JANUARY 2021

January 4, 2021 NEW YEAR, NEW CREATION
Readings for today: Genesis 1-2, Matthew 1

January 5, 2021 THE ORIGIN OF SHAME
Readings for today: Genesis 3-5, Matthew 2

January 6, 2021 THE DESCENT OF MAN
Readings for today: Genesis 6-7, Matthew 3-4

January 7, 2021 BEATITUDES
Readings for today: Genesis 8-11, Matthew 5

January 8, 2021 CURE FOR ANXIETY
Readings for today: Genesis 12-14, Matthew 6

January 9, 2021 TRIBAL CONFLICT
Readings for today: Genesis 15-19, Matthew 7

January 11, 2021 THE FEAR OF THE LORD
Readings for today: Genesis 20-22, Matthew 8

January 12, 2021 LABORING FOR THE LORD
Readings for today: Genesis 23-24, Matthew 9

January 13, 2021 ELECTION
Readings for today: Genesis 25-26, Matthew 10:1-25

January 14, 2021 UNCONDITIONAL
Readings for today: Genesis 27-28, Matthew 10:26-42

January 15, 2021 REST
Readings for today: Genesis 29-30, Matthew 11

January 16, 2021 WRESTLING WITH GOD
Readings for today: Genesis 31-35, Matthew 12

January 18, 2021 DANGEROUS DREAMS
Readings for today: Genesis 36-37, Matthew 13:1-23

January 19, 2021 THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD
Readings for today: Genesis 38-40, Matthew 13:24-58

January 20, 2021 TRUE ALLEGIANCE
Readings for today: Genesis 41, Matthew 14:1-21

January 21, 2021 THE NARROW WAY
Readings for today: Genesis 42-43, Matthew 14:22-36

January 22, 2021 GODLY PERSPECTIVE
Readings for today: Genesis 44-45, Matthew 15:1-20

January 23, 2021 WAS JESUS A RACIST?
Readings for today: Genesis 46-48, Matthew 15:21-39

January 25, 2021 EVERYDAY HEROISM
Readings for today: Genesis 49-50, Exodus 1, Matthew 16:1-4

January 26, 2021 IS GOD FORGETFUL?
Readings for today: Exodus 2-4, Matthew 16:5-28

January 27, 2021 MEETING THE LORD
Readings for today: Exodus 5-6, Matthew 17

January 28, 2021 GOD ISN'T FAIR
Readings for today: Exodus 7-10, Matthew 18:1-20

January 29, 2021 THE SCANDAL OF FORGIVENESS
Readings for today: Exodus 11-12, Matthew 18:21-35

January 30, 2021 GOD'S LOVE FOR CHILDREN
Readings for today: Exodus 13-15, Matthew 19:1-15

February 2021

February 1, 2021 Open Hands
Readings for today: Exodus 16-19, Matthew 19:16-30

February 2, 2021 MT. SINAI
Readings for today: Exodus 20-22, Matthew 20:1-16

February 3, 2021 GOD'S LAW
Readings for today: Exodus 23-25, Matthew 20:17-34

February 4, 2021 AS IT IS IN HEAVEN….
Readings for today: Exodus 26-28, Matthew 21

February 5, 2021 RENDER UNTO CAESAR?
Readings for today: Exodus 29-30, Matthew 22:1-22

February 6, 2021 WORSHIP
Readings for today: Exodus 31-33, Matthew 22:23-46

February 8, 2021 KNOWING GOD
Readings for today: Exodus 34-38, Matthew 23:1-22

February 9, 2021 THE PRESENCE OF GOD
Readings for today: Exodus 39-40, Leviticus 1, Matthew 23:23-39

February 11, 2021 Living Intentionally
Readings for today: Leviticus 4-6, Matthew 25:1-30

February 12, 2021 SACRIFICE
Readings for today: Leviticus 7-9, Matthew 25:31-49

February 13, 2021 DANGEROUS WORSHIP
Readings for today: Leviticus 10-12, Matthew 26:1-19

February 15, 2021 LESSONS ON COVID FROM LEVITICUS
Readings for today: Leviticus 13-15, Matthew 26:20-56

February 16, 2021 THE HUMANITY OF JESUS
Readings for today: Leviticus 16, Matthew 26:57-75

February 17, 2021 THE BETRAYAL OF JESUS
Readings for today: Leviticus 17, Matthew 27

February 18, 2021 THE GOLDEN RULE
Readings for today: Leviticus 18-20, Matthew 28

February 19, 2021 SACRED RHYTHMS
Readings for today: Leviticus 21-23, Mark 1:1-28

February 20, 2021 LIFE IN GOD'S KINGDOM
Readings for today: Leviticus 24-25, Mark 1:29-45

February 22, 2021 A NEW EDEN
Readings for today: Leviticus 26-27, Numbers 1, Mark 2

February 23, 2021 WAS JESUS CRAZY?
Readings for today: Numbers 2-3, Mark 3

February 24, 2021 SOWING SEEDS
Readings for today: Numbers 4-5, Mark 4

February 25, 2021 THE BLESSING
Readings for today: Numbers 6-7, Mark 5:1-20

February 26, 2021 WAITING ON GOD
Readings for today: Numbers 8-10, Mark 5:21-43

February 27, 2021 HUMILITY
Readings for today: Numbers 11-13, Mark 6:1-29

March 2021

March 1, 2021 THE MISSION OF GOD
Readings for today: Numbers 14-18, Mark 6:30-56

March 2, 2021 BLAME-SHIFTING
Readings for today: Numbers 19-20, Mark 7:1-13

March 3, 2021 THE DONKEY THAT SPOKE
Readings for today: Numbers 21-22, Mark 7:14-37

March 4, 2021 DEVOTION
Readings for today: Numbers 23-25, Mark 8:1-21

March 5, 2021 DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD
Readings for today: Numbers 26-27, Mark 8:22-9:1

March 6, 2021 SACRIFICE
Readings for today: Numbers 28-29, Mark 9:2-29

March 8, 2021 JUDGMENT
Readings for today: Numbers 30-33, Mark 9:30-10:34

March 9, 2021 THE DEATH PENALTY
Readings for today: Numbers 34-35, Mark 10:35-52

March 10, 2021 ONE LAST SERMON
Readings for today: Numbers 36, Deuteronomy 1, Mark 11:1-14

March 11, 2021 THE MERCY OF GOD
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 2-4, Mark 11:15-33

March 12, 2021 THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 5-7, Mark 12:1-27

March 13, 2021 SACRED MEMORY
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 8-10, Mark 12:28-44

March 15, 2021 THE END OF POVERTY
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 11-16, Mark 13:1-14:9

March 16, 2021 LEARNING HUMILITY
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 17-19, Mark 14:10-31

March 17, 2021 THE CURSE
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 20-22, Mark 14:32-52

March 18, 2021 SWIMMING UPSTREAM
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 23-25, Mark 14:53-72

March 19, 2021 THE PRINCIPLE OF FIRSTFRUITS
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 26-27, Mark 15:1-20

March 20, 2021 THE WAY
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 28, Mark 15:21-47

March 22, 2021 THE SONG OF MOSES
Readings for today: Deuteronomy 29-34, Mark 16, Luke 1:1-38

March 23, 2021 SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES
Readings for today: Joshua 1-2, Luke 1:39-56

March 25, 2021 TAKING SIDES
Readings for today: Joshua 5-6, Luke 2:1-21

March 26, 2021 GROWING UP JESUS
Readings for today: Joshua 7-8, Luke 2:22-52

March 27, 2021 HOLY WAR
Readings for today: Joshua 9-10, Luke 3

March 29, 2021 THE FAME OF JESUS
Readings for today: Joshua 11-14, Luke 4:1-41

March 30, 2021 FINISHING STRONG
Readings for today: Joshua 15-17, Luke 4:42-5:26

March 31, 2021 LEVI'S FEAST
Readings for today: Joshua 18-19, Luke 5:27-39

APRIL 2021

April 1, 2021 WITNESS
Readings for today: Joshua 20-22, Luke 6:1-26

April 2, 2021 BLESSINGS
Readings for today: Joshua 23-24, Luke 6:27-49

April 3, 2021 EVANGELISM
Readings for today: Judges 1-2, Luke 7:1-35

April 5, 2021 THE STRUGGLE IS REAL
Readings for today: Judges 3-7, Luke 7:36-8:39

April 6, 2021 HUMILITY
Readings for today: Judges 8-10, Luke 8:40-56

April 7, 2021 JEPHTHAH'S SACRIFICE
Readings for today: Judges 11-12, Luke 9:1-27

April 8, 2021 DESIRE
Readings for today: Judges 13-14, Luke 9:28-62

April 9, 2021 THE HARVEST
Readings for today: Judges 15-17, Luke 10:1-24

April 10, 2021 INHUMANITY
Readings for today: Judges 18-19, Luke 10:25-11:12

April 12, 2021 FINDING HOPE IN THE ORDINARY
Readings for today: Judges 20-21, Ruth 1-4, Luke 11:13-12:3

April 13, 2021 GOD IS FAITHFUL
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 1-2, Luke 12:4-34

April 14, 2021 NEW HOPE
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 3-6, Luke 12:35-59

April 15, 2021 WALKING WITH OPEN HANDS
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 7-9, Luke 13:1-21

April 16, 2021 THE SPIRIT-FILLED LIFE
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 10-12, Luke 13:22-35

April 17, 2021 WAITING ON GOD
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 13-14, Luke 14:1-24

April 19, 2021 WHOLE-HEARTED
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 15-19, Luke 14:25-15:10

April 20, 2021 THE GOD OF PRODIGALS AND PHARISEES
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 20-21, Luke 15:11-32

April 22, 2021 LETTING GO
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 24-26, Luke 16:14-31

April 23, 2021 SERVANT-MINDED
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 27-29, Luke 17:1-19

April 24, 2021 EPITAPH
Readings for today: 1 Samuel 30-31, Luke 17:20-37

April 26, 2021 THE SECRET TO PRAYER
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 1-5, Luke 18:1-19:10

April 27, 2021 UNLESS THE LORD BUILDS THE HOUSE…
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 6-8, Luke 19:11-27

April 28, 2021 AMAZING GRACE
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 9-11, Luke 19:28-48

April 29, 2021 HYPOCRISY
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 12-14, Luke 20:1-26

April 30, 2021 THE TRAGEDY OF UNFORGIVENESS
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 15-16, Luke 20:27-47

MAY 2021

May 1, 2021 HUMAN NATURE
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 17-18, Luke 21:1-19

May 3, 2021 OUR ONLY HOPE
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 19-23, Luke 21:20-22:23

May 4, 2021 PRIDE, POWER, AND POPULARITY
Readings for today: 2 Samuel 24, 1 Kings 1, Luke 22:24-38

May 5, 2021 THE GODFATHER
Readings for today: 1 Kings 2-3, Luke 22:39-71

May 6, 2021 THE POWER OF WISDOM
Readings for today: 1 Kings 4-5, Luke 23:1-25

May 7, 2021 BUILDING WITH GOD
Readings for today: 1 Kings 6-7, Luke 23:26-43

May 8, 2021 THE REALITY OF GOD
Readings for today: 1 Kings 8-9, Luke 23:44-56

May 10, 2021 THE LOVE OF MONEY
Readings for today: 1 Kings 10-14, Luke 24:1-35

May 11, 2021 FEAR. DOUBT, AND FAITH
Readings for today: 1 Kings 15-16, Luke 24:36-53

May 12, 2021 ELIJAH
Readings for today: 1 Kings 17-18, John 1

May 13, 2021 GOD STILL SPEAKS
Readings for today: 1 Kings 19-20, John 2

May 15, 2021 STREAMS IN THE DESERT
Readings for today: 2 Kings 1-3, John 3:22-36

May 17, 2021 OPEN OUR EYES
Readings for today: 2 Kings 4-9, John 4

May 19, 2021 THE STEADFAST LOVE OF GOD
Readings for today: 2 Kings 12-14, John 5:30-47

May 20, 2021 WE ARE WHAT WE WORSHIP
Readings for today: 2 Kings 15-17, John 6:1-21

May 21, 2021 REVIVAL
Readings for today: 2 Kings 18-19, John 6:22-59

May 22, 2021 LEADERSHIP

Readings for today: 2 Kings 20-22, John 6:60-71

May 24, 2021 SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

Readings for today: 2 Kings 23-25, 1 Chronicles 1-2, John 7:1-52

May 25, 2021 CONNECTION

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 3-5, John 7:53-8:11

May 27, 2021 GENEALOGY

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 8-10, John 8:39-59

JUNE 2021

Doug Resler was on a mission trip for the last few days of May and continued his Bible in a Year commentaries below. Please see his Morning Communion with God sharing for those days when he was on the trip serving others.

June 21, 2021 God of the Impossible
Readings for today: Nehemiah 1-5, Acts 2:1-41

June 22, 2021 Fundamentals
Readings for today: Nehemiah 6-8, Acts 2:42-3:10

June 23, 2021 Signs and Wonders
Readings for today: Nehemiah 9-11, Acts 3:11-4:22

June 24, 2021 The Danger of Compromise
Readings for today: Nehemiah 12-13, Acts 4:23-37

June 25, 2021 Powerful Women
Readings for today: Esther 1-3, Acts 5:1-16

June 26, 2021 Suffering for Christ
Readings for today: Esther 4-6, Acts 5:17-42

June 28, 2021 Theodicy
Readings for today: Esther 7-10, Job 1-2, Acts 6:1-7:22

June 29, 2021 Vulnerable before God
Readings for today: Job 3-6, Acts 7:23-34

June 30, 2021 Fundamental Reality of Grace
Readings for today: Job 7-9, Acts 7:35-8:3

JULY 2021

July 1, 2021 Comfort in Suffering
Readings for today: Job 10-12, Acts 8:4-25

July 2, 2021 Living Hope
Readings for today: Job 13-15, Acts 8:26-40

July 3, 2021 Redemptive Suffering
Readings for today: Job 16-18, Acts 9:1-22

July 5, 2021 Courage to Care
Readings for today: Job 19-23, Acts 9:23-10:8

July 6, 2021 Miraculous Gifts
Readings for today: Job 24-25, Acts 10:9-48

July 7, 2021 The Blessing of Being Powerless
Readings for today: Job 26-27, Acts 11

July 9, 2021 Self-Examination
Readings for today: Job 31-32, Acts 13:1-25

July 10, 2021 The First Missionaries
Readings for today: Job 33-34, Acts 13:26-53

July 12, 2021 Feeling Small
Readings for today: Job 35-40, Acts 14

July 13, 2021 Repentance
Readings for today: Job 41-42, Psalm 1, Acts 15

July 14, 2021 Vision
Readings for today: Psalms 2-3, Acts 16:1-15

July 15, 2021 Being before Doing
Readings for today: Psalms 4-6, Acts 16:16-40

July 16, 2021 Imago Dei
Readings for today: Psalms 7-9, Acts 17:1-15

July 17, 2021 Holding onto Hope
Readings for today: Psalms 10-12, Acts 17:16-34

July 19, 2021 Godly Contentment
Readings for today: Psalms 13-18, Acts 18

July 20, 2021 Following the Way
Readings for today: Psalms 19-22, Acts 19

July 21, 2021 Psalm 23
Readings for today: Psalms 23-24, Acts 20:1-16

July 22, 2021 The Path of Righteousness
Readings for today: Psalms 25-27, Acts 20:17-38

July 23, 2021 Gratitude
Readings for today: Psalms 28-30, Acts 21:1-16

July 24, 2021 People of the Truth
Readings for today: Psalms 31-33, Acts 21:17-36

July 26, 2021 Fixing our Eyes on Jesus
Readings for today: Psalms 34-38, Acts 21:37-23:11

July 27, 2021 Life is Fleeting
Readings for today: Psalms 39-41, Acts 23:12-35

July 28, 2021 Mental Health
Readings for today: Psalms 42-43, Acts 24

July 30, 2021 God's Politics
Readings for today: Psalms 47-49, Acts 26

July 31, 2021 Preparing for Worship
Readings for today: Psalms 50-52, Acts 27:1-26

AUGUST 2021

August 2, 2021 Defining Salvation
Readings for today: Psalms 53-58, Acts 27:27-28:10

August 3, 2021 Poured Out
Readings for today: Psalms 59-61, Acts 28:11-31

August 4, 2021 The Power of the Gospel
Readings for today: Psalms 62-64, Romans 1

August 5, 2021 God of our Salvation
Readings for today: Psalms 65-67, Romans 2

August 6, 2021 Learned Helplessness
Readings for today: Psalms 68-69, Romans 3

August 7, 2021 Saving Faith
Readings for today: Psalms 70-72, Romans 4

August 9, 2021 Escaping Envy
Readings for today: Psalms 73-74, Romans 5

August 10, 2021 Repentance
Readings for today: Psalms 75-76, Romans 6

August 11, 2021 The Wonders of God
Readings for today: Psalm 77-79, Romans 7

August 12, 2021 Redemptive Suffering
Readings for today: Psalms 80-84, Romans 8

August 13, 2021 The Challenge of Election
Readings for today: Psalms 85-87, Romans 9:1-10:4

August 14, 2021 Foundations of God's Throne
Readings for today: Psalms 88-89, Romans 10:5-21

August 16, 2021 The Gift of the Psalms
Readings for today: Psalms 90-95, Romans 11

August 17, 2021 Be Transformed
Readings for today: Psalms 96-98, Romans 12

August 19, 2021 My Life is not My Own
Readings for today: Psalms 102-104, Romans 14

August 20, 2021 Seeking the Good of Others
Readings for today: Psalms 105-106, Romans 15:1-21

August 21, 2021 The Steadfast Love of the Lord
Readings for today: Psalms 107-108, Romans 15:22-33

August 23, 2021 Kingdom Work Requires Teamwork
Readings for today: Psalms 109-112, Romans 16, 1 Corinthians 1

August 24, 2021 Seeking the Mind of Christ
Readings for today: Psalms 113-115, 1 Corinthians 2

August 27, 2021 The Meaning of Wisdom
Readings for today: Psalms 119:105-176, 1 Corinthians 5

August 28, 2021 Songs of Ascent
Readings for today: Psalms 120-123, 1 Corinthians 6

August 31, 2021 The Key to Unity
Readings for today: Psalms 130-133, 1 Corinthians 8

SEPTEMBER 2021

September 1, 2021 Meeting People Where They Are
Readings for today: Psalms 134-137, 1 Corinthians 9

September 2, 2021 God is Pro-Life
Readings for today: Psalms 138-141, 1 Corinthians 10:1-22

September 3, 2021 People Pleasing
Readings for today: Psalms 142-144, 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

September 4, 2021 Cultural Blind Spots
Readings for today: Psalms 145-147, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

September 6, 2021 The Beginning of Wisdom
Readings for today: Psalms 148-150, Proverbs 1, 1 Corinthians 11:17-12:11

September 7, 2021 Belonging
Readings for today: Proverbs 2-4, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

September 8, 2021 True Love
Readings for today: Proverbs 5-6, 1 Corinthians 13

September 9, 2021 Listening to Jesus
Readings for today: Proverbs 7-8, 1 Corinthians 14

September 10, 2021 The Beating Heart of the Gospel
Readings for today: Proverbs 9-10, 1 Corinthians 15:1-34

September 11, 2021 Inherit the Wind
Readings for today: Proverbs 11-12, 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

September 14, 2021 The Power of Forgiveness
Readings for today: Proverbs 17-18, 2 Corinthians 2

September 15, 2021 Pastoral Effectiveness
Readings for today: Proverbs 19-20, 2 Corinthians 3

September 16, 2021 Jars of Clay
Readings for today: Proverbs 21-22, 2 Corinthians 4

September 17, 2021 Who's in Control?
Readings for today: Proverbs 23-24, 2 Corinthians 5:1-6:13

September 18, 2021 Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance.
Readings for today: Proverbs 25-27, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

September 20, 2021 True Repentance
Readings for today: Proverbs 28-31, Ecclesiastes 1-2, 2 Corinthians 7:2-8:24

September 21 Incarnational Community
Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 3-4, 2 Corinthians 9

September 23, 2021 Handling Criticism
Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 7-9, 2 Corinthians 11:1-15

September 24, 2021 Choose Joy
Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 10-12, 2 Corinthians 11:16-33

September 25, 2021 Intimacy with God
Readings for today: Song of Solomon 1-3, 2 Corinthians 12

September 27, 2021 Death-Defying Love
Readings for today: Song of Solomon 4-8, 2 Corinthians 13, Galatians 1, Isaiah 1

September 28, 2021 On Earth as it is in Heaven
Readings for today: Isaiah 2-3, Galatians 2

September 29, 2021 A Prophetic Call
Readings for today: Isaiah 4-6, Galatians 3

September 30, 2021 Layers of Meaning
Readings for today: Isaiah 7-9, Galatians 4

October 2021

October 1, 2021 Christian Freedom
Readings for today: Isaiah 10-12, Galatians 5

October 2, 2021 The Danger of Self-Promotion
Readings for today: Isaiah 13-15, Galatians 6

October 4, 2021 The Sovereignty of God
Readings for today: Isaiah 16-20, Ephesians 1-2

October 5, 2021 The Unsearchable Riches of Christ
Readings for today: Isaiah 21-23, Ephesians 3

October 6, 2021 The Honor of God
Readings for today: Isaiah 24-26, Ephesians 4

October 7, 2021 A New Day
Readings for today: Isaiah 27-28, Ephesians 5

October 8, 2021 Spiritual Battle
Readings for today: Isaiah 29-30, Ephesians 6

October 9, 2021 The Impact of Righteousness
Readings for today: Isaiah 31-33, Philippians 1

October 11, 2021 The Mind of Christ
Readings for today: Isaiah 34-37, Phil. 2-3

October 12, 2021 Promise-Keeper
Readings for today: Isaiah 38-40, Phil. 4

October 13, 2021 Serving the Servant
Readings for today: Isaiah 41-42, Colossians 1:1-2:5

October 15, 2021 Words Matter
Readings for today: Isaiah 45-47, Colossians 3:18-4:18

October 16, 2021 Raising Expectations
Readings for today: Isaiah 48-49, 1 Thessalonians 1

October 18, 2021 Invitation
Readings for today: Isaiah 50-55, 1 Thessalonians 2

October 19, 2021 A House of Prayer for All People
Readings for today: Isaiah 56-58, 1 Thessalonians 3

October 20, 2021 Christian Hope
Readings for today: Isaiah 59-61, 1 Thessalonians 4

October 21, 2021 Potter's Hand
Readings for today: Isaiah 62-64, 1 Thessalonians 5

October 22, 2021 With God's Help
Readings for today: Isaiah 65-66, 2 Thessalonians 1

October 23, 2021 Broken Wells
Readings for today: Jeremiah 1-2, 2 Thessalonians 2

October 25, 2021 The Pain of God
Readings for today: Jeremiah 3-7, 2 Thessalonians 3, 1 Timothy 1

October 26, 2021 Truth
Readings for today: Jeremiah 8-9, 1 Timothy 2

October 27, 2021 Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing
Readings for today: Jeremiah 10-11, 1 Timothy 3

October 28, 2021 COVID Fatigue
Readings for today: Jeremiah 12-13, 1 Timothy 4

October 29, 2021 Discouragement
Readings for today: Jeremiah 14-16, 1 Timothy 5, 6:2

October 30, 2021 Follow Your Heart?
Readings for today: Jeremiah 17-19, 1 Timothy 6:2-21

November 2021

November 1, 2021 War With God
Readings for today: Jeremiah 20-23, 2 Timothy 1-2

November 2, 2021 A Prophetic Word
Readings for today: Jeremiah 24-26, 2 Timothy 3

November 3, 2021 False Prophets
Readings for today: Jeremiah 27-28, 2 Timothy 4

November 4, 2021 God's Good Plans
Readings for today: Jeremiah 29-30, Titus 1

November 5, 2021 Recovery
Readings for today: Jeremiah 31-32, Titus 2

November 6, 2021 The Plain Meaning of Scripture
Readings for today: Jeremiah 33-35, Titus 3

November 8, 2021 My Will or Thy Will?
Readings for today: Jeremiah 36-41, Philemon 1, Hebrews 1

November 9, 2021 Running from God
Readings for today: Jeremiah 42-43, Hebrews 2

November 11, 2021 Our Great High Priest
Readings for today: Jeremiah 46-48, Hebrews 4:14-5:10

November 12, 2021 Discernment
Readings for today: Jeremiah 49-50, Hebrews 5:11-6:12

November 13, 2021 God's War with Sin
Readings for today: Jeremiah 51-52, Hebrews 6:13-7:10

November 15, 2021 The Pervasiveness of Sin
Readings for today: Lamentations 1-5, Hebrews 7:11-28

November 16, 2021 Visions
Readings for today: Ezekiel 1-3, Hebrews 8

November 17, 2021 The Purpose of Judgment
Readings for today: Ezekiel 4-6, Hebrews 9

November 18, 2021 Strike Fire!
Readings for today: Ezekiel 7-9, Hebrews 10

November 19, 2021 The Glory of the Lord
Readings for today: Ezekiel 10-12, Hebrews 11:1-16

November 20, 2021 By Faith
Readings for today: Ezekiel 13-15, Hebrews 11:17-40

November 22, 2021 The Gospel according to Ezekiel
Readings for today: Ezekiel 16-20, Hebrews 12-13

November 23, 2021 The Problem with Anger
Readings for today: Ezekiel 21, James 1

November 24, 2021 Justice
Readings for today: Ezekiel 22-24, James 2

November 25, 2021 Watching our Words
Readings for today: Ezekiel 25-26, James 3

November 26, 2021 The Deadly Sin of Pride
Readings for today: Ezekiel 27-28, James 4

November 27, 2021 Effective Prayer
Readings for today: Ezekiel 29-31, James 5

November 29, 2021 The Watchman
Readings for today: Ezekiel 32-34, 1 Peter 1-2

November 30, 2021 Refugee Faith
Readings for today: Ezekiel 35-36, 1 Peter 3

December 2021

December 1, 2021 Can Dry Bones Live?
Readings for today: Ezekiel 37-38, 1 Peter 4

December 2, 2021 *No Commentary Today*
Readings for today: Ezekiel 39-40, 1 Peter 5

December 3, 2021 The Lord's Return
Readings for today: Ezekiel 41-42, 2 Peter 1

December 4, 2021 Living the Christian Life
Readings for today: Ezekiel 43-44, 2 Peter 2

December 6, 2021 Living Water
Readings for today: Ezekiel 45-48, 2 Peter 3, 1 John 1

December 7, 2021 Faithful
Readings for today: Daniel 1-2, 1 John 2

December 8, 2021 Another in the Fire
Readings for today: Daniel 3-4, 1 John 3

December 9, 2021 *No Commentary Today*
Readings for today: Daniel 5-6, 1 John 4

December 10, 2021 Strange Visions
Readings for today: Daniel 7-8, 1 John 5

December 11, 2021 Systemic Sin
Readings for today: Daniel 9-10, 2 John 1

December 13, 2021 Spiritual Adultery
Readings for today: Daniel 11-12, Hosea 1-4, 3 John 1, Jude

December 14, 2021 *No Commentary Today*
Readings for today: Hosea 5-6, Revelation 1

December 15, 2021 2nd Advent
Readings for today: Hosea 7-10, Revelation 2

December 16, 2021 Radical Love of God
Readings for today: Hosea 11-14, Revelation 3

December 17, 2021 Revival
Readings for today: Joel 1-3, Revelation 4

December 18, 2021 God's Justice
Readings for today: Amos 1-3, Revelation 5

December 20, 2021 Let Justice Roll Down
Readings for today: Amos 4-9, Revelation 6-7

December 21, 2021 *No Commentary Today*
Readings for today: Obadiah, Jonah 1-3, Revelation 8

December 22, 2021 Dying to Self
Readings for today: Jonah 4, Micah 1-2, Revelation 9

December 23, 2021 The Mystery of God
Readings for today: Micah 3, Revelation 10

December 24, 2021 Our Heavenly Father
Readings for today: Micah 4-5, Revelation 11

December 25, 2021 Biblical Justice
Readings for today: Micah 6-7, Revelation 12

December 27, 2021 666
Readings for today: Nahum 1-3, Habakkuk 1-2, Revelation 13-14

December 28, 2021 The Call to Humility
Readings for today: Habakkuk 3, Zephaniah 1-3, Haggai 1-2, Revelation 15-16

December 29, 2021 Yahweh Remembers
Readings for today: Zechariah 1-6, Revelation 17-18

December 30, 2021 New Year's Resolutions
Readings for today: Zechariah 7-9, Revelation 19

December 31, 2021 Come, Lord Jesus!
Readings for today: Zechariah 10-14, Malachi 1-4, Revelation 20-22

January 4, 2021

NEW YEAR, NEW CREATION

Readings for today: Genesis 1-2, Matthew 1

"And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." (Genesis 1:2b)

I love this image. It strikes me almost every year. Years ago I looked up the Hebrew word for "hovers" and found the same expression used to describe what an eagle does over her young. There is a sense of tenderness about the word. A sense of comfort. Genesis 1 and 2 are parallel creation accounts. The first written in poetry, the second in prose. Both describe using different details God's heart for His creation. God's purpose for creation. God's design for creation. It is good. It is orderly. It is meant for blessing.

Before there was a "beginning", there was God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existing in eternal relationship. Three Persons. One God. God is all-sufficient in Himself. There was no need to create. No lack within Himself that He was seeking to fulfill. Rather, He creates out of an overflow of love. God is love and God chooses to extend His love beyond Himself to all creation in general and to a creature made in His own image in particular. That's me. That's every single human being who has ever walked the face of the earth. Man and woman. Black, white, and brown. Male and female. Gay and straight. Rich and poor. You name it. If you belong to the human race, you have dignity and worth because you are made in the image of God. You are the object of His affection and love. He desires to have a relationship with you. This is why He created in the first place. To share His love with you.

You are no accident. You are not the product of random chance. The Spirit hovered over your creation just as an eagle hovers over her young. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. Knit together by God's own hand. Every part of you a product of God's eternal design. God took great care in making you who you are. Giving you the personality and gifts and talents and abilities you have. You are no "rush job." You are not the product of some divine assembly line. You are unique and beautiful because God has declared you to be so. This is the most fundamental truth of our existence. Surely there are other truths that will be revealed along the way. Most certainly, the image of God has been defaced in all our lives due to sin. But sin is a "contingent" reality and not eternal.

As we begin the year, it's important to rest in this truth. The same Spirit who hovered over the waters at creation is the same Spirit who hovered over our conception and birth. He is the same Spirit who hovers over us even now. Protecting. Providing. We rest secure under the shadow of His wings.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 3-5, Matthew 2

January 5, 2021

THE ORIGIN OF SHAME

Readings for today: Genesis 3-5, Matthew 2

Shame. It's the source of a lot of conversation today. Researchers like Brene Brown are writing best-selling books about it. Therapists across the country are spending hours and hours trying to help countless clients manage it. It's the source of a lot of addiction. A lot of divorce. A lot of depression and suicidal ideation. Historically speaking, human society has built entire communal systems around it. Honor/shame systems still make up 2/3 of the world's culture today especially in the Far East and the Global South. Within such systems, the greatest punishment is not death but exile. Shunning. Being removed from presence of those you love and those you live among. So where does this powerful emotion come from? What is it's origin? Listen again to the words from Genesis 3:6-13 and see if you can spot what I'm talking about…

"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

Adam and Eve break God's command and what's the first thing they experience? Hint: it's not guilt over breaking God's law. It's shame over their nakedness. So what do they do? They literally try to "cover up." Rather than confess their sin and come clean to God, they sew fig leaves together and cover their nakedness and I guess hope God won't notice? When God shows up, He knows exactly what's taken place. But He's gracious and merciful and He gives Adam and Eve a chance to repent. "Where are you?" Not just physically but emotionally and spiritually. Where's your heart Adam? Where's your heart Eve? Why have you covered up? Why are you hiding from Me? Adam is at least honest. "I heard you. I was afraid of you. I hid from you." Fear is the chief byproduct of shame. It's what happens when we feel threatened. And it drives us to respond in all sorts of unhealthy ways. The conversation continues. God again gives them the chance to respond in repentance. "Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" Rather than confess, Adam blames Eve. Eve blames the serpent. And the Fall of humanity commences with devastating consequences for all their descendants.

Cover up. Hiding. Avoiding. Blaming. This is how human beings typically react to shame. Out of fear of being "found out" or "discovered" to be something we aren't, we resist taking any kind of responsibility for our actions. We play the victim. We claim to be powerless. We allow ourselves to be at the mercy of what we feel. Fear. Shame. Guilt. Without a doubt, these are powerful emotions. But they are not all-powerful. They only have as much power as we give them. This is where Brene Brown and others have done such great work. The key to combating these feelings is confession. Honesty. Transparency. Repentance. Owning how we might have contributed to the situation that brought these emotions on in the first place. Imagine how different the world would look today if Adam and Eve had simply gone to God as soon as they realized what they had done? Instead of them sewing fig leaves to

cover up and then hiding when they heard God coming; imagine them standing before God naked and ashamed? Naked and afraid? Owning their sin. Confessing their transgression. Repenting for all they had done. How would have God responded? We don't have to guess. We know. God is a God of grace and mercy and I have no doubt He would have forgiven them.

Friends, here's the great news of the gospel…In Christ, God shames Himself by taking on a fully human nature. Humbling Himself to become a servant. Humiliating Himself on the cross. God enters our shame. God embraces our shame. God puts an end to our shame so that we can now stand before the throne of grace with confidence, trusting God to save to the uttermost those who draw near to Him. Stop running from God. Stop hiding from God. Stop the blame game. Stop playing the victim. In Christ, you are loved. In Christ, you are accepted. In Christ, you are saved.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 6-7, Matthew 3-4

January 6, 2021

THE DESCENT OF MAN

Readings for today: Genesis 6-7, Matthew 3-4

In 1871, Charles Darwin published the culmination of his life's work. Titled The Descent of Man , it applied general evolutionary theory to human beings. Human beings, Darwin argues, are "descended" from more primitive life forms and subject to natural selection much like every other life form in the world. Of course, "Descent" is somewhat of a double entendre because Darwin's theory also levels the playing field between human beings and the rest of the animal world. We are not special. We are not set apart. We certainly are not made in the image of God, have no divine mandate, and therefore no kind of ascendant status over the rest of creation. Though there is some debate about Darwin's own views, his theory has been used to justify all kinds of evil. Racism. Eugenics. Social Darwinism and the Final Solution. If humanity is not set apart by God. If humanity is not special in any way. If humanity is just another animal species than we are NOT endowed with any inalienable rights and therefore might makes right. Natural selection is just. It's survival of the fittest and only the strongest survive.

Strangely enough, the Bible also talks about the "Descent of Man." Not in terms of biological evolution but in terms of moral devolution. We will see this story set on repeat throughout the Scriptures. God makes a covenant with a human family. The descendants of that particular human family become morally compromised over time. Their corruption eventually becomes so great that God responds with righteous anger and judgment. God then starts over with a new covenant with a new human family and the cycle begins anew. Some might argue this calls God's judgment into question. Why do the same thing over and over again and expect a different result? Isn't that the definition of insanity? This is not, of course, the argument the Bible makes. The point the Bible sets out to prove is the utter futility of humanity. Humanity is, simply put - a lost cause. Sin corrupts everything it touches. Infecting every heart. Polluting every mind. Silencing every soul. There is no hope for us unless God Himself decides to intervene.

Thankfully this is exactly what God does. The Bible is a record of God's interventions in human history over time. He intervened with Adam and Eve, clothing them in an act of grace before sending them out of the Garden into a world ruined by sin. As the generations that come after them descend into further chaos, devolving to the point where God Himself grieves over what He has made, He intervenes yet again. He starts over by delivering Noah and his family from the flood. One can only imagine what it must have been like for Noah as he watched the world around him drown. I cannot fathom the pain and suffering he must have witnessed. But that is nothing compared to the pain God experienced as He watched His good creation drown in evil and sin. Grieving over what He made, He makes the terrible decision to cleanse the world by destroying it.

Fast forward thousands of years. The world is still writhing in pain. Still ravaged by sin. Still drowning in evil. God's heart continues to break. He grieves over what He has made and He makes the terrible decision to send His Beloved Son into the world to cleanse it once and for all. Jesus appears before his cousin John to be baptized. All of the Old Testament prophecies are coming to fulfillment. Jesus will be destroyed so the world can be saved. Jesus will suffer so you and I can be set free. Jesus will drown in order to rescue all of creation. This is the good news of the gospel, friends!

I know the world around us suffers. There is injustice. There is pain. There is heartache and heartbreak. Hatred, evil, and sin still seemingly run amuck. Human systems cannot stem the tide. Human beings cannot save the day. Our only hope is God. And thankfully, He is eternally faithful. Place your trust in Him and you will never be put to shame!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 8-11, Matthew 5

January 7, 2021

BEATITUDES

Readings for today: Genesis 8-11, Matthew 5

Yesterday was a truly horrifying day. We watched an insurrection take place in the heart of our nation. Domestic terrorists forced their way onto the hallowed grounds of the US Capitol building. Lives were lost. People were hurt. Elected officials forced to find safe shelter. Images of law enforcement defending the House and Senate floors. It was one of the ugliest moments in our history. Thankfully, law enforcement restored order. US Representatives and Senators went back to work and the election results were certified.

For me, the most heartbreaking thing about the whole episode was to see so many "Jesus saves" or "Jesus 2020" signs amidst the mob. So many Christians have been led astray by the heresy of Christian nationalism. They have wrapped the cross in an American flag. They believe God identifies Himself with one particular political party over another. They believe violence is justified to defend their way of life. They too easily believe the lies their leaders tell them. Too easily fall for the conspiracy theories being spun. And as our national rhetoric has become more and more heated in recent years, they act out. They lash out. And we all bore witness to the tragic results.

Thankfully, most Christians are able to differentiate between patriotism and faith. Most Christians are able to differentiate between love of country and love of Jesus. Most Christians have found a way to honor our nation and honor our God. But this majority has remained silent for far too long. We keep waiting for the radical elements to just go away. We assume things will eventually calm down once the election cycle is over. Once the pandemic ends. Once things get back to normal. But, friends, we cannot wait any longer. God is calling Christians to take a stand. God is calling His Church to take a stand. God is calling His people to show the world a different way. The way of Jesus.

"And Jesus opened his mouth and taught them, saying:
Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you…

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden…In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven…

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…

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also…

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Matthew 5:2-12, 14, 16, 21-22, 38-39, 43-45)

Friends, the work of healing and rebuilding and restoring our nation begins with each one of us. It begins today with the prayers we pray. The words we say. The memes we share. The news we consume. It begins with the votes we cast. The candidates we support. The money we give. It begins with the lives we lead. The love we share. The hospitality we show. It begins with a commitment to love others the way Christ loves us. A commitment to serve others the way Christ serves us. A commitment to forgive and reconcile with others the way Christ forgives and reconciles Himself to us. There is no other way. Our nation has no other hope. The world is watching. The world is waiting. “All of creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons and daughters of God.” (Romans 8:19)

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 12-14, Matthew 6

January 8, 2021

CURE FOR ANXIETY

Readings for today: Genesis 12-14, Matthew 6

Anxiety is on the rise. Personally. Socially. Nationally. We can sense it in the air. We can feel it in our bones. And the data bears it out. According to a recent poll from the American Psychiatric Association, nearly 1/3 of American adults say they feel more anxious than a year ago. The National Institutes of Health reports that anxiety disorders are now the most common mental health disorder in the United States, impacting nearly 1/5 of all adults each year. The CDC reports significant increases in anxiety among children as well. Some have even called the 21st century the "Age of Anxiety." No one quite knows the cause though some argue it has to do with the "constant state of threat" we live under due to a 24 hour news cycle and our perpetual connection to the world through social media. I tend to agree with them. So what are we to do?

Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life…" (Matthew 6:25) And He goes on to list the things people living in a first century, subsistence agricultural community would be anxious about. Food. Water. Clothing. Basic staples of life. If He were living in a 21st century suburban American context today, He might easily have listed money, safety, access to good healthcare and education, jobs. These are the things we consider to be basic staples of life. So why shouldn't we be anxious about these things according to Jesus? Because our Heavenly Father sees our needs and meets them. Just as He does the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. Furthermore, there are more important things than the American Dream. More important things than living an upper middle class suburban lifestyle. And then comes the kicker…who among us can add a single hour to our lifespans? What does all our anxiety produce at the end of the day except more anxiety?

So what do we do? After all, anxiety is real. It's not like we can pretend it doesn't exist. It's not like we can muster up the strength to just make it go away. Once again, Jesus provides the answer. Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. Seek to dwell under the shadow of the Almighty. Intentionally live your life in His presence. Stay in step with His Spirit. As you do these things, you will find all that you need will be given to you and all your anxieties will begin to fade away.

What does this look like practically? Well, in my own life, I have found the more I seek Christ and His Kingdom. The more I relinquish my treasure and talents into His hands. The more I give Him my hopes and dreams for my future. The more I let go of my needs, wants, and desires; the more I experience peace. The more I give away, the more I joy I get in return. The more I relinquish and surrender, the more fulfilled I become. I sleep better. I feel better. Anxiety has lost it's hold on me. Fear has lost it's hold on me. I am truly free. Not because of my circumstances. Not because my inner strength, health, or well-being. It's simply because I made Matthew 6:33 my life verse. May you find peace as you seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness in your own life today!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 15-19, Matthew 7

January 9, 2021

TRIBAL CONFLICT

Readings for today: Genesis 15-19, Matthew 7

A few years ago I was in Ethiopia. The day we arrived marked the end of several days of political unrest, conflict, and protests that grew violent just outside the capital of Addis Ababa. Our Ethiopian partners were visibly uncomfortable with the idea of taking us to Gojo where we were to conduct our church planter training and medical clinic. They wanted to make sure we stayed safe. We eventually loaded up the Land Rovers and headed out on our 4+ hour trip. As we traveled, we passed right through where the riots had been just a day or two before. Large rocks littered the road. Burned out vehicles had yet to be cleared. A large semi-truck had been set on fire and flipped over. And while we were never in any real danger, we were reminded of the political realities on the ground in this country we love so much. Sound familiar?

There is a "tribal" element to almost all human conflict. Whether the tribes are Republican or Democrat in the US or Oromo and Tigray in Ethiopia or the tribes that went to war in Abram's day. All these different tribes want the same thing. An expansion of their power and influence. And the temptation is to believe this is where the real action is taking place. The temptation is to believe that our future and the fate of God's people is somehow wrapped up in the outcomes of these power struggles. I see it in the apocalyptic language so many use to describe the outcome our electoral process. And I imagine if one lived in the days of Abram, one might be tempted to think something significant rested on the outcome of the battle between the kings of Shinar, Ellasar, Elam, and Goiim and the kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Bela. But the Bible almost treats their conflict as an afterthought. Reading the passage, one gets the sense that the only reason this story is included at all is because Lot got caught up in it, forcing Abram into action. You see, the real action in these chapters has nothing to do with kings (even Melchizedek) and tribes and nations and their power struggles. No, the real action. The real drama. The real conflict involves an old man and his barren wife and their struggle to have children. It has to do with God and His promise to Abram and Sarai that they would have a son to carry on their family name. The real struggle is God telling Abram to look up into the heavens and number the stars of the sky, for so shall his offspring be.

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

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

Furthermore, as we have already seen, God's faithfulness is unconditional. Even when Abram and Sarai take matters into their own hands - as in the case of Hagar and Ishmael - God is there to turn it for His good purpose. Because God has committed Himself to Abram and his family, He will never let go. No

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

Can you begin to fathom the fact that in Christ, we see the fulfillment of Genesis 15? God sacrificing His own life for the sake of Abram and his descendants? God sealing a new covenant by giving His body and shedding His blood? Do you understand the great faithfulness of God to His people? The lengths to which He is willing to go for the sake of those He loves? Abram. Sarai. Hagar. Ishmael. You and me. With all the chaos that is swirling around us these days as our “tribes” go to war, my prayer is you believe as Abram once did. May you look to Him and receive full assurance that He is able to do what He has promised!

January 11, 2021

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

Readings for today: Genesis 20-22, Matthew 8

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 23-24, Matthew 9

January 12, 2021

LABORING FOR THE LORD

Readings for today: Genesis 23-24, Matthew 9

Many years ago a mentor taught me this prayer - “Lord, help me to see the world as you see it. Break my heart with the things that break your heart. And when you call me to act, help me not to duck.” ;-) I’ve been praying that prayer in some form or another ever since. It’s the first thing that came to mind this morning as we read through Matthew 9.

Paralytics. Tax collectors. Sinners. Religious elite. The blind, mute, and demon-possessed. The chronically ill, marginalized, those who have suffered tragedy. Seeing the world through Jesus’ eyes means truly “seeing” those around us. Not just passing by on the other side. Not just ignoring or dismissing those in need. Not just focusing all my attention on my own wants, needs, and desires. I must lift up my eyes above my navel and look around me. There are so many in need. So many who are struggling. So many who are lost. So many who are lonely. So many who need help. So many who need someone simply to acknowledge them. Simply to “see” them and treat them with dignity and honor and respect as fellow image-bearers of God.

“And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Matthew 9:35-36) Once I see them, how do I feel about them? Is my heart broken for them? Do I have compassion for them? Or do I react in anger, defensiveness, frustration, fear? I think of the crowds who gathered in the streets after George Floyd was killed. I think of all the turmoil and upheaval of the last several days. It’s easy to judge. Easy to condemn. Easy to cast blame or make snarky comments or use these events as cover to accumulate more political power. But if my heart breaks for the things that break God’s heart, I will find myself tearing up over the injustices so my friends of color still face. I will find myself moved to work for greater opportunity and access for those who feel marginalized and forgotten by society. I will listen to those who feel threatened by all the changes taking place in our culture. I will see the hurting and the helpless and harassed and seek to come alongside them to shepherd them rather than view them as enemies to be destroyed.

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” (Matthew 9:37-38) The harvest is plentiful. The world is crying out for the gospel. So many are sick and tired of being sick and tired. They are tired of being helpless and hopeless. Tired of working so hard only to watch all their efforts turn to dust in the grand scheme of things. They are tired of trying to legislate change that can only happen in the human heart. But the laborers are too few. There are too few Christians willing to walk the walk and talk the talk. Too few Christians who truly understand their calling in this world. We are here to be salt and light. All that we have and all that we are is given to us by God for the express purpose of expanding His Kingdom in the world. We do not own the fields into which we’ve been sent. We have no claim on them nor should our aim be to profit in any from our work. We are simply day laborers for the Lord, here to do His will. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

Many years ago, I suffered a tremendous professional failure. I was a church planter in a small town outside of Madison, WI. For months I worked to gather a group of people who would help us launch the new church as we sought to reach the community in the name of Jesus. But all my efforts failed. I was at odds with the board. I was at odds with some of the people in the group. All my fears and

insecurities came to the fore. I was struggling. I was depressed. And once it imploded, I had no idea what I was going to do. Yes, I could justify myself. Yes, I could point to all the reasons it wasn't my fault. Yes, I could blame-shift and throw up my hands and leave the ministry. But God would not let me go. He forced me into several months of prayer. Several months where I literally would pace the floor all night long crying out to Him. I got so little sleep. I was so anxious over how I was going to provide for my family. I felt helpless and hopeless and lost and afraid. But it was there in the darkness that I met God again. He stripped my life down to the studs. All I had built, He took away in order to teach me an all-important truth. My life is not my own. My life is His to do with as He wills. He is the Potter. I am the clay. All I can do is surrender. Submit my life to Him. Offer myself as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to Him.

Friends, I truly believe I became a "laborer" through that experience. Though I had been in ministry for years, I had never truly surrendered my life, my future, my professional hopes and dreams to God. I was still holding onto the lie that I co-owned the fields I worked in with God. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Now I find myself in a different place. Yes, I am still tempted to believe I have a share in what God has built but thankfully God is quick to remind me of my "day laborer" status. ;-) And I will tell you there is no greater freedom in this life than surrendering all you have to the Lord. No greater joy in this life than answering His call to serve. Friends, wherever God has you right now, know He has put you there for a purpose! His desire is for you to "labor" in that particular field for His glory. Labor with compassion. Labor with grace. Labor with love.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 25-26, Matthew 10:1-25

January 13, 2021

ELECTION

Readings for today: Genesis 25-26, Matthew 10:1-25

The title of today's entry probably caught your attention. Especially with our nation in turmoil over our current transition of power. However, the election I'm talking about has nothing to do with ballots or voting machines or accusations of voter suppression and/or voter fraud. It has to do with God's decision from eternity to elect a people for Himself. One of the things that happens when we begin reading the Bible is we come face to face with the character and nature of our God. He reveals Himself to us and confronts us on the idols we have made. The ways we have tried to make Him in our image rather than accept Him for who He is. We start to grapple with truly difficult questions like can God be trusted? Is He a good God? A righteous God? A holy God? If one concludes the answer to these questions is "Yes", then these narratives begin to make sense. If one concludes the answer to these questions is "No" or "Not sure", then these narratives get really difficult to understand. Why does God allow Noah to curse his grandson for something his father did? Why does God seem to overlook Abraham's lying? Why does God turn Lot's wife into a pillar of salt simply for a glance backwards and yet seemingly do nothing to Lot's daughters when they rape their father to get pregnant? How could God allow Hagar and Ishmael to be treated so terribly by Sarah? And what are we to make of the conflict between Esau and Jacob which began before they were even born?

These are all honest, real questions that should be raised by any thoughtful, engaged readers of the Bible. And they press us to the primary question which will undergird our entire journey this year...will we let God be God? Can we agree His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts? Can we agree that in standing outside of time and space, He has a perspective we can never grasp? Can we agree that God is infinite in wisdom and understanding Omniscient and omnipotent? Will we trust His sovereign decision to choose Israel and not the other nations? Will we trust His sovereign plan to use Israel for the sake of the other nations? Will we trust His sovereign decision to use this particular family, the family of Abraham, with all of its baggage and dysfunction? Will we let God be God?

All of this provides the backdrop to our readings. When we let God be God, the narrative begins to make sense. We see the guidance of God as He leads the servant of Abraham miraculously to Rebekah. (Reminds me of that great line from Casablanca where Bogart says, "Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine.") We see the hand of God present as Abraham settles his estate and dies peacefully among his people. His funeral attended by his two boys, Ishmael and Isaac, who reunite to bury their father in what must have been a tender scene. We see both Ishmael and Isaac receive the blessing of God as their families grow. We see God heal Rebekah's barren womb in what will become a pattern throughout the Old Testament. We witness the sovereign choice of God to elect Jacob to carry on the promise even though Esau is the firstborn. We see Esau confirm that decision as he despises his birthright, selling it to Jacob for a bowl of stew. Finally, we see God renew His covenant with Isaac, almost immediately followed by Isaac's repetition of the same mistake his father made.

Time and again we are reminded that unless God acts to preserve His promise, we are doomed. The human race is just too dysfunctional. Our thoughts too prone to evil. Our hearts so easily seduced by sin. This should challenge us as well as comfort us. God calls us into relationship with Himself because He wants to use us as His instruments to fill the earth with His glory. And this demands something of us. Actually, it demands everything from us! At the same time, the successful completion of God's plan

doesn’t depend on human effort. Again, I love what Paul says in Romans 9:16, “So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.” Where is God challenging you today to follow His will? How is God comforting you in those areas where you fall short?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 27-28, Matthew 10:26-42

January 14, 2021

UNCONDITIONAL

Readings for today: Genesis 27-28, Matthew 10:26-42

One of the most difficult concepts for me to grasp is the unconditional nature of God's love. It is foreign to me. Alien. Strange. I cannot comprehend it because I cannot manufacture it in my own life. Even with those closest to me, unconditional love is difficult. What happens when they disappoint me? Let me down? Hurt my feelings? Sin against me? What happens when they are inconsiderate? Ignore my needs? Push me away? When these things happen, I find myself layering all kinds of "conditions" on my forgiveness and reconciliation. There are hoops the other person must now jump through in order for me to love them again. We use all kinds of buzz words and phrases to describe these conditions. We talk about boundaries. We ask questions like "are they a safe person?" We demand to see remorse before we forgive. And I'm actually not saying these things are unimportant. Too many people use the "unconditional" love of God to justify all kinds of abuse but the point still holds. Unconditional love is impossible for us to grasp.

Simply consider the events in today's reading. Having stolen Esau's birthright, Jacob now steals his blessing. He conspires with his mother to take advantage of his disabled father in order to become the paterfamilias of the family. This means Jacob will now hold the power of life and death over his household. He will inherit all the wealth. His word will be law for those who serve him. Esau, of course, flies into a murderous rage and plots to kill his brother. So Rebekah sends Jacob away for safety. On his journey, God visits Jacob in a dream. One might expect God to confront Jacob on his sin. One might expect God to make some demands of Jacob before He blesses him. One might expect God to require obedience to His will in order for Jacob to secure the promises of the covenant. In short, one might expect God to righteously lay down some conditions or "boundaries" here to force Jacob to reform his behavior. But God shocks our sensibilities by offering Jacob nothing but unconditional love.

"I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Genesis 28:13-15) No conditions. No boundaries. It doesn't seem to matter that Jacob is not a "safe" person and cannot be trusted. God simply chooses unconditionally to set His love on this corrupt and sinful man. I love how Jacob responds. He's so uncomfortable with God's lack of conditions that he decides to put some on himself. "Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you." (Genesis 28:20-22)

I don't know about you but I identify with Jacob. I have been the manipulator. The schemer. I have sought to get ahead by shading the truth or exaggerating my accomplishments or spinning things in my favor. I am often driven by selfish motives. I am often tempted by greed. I often put conditions on my love for others and my love for God. I am a broken and sinful man in so many ways. But God is faithful. His love for me is unconditional. He loves me for who I am, warts and all. His blessings flow into my life not because I am more obedient than the next person but simply because God has chosen to lavish His grace on me. And the more I surrender. The more I submit. The more I listen to Jesus and

trust Him when He says, “whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39), the more my eyes are open to everything God has done for me. Once the reality of God’s unconditional love settles into my heart, I find myself not only able but willing to extend that same love out to others.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 29-30, Matthew 11

January 15, 2021

REST

Readings for today: Genesis 29-30, Matthew 11

Medical professionals all agree that healthy adults need around 7-8 hours of sleep a night. Rest is an essential part of our overall health and well-being not just physically but mentally and emotionally as well. Sadly, we live in a society where rest seems to be in short supply. According to recent studies by the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health, 70% of Americans reported insufficient sleep at least one night a month. 11% report insufficient sleep every night. Sleep-related problems impact some 50-70 million Americans of all ages and socio-economic classes and seem largely due to technology, anxiety, lifestyle demands, and the lack of education around the impact of sleep loss. As the "sleep debt" piles up, so do the consequences. It is estimated that our collective lack of sleep is costing us over 100 billion a year in lost productivity, medical expenses, sick leave, etc. Throw in the chronic anxiety fostered by our culture and you have a recipe for disaster. Is it any wonder we are seeing the rise in extremism? The rise in hate and outrage as sleep-deprived, chronically anxious people begin acting out in all sorts of ways?

Now listen to the words of Jesus. "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:27-30)

What a difference! What a contrast! All things have been given to Jesus by His Heavenly Father. All authority in heaven and on earth has been entrusted into His hands. All things were made through Him and without Him nothing was made that has been made. Jesus reigns. He rules. He sits on heaven's throne. As such, He is the only one with the authority to set us free from our anxiety and restlessness. He is the only one with the power to grant us a peaceful sleep. Furthermore, this is His great desire! To grant us rest! He is no tyrant! No dictator! No abusive strongman! He is a gentle and humble King who loves His people dearly. His yoke is therefore easy. His burden is therefore light. He doesn't seek to "pile on." He is not like human rulers who seek to accumulate as much control over our lives as possible. His goal for us is "soul-rest." The kind of rest that sinks deep into your bones. The kind of rest you can only get when you truly believe someone benevolent and good and righteous and faithful sits on the throne of eternity and is watching over your life.

Human beings were made to rest. Rest one day out of every seven. It's what we call a Sabbath. We were made to rest one-third out of every day. It's what we call sleep. We were made to rest in an intimate relationship with God that would relieve all the pressure that comes from life in this world. It's why Jesus tells us not to be anxious. God is in control. It's why Jesus tells us not to worry. God is in control. It's why Jesus tells us not to be afraid when we see all the upheaval and turmoil in the world around us. God is in control. Rest in this great truth, friends! Come to Jesus and find the rest your heart longs for! The rest you were made for!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 31-35, Matthew 12

January 16, 2021

WRESTLING WITH GOD

Readings for today: Genesis 31-35, Matthew 12

One of the things I love most about God is His willingness to wrestle with us. His willingness to get down in the mud with us. He is not afraid to get his hands dirty. Not afraid to engage us in the deepest, darkest places of our hearts. Not afraid of our outbursts of anger. Not afraid of our doubts and questions. We can bring all this to God. Meet Him unafraid and unashamed and struggle with Him over His sovereign will for our lives. God is not after robots. He is not after automatons. He doesn't want uncritical, unthinking obedience. He wants our hearts. He wants our souls. He wants our bodies. He wants our minds. He wants all of us. Every part of us must eventually surrender to Him. And that's a fight because our sinful nature pushes back.

My mother would tell you I've always been independent. Even as a child. I didn't like to cuddle. Didn't like to be held. I would push back against her when she would try to wrap me up in her arms. When I got older and headed off for my first day of school, I shed no tears. Just got out of the car and walked towards the school, no looking back. Recently, she and I had breakfast together. We talked about how I am still pretty independent. She loves me. She's proud of me. She'd love for me to need her for something. Anything. I do the same thing with God if I am honest. I push back. I don't like to be wrapped up in His arms. I want to be independent. Do my own thing. I don't want to need Him. I like to pretend like I have it all together. Like I'm good on my own. It's all a lie of course. I do need God. I do need my mom. I am not an independent creature. It is not good for me to be alone.

It's taken some hard experiences for me to learn this about myself. Experiences much like Jacob had. Jacob's entire life is a house of cards. He steals his brother's birthright. Steals his brother's blessing. Steals from his uncle. He is constantly manipulating and scheming in order to get ahead. Frankly, he even tries to "scheme" God. But now he's got to face the consequences. Now all the chickens have come home to roost. His brother is on his way to meet him. When last they say each other, Esau was in a murderous rage. Now Jacob's afraid. Is his brother coming to exact vengeance? Is his brother coming to kill him and his family? This is what drives Jacob down to the Jabbok to wrestle all night with God. Have you ever done the same?

Like Jacob, I know what it's like to wrestle with God all night. I've been there and done that. I've battled Him. I've fought with Him. I've watched the sun rise and set only to do it all over again. This was my life in the fall of 2009. I averaged 2-3 hours of sleep a night for a few months. God and I went to war over my life. My family. My ministry. My future. Everything I have and everything I hold dear was in play. Finally, there came a point where He simply broke me. He broke my heart. He broke my spirit. He broke my pride. And while the pain was intense and real, there was relief as well. A profound sense of freedom flooded my being. I've been walking with a limp ever since.

Where have you wrestled like Jacob? Where are you wrestling like Jacob? Where are you mad at God? Frustrated with God? Upset with God? What questions do you have for Him? Doubts? Fears that need to be expressed? Where are you resisting Him? Pushing back against His will? Struggling to accept His sovereign plan? Today's passage invites you into the ring! To grapple with God honestly! God's a big boy! He can handle everything you throw at Him and more! Let your guard down and lay it all out before your Lord. Fight Him until you break before His relentless love and grace.

Readings for tomorrow: None

January 18, 2021

DANGEROUS DREAMS

Readings for today: Genesis 36-37, Matthew 13:1-23

Today is Martin Luther King Jr. Day. A day we set aside in our nation to honor one of our heroes. A man who fought against racism and poverty and war. He dedicated his life to following the way of Jesus. Like Jesus, MLK displayed a fierce commitment to the truth. He refused to let injustice stand. He took great personal risks that put his life in danger on many occasions but never resorted to violence even in self-defense. One would think such a man would have been celebrated in his own time. Hailed as a hero especially in a nation that claimed a strong Christian heritage. Tragically, this was not the case. He was hated and violently opposed for his beliefs. Public opinion polls taken at the time of his death showed a 75% "disapproval" rating. What was it about MLK's dream that was so dangerous? His radical commitment to peace posed a threat to a growing military industrial complex. His radical commitment to care for the poor posed a threat to runaway capitalism and corporate greed. His radical commitment to equality posed a threat to a nation who refused to repent for the sins of her racist past. And though our nation has made progress since those dark days in 1968, we still have so far to go before we see Dr. King's dream realized.

I couldn't help but think of Dr. King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech as I read our passage today. Joseph's dreams were similarly dangerous. They posed a threat to a family system governed by the strict rules of an ancient near east culture. Younger sons did not rule over older sons nor did parents ever bow down to their children. Such a notion was deeply shameful and dishonoring which is why Joseph's brothers respond so violently. They are well within their rights to cast him out of the family. Punish him for his transgressions even if their father will not. They know he is the favored son and perhaps they worried that Jacob may indeed upend the "system" to elevate Joseph and make all his dreams come true. Little did they know how their actions were serving the larger purposes of God. Indeed, decades will pass before Joseph will see his dreams realized. In that time, he would suffer tremendous hardship and pain. He would face disappointment time and time again. He would rise only to fall and he must have had his moments of despair. But eventually he came to a point where he could see what his brothers intended for evil, God intended for good.

I have to believe God is up to something similar in our day. As I reflect back on the events of the past year, I find myself wondering if what we are seeing are the birth pangs of a new age. I think of the words of Jesus to His disciples in Matthew 24:4-14, "See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." You see, Jesus too has a dream. He dreams of a world where peace and justice reign. A world where wars will cease and hatred is replaced by love. A world where every injustice is made right and every wrong redressed. A world where truth and righteousness are lifted up and lies, deceit, and conspiracy theories laid low. He dreams of a world where the poor and needy and outcast are treated with compassion. He

dreams of a world where sinners repent and every human being takes responsibility to steward the gifts and resources they've been given for glory of God and in service to His Kingdom.

Friends, our world is not friendly to dreamers. Especially those who dream God's dreams. It will take courage to hold fast to God's dreams in a world where violence and hatred and outrage and injustice are on the rise. It will take courage to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Turning the other cheek. Repaying evil with good. Offering a gentle answer in response to wrath. Fighting for justice in non-violent ways. And so I challenge you on this Martin Luther King Jr. Day to not just post a quote on social media but to actually take the pledge MLK offered to his followers during the Birmingham campaign in 1963…

Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.

Remember always that the nonviolent movement seeks justice and reconciliation — not victory.

Walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love.

Pray daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free.

Sacrifice personal wishes in order that all men might be free.

Observe with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.

Seek to perform regular service for others and for the world.

Refrain from the violence of fist, tongue or heart.

Strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health.

Follow the directions of the movement and of the captain of a demonstration. (Our Captain being Jesus and our Movement being the Kingdom of God.)

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 38-40, Matthew 13:24-58

January 19, 2021

THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

Readings for today: Genesis 38-40, Matthew 13:24-58

The story of Judah and Tamar seemingly comes out of nowhere. It's almost an interruption in the much larger story of Joseph. And yet, it is critical for our understanding of the saving purposes of God. In the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Judah and Tamar are both mentioned and Matthew knows his audience will immediately call to mind this story from Genesis. Women, by the way, are almost never included in any ancient near east genealogy but Matthew makes sure we know the names of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. That's prostitute, prostitute, Moabite, and adulteress for those scoring at home. The point Matthew is making is that even the family tree of Jesus is not free from scandal and sin!

All kinds of important questions are raised by this text. Why does God kill Er and Onan for seemingly minor offenses? Why is Judah engaging the services of cult prostitutes? Is this his regular practice after his wife dies? And why is the penalty for adultery so harsh for Tamar? Burning at the stake? What is God up to here?

After the incident with Joseph where Judah sells his own brother into slavery, he leaves his family. Perhaps out of guilt over what he has done. Perhaps just to get away from the family dysfunction. We aren't given a reason. He marries outside his clan and his wife bears him three sons. Er, his oldest, is so wicked that the Lord puts him to death. Again, no reason is given. It is simply something we have to accept. In the ancient near east, brothers were required to take their widowed sister-in-laws into their home with the hope they could get them pregnant and thereby continue the family line. Onan is fully aware of this custom but apparently only uses Tamar for his own personal sexual gratification while refusing to fulfill his filial responsibility. And the Lord puts him to death for his offense. This rightfully frightens Judah. He's not about to lose his third son as this will put his own family's future at risk so he sends Tamar home to her own family and asks her to wait until Shelah comes of age.

Then the subject of the passage shifts. Tamar is now the primary actor. She also is frightened for her future. She's been married twice. Her reputation is in tatters as both men have died. She's been sexually abused by at least one husband. And she knows by now that Judah has no intention of fulfilling his promise. So she dresses herself as a cult prostitute, complete with a veil so he won't recognize her. She knows his wife has died. Perhaps she even knows Judah visits prostitutes with regularity although the text doesn't indicate as such. And she places herself in prime position to meet him along the way. Judah takes the bait and Tamar is crafty enough to ask for his signet, cord, and staff, all of which clearly identify him to the community. Then she returns home. Three months later, she starts showing. And even though she's living in her father's home, she is technically Judah's responsibility. He brings her out to be burned at the stake and that's when the other shoe drops.

So what is God up to here? Over and over again, it seems like the salvation plan of God teeters on the brink of collapse. There is the barrenness of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. All women who desire children but cannot seem to conceive through natural means. Then there is the sinful scheming of the men. The lies of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob constantly threaten God's promise. And now we read about Judah's failings as a father-in-law. One would think God might be tempted to give up on this family! But God is faithful and the central message of Genesis is that God uses even the frail, sinful people in Abraham's family to bring about His sovereign purposes.

What about your life? Where has nature itself seemingly conspired against you? Where have time and chance not gone your way? Where have you failed and lost sight of God's promises? Friends, do not be afraid! The same God who opened the wombs of the barren women and saved the men from their sin is the same God who is active in your life today! He is using all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose! He is sanctifying you through His Spirit, granting you a faith that is strong enough to endure every trial.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 41, Matthew 14:1-21

January 20, 2021

TRUE ALLEGIANCE

Readings for today: Genesis 41, Matthew 14:1-21

Over and over again we read how the Lord was with Joseph. He was with him at the heights of his success. He was with him in the depths of his failures. With him when he was rapidly climbing in favor. With him when he was falsely accused and imprisoned. No matter where Joseph went, God was at his side. How do we know? Because of the fruit his life produced. Joseph was a humble man. He submitted his life to God's will. He walked in God's ways. He refused to let bitterness or anger or fear get the best of him. Whatever others may intend for evil, Joseph knew God could turn to good if he would trust Him. Joseph's life is a model of faithfulness. A model of humility. A model of walking with open hands and an open heart to however the Lord would choose to work. Joseph's steps were determined for him. He did not choose to go to Egypt. Did not choose to be part of Potipher's house. Did not choose to be thrown in prison. Did not choose to serve Pharaoh. Joseph, like Daniel after him, simply chose to grow where he was planted. Like the seed that fell on good soil, his life bore thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred-fold for the Lord. And the result was the blessing of a pagan nation.

I am sure Joseph had his moments. Perhaps he cried out like the Psalmist to God for vindication. Cried out for justice. Cried out for peace. I am sure Joseph spent many a dark night in the prison cell asking God why this had happened. Reflecting what God wanted to teach him. I am sure Joseph's faith was put to the test by his experiences and yet through it all, Joseph chooses the path of faithfulness. The path of trust. Come hell or high water, Joseph throws his lot in with God. It's a powerful testimony, one Joseph himself confirms in the naming of his sons. "Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house. The name of the second he called Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." (Gen. 41:51-52)

What about us? Today is a good day to reflect the life of Joseph and the faithfulness of God. Today we inaugurate a new president. Depending on where you fall on the political spectrum, you might view the next four years as a time of plenty or of want. You might look back at the last four years in a similar vein. What we need to remember is to never place our hope in Pharaoh. We should never become too comfortable in Egypt. God has not designed us to live comfortably in this world and we should never cozy up to the political ideologies of one particular party or another. No, our hope is in God. Our home is His country. Our allegiance to His Kingdom. This was something Joseph never forgot. Even as he lay on his deathbed, as we will see in a few chapters, he secures a promise from his children to take his body one day back to the Promised Land.

What does your life look like when you experience the ups and downs? When you are attacked and falsely accused? When the people around you…the very people who are supposed to love you… actually intend evil and seek to harm you? What happens then? How do you respond? So often, I find myself reacting in one of two ways. I lash out. I go on the attack. I violently defend myself if necessary. Or I run. I curl up in the fetal position. I let my fears get the best of me and I try to hide. Neither approach is gospel-centered. Neither approach is faithful. God calls us to place our trust in Him. To seek our approval in Him. To place our faith in His will and His way and ultimately, His vindication. To walk with the Lord means blooming where He plants us. Blessing the people He has placed around us be they Christian or pagan. Praying for our political leaders be they Republican or Democrat. We walk in His ways on the mountaintop when things are going great and in the valley when things are hard. We accept both good and evil from his hands like Job. As we do so, God produces in us a great harvest of righteousness.

So where does life find you today? As our nation undergoes a transition of power, where are you placing your trust? Is it in your circumstances? Is it in a new administration? Is it in the people around you and their opinions of you? Or is your hope in God?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 42-43, Matthew 14:22-36

January 21, 2021

THE NARROW WAY

Readings for today: Genesis 42-43, Matthew 14:22-36

Ultimately, there are two ways to live. You can live honestly. Openly. Transparently. Vulnerably. Daily practicing unconditional love and forgiveness and reconciliation. The result being a life of peace. A life of deep joy. A life of gracious self-acceptance because you have nothing to hide. Nothing to fear. Nothing to protect. No false self to prop up. Jesus calls this the narrow way. It's a hard way. Those who find it and are willing to submit to it are few. Or you can choose the wide way. The easy way. The way the world recommends. Always hiding your true self. Always living deceptively on some level, not letting anyone in. Guarding your heart against any pain and suffering. Refusing to look in the mirror. You can love conditionally. Forgive selectively. Refuse to reconcile. The result is a life of guilt. A life of fear. A life of fleeting joy. A life of self-regret. A life of self-destruction.

Sadly, I meet too far many people who choose the latter of the two scenarios. Just like Jesus said I would. Rather than take an honest inventory of their own failings and mistakes, they become hyper-critical of others. Rather than take responsibility for how they may have contributed to another person's pain, they lash out defensively, always protesting their innocence. Rather than do the hard work of navigating broken trust in relationships, they simply ghost the person and move on. Recently, I read an editorial from a major news outlet extolling the virtues of cutting people out of one's life. The premise from the author was that her life was better without her mother. DNA doesn't matter. Biological connections simply aren't worth it. We should discard anyone in our lives who we deem to be "toxic." Now are there scenarios where estrangement needs to happen? Of course. Some people are so abusive - verbally, emotionally, physically, spiritually - that we need to cut them off. But such tragedies are never to be celebrated. They are to be grieved. Friends, the brokenness of our world is legion. It is breathtaking in scope and heartbreaking in depth. And it leads in a direct line to the rise of suicide, depression, anxiety-disorders, opioid and other drug abuse, alcoholism, sexual addiction, etc. that so many are struggling with today. We all know it. We must come to grips with it. We have to face it. And we have to ask God for the courage to choose the narrow way.

The Joseph narrative reveals a similar dynamic. As a young man, Joseph was an insufferable fool. The favored son of an aging father from his beloved wife, he was given all kinds of privilege and power in the family. Resentment grew to the point where his own brothers wanted to kill him. After throwing him in a pit, they made the fateful decision to sell him into slavery instead so they could turn a profit. It seemed like such an easy solution to all their problems but this tragic act will haunt them for the rest of their lives. Fast forward a few decades. Joseph has risen to power in Egypt. He has saved the nation from a devastating famine and now the whole world comes to humble itself before him. His own brothers make the journey and he immediately recognizes them. But he is suspicious. Why are they here? What do they want? Most importantly, do they regret the decision they made all those years ago? So he puts them to the test. They believe they're being punished for the sins of their past. The pain is real. It extends back to Jacob, their father, who has to undergo the pain of letting his youngest son - the only son he has left from the wife he loved - go to Egypt with no guarantee he'll return. Reuben attempts to assuage his father's concern. "Kill my two sons if I don't return with Benjamin." What kind of monster would Jacob have to be to kill his own grandchildren? The dysfunction here is real. The consequences of the sinful choices of this family over the years are now being realized. The weight of their guilt and shame lies heavy upon them. They are once again at a crossroads. Which path will they choose?

We all live dysfunctional lives to some extent. We all find ourselves straddling on some level the two paths I outlined above. I imagine most of us have days when we are honest and open and transparent and real. I imagine we also have days when we are guarded, dishonest, and secretive. I imagine most of us have days when we are able to love unconditionally. Forgive generously. Reconcile freely. And I imagine we all have days when love is difficult. Forgiveness a pipe dream. Reconciliation beyond us. I know I do. Friends, the goal of the Christian life is to surrender more and more each day to the Holy Spirit. To let Him draw us close into the presence of our Heavenly Father where there is grace and peace and life in abundance. It is a life of openness and honesty and transparency because, after all, who can hide anything from God? It's costly because it forces us out of our comfort zones, out of the protective cocoons we've created for ourselves, out of the self-centered life we tend to naturally choose. And it's not easy. Our bodies, minds, and emotions often rebel. The act of submission is a courageous choice we all have to make in a world that will never celebrate following Christ. That's why Jesus says, "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." (Matthew 7:13-14) May we choose the narrow way today.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 44-45, Matthew 15:1-20

January 22, 2021

GODLY PERSPECTIVE

Readings for today: Genesis 44-45, Matthew 15:1-20

“So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.” (Genesis 45:4-8)

What does it look like to have God’s perspective? To look at life with all its ups and downs and see the hand of God at work? Consider all that Joseph had gone through. Assaulted by his own brothers. Sold into slavery. Falsely imprisoned. He could easily have adopted a victim mindset. He could easily have become bitter and angry. He could easily have sought revenge. But Joseph - perhaps more than anyone else save Abraham in the Book of Genesis - walks with God. He cultivates a close relationship with God. Interestingly enough, we have these accounts of God coming to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Visiting them over and over again throughout their lives. Speaking to them. Making promises. Not so with Joseph. Yes, he does receive visions and dreams but it’s not the same. And yet, his relationship with God seems to be the closest!

The Joseph cycle is a tender one filled with special moments. Joseph reuniting with his brothers. Judah, the one who sold Joseph into slavery in the first place, now offering his life for Benjamin’s. Jacob hearing the news that his beloved son is alive. God visiting Jacob one last time to assure him he would see his son before he dies. When one stops to think about it, one can probably see many parallels in our own lives and families. What an encouragement to know God is at work! What an encouragement to know God uses all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose! What an encouragement to know God is sovereignly orchestrating the events of our lives according to His good and perfect will!

Where do you need God’s perspective today? Can you take a step back and see His hand at work in your life? In your home? In your neighborhood? In your school? At work? In our nation? Even if you are in the middle of great trial and struggle or you’ve experienced significant loss or suffering pain, do you have confidence God is with you? Trust in God’s promises! Lean on Him for strength! Cling to Him for hope! He will carry you through!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 46-48, Matthew 15:21-39

January 23, 2021

WAS JESUS A RACIST?

Readings for today: Genesis 46-48, Matthew 15:21-39

"And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly." (Matthew 15:21-28)

Much of today's writing comes from Kenneth Bailey's work in Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels. I highly recommend it.

Today we come to one of the most difficult passages in the gospels. Many commentators have wrestled over this interaction. On the face of it - read through 21st century eyes - it seems like Jesus is a racist. Shaped and formed by the same supremacist attitudes that most of the Jews held towards those who were not part of God's chosen people. Furthermore, this woman is a Canaanite. She belonged to a particular tribe of people who were ancient enemies of the Jews. Then you layer in all the honor/shame components of an ancient near east society. The fact that women did not approach men they were not related to much less speak to them. The fact that the woman's daughter was demon-possessed which would have made her ritually unclean. All of these factors come into play as we seek to understand what's happening in this story. And a huge part of the challenge is setting aside our own cultural understandings to let the text speak for itself.

So why doesn't Jesus initially respond to the woman? Why does He initially dismiss her request? This doesn't seem to fit His character. After all, we've seen Him break all kinds of barriers and social taboos. We've seen Him reach out in compassion to those who are lost and hurting and marginalized. Why would He shift gears so suddenly? What's really going on here? Bailey suggests this is a typical "honor/shame" interaction in first century Palestinian society that was meant to both test and educate at the same time. He is testing the woman's faith and He is educating His disciples who still haven't grasped the inclusiveness of God's Kingdom.

So let's walk through the text. The interaction begins with the heart cry of this woman whose daughter lies in desperate need. This is where the testing begins. Jesus initially seems to ignore her cry but doesn't send her away as His disciples suggest. Instead, He makes a statement that is more directed at them than the woman. He's sees their hearts. He knows their prejudices. He is going to challenge them with this interaction. One can imagine Jesus turning from His disciples back to the woman with a smile on His face to see what she will do. The woman rightfully sees this as an invitation to press further which she does. As Ken Bailey explains, the woman "did not move because she believed Jesus did not mean it." She cries out for help. Once again, we are confused by Jesus' response which would have been typical for his day. Dogs were unclean animals. They were not pets. They were not part of the family. At best, they were used to guard property and at worst were mangy scavengers. To be called one was a great insult and yet Jesus intentionally softens the language by using a word best translated as "little dog." Certainly not a term of endearment but also not as threatening. It both signaled to the

woman that the exchange should continue while at the same time signaling to the disciples that their cultural bias was rooted in sin. Once again, the woman is invited to respond. Will she get angry? Leave in frustration? Rage at the injustice of her treatment? Remarkably, Bailey points out, she responds with wisdom. She passes the test. And one can almost see the twinkle in Jesus' eye. The utter delight on His face. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly."

I find Bailey's interpretation deeply compelling. Partly because I've seen similar interactions in North Africa where I spend a great deal of time each year. There are certain cultural exchanges in honor/shame societies that seem strange to Western eyes. We are so used to direct forms of communication that we often miss what is taking place in cultures where indirect communication is more of the rule. When I'm able to lay aside my own cultural biases and let the text speak for itself. From it's own cultural milieu. My eyes are opened much like the disciple's must have been to the many ways Jesus challenges the prevailing attitudes of His day and our day.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 49-50, Exodus 1, Matthew 16:1-4

January 25, 2021

EVERYDAY HEROISM

Readings for today: Genesis 49-50, Exodus 1, Matthew 16:1-4

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 2-4, Matthew 16:5-28

January 26, 2021

IS GOD FORGETFUL?

Readings for today: Exodus 2-4, Matthew 16:5-28

"And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew." (Exodus 2:24-25)

My family has a history of dementia. Early onset Alzheimer's. Diseases that rob us of our precious memories and make strangers of those we love. My grandfather died in his middle thirties due to this disease. My aunt when she was in her early sixties. My grandmother on my mother's side spent the last few years of her life in an almost catatonic state. So I know the journey. I know the pain of watching someone you love slip away from you while they are still living.

I'm also a pastor. As such, I've spent countless hours with people who wonder if they've been forgotten by God. They go through incredible hardship and pain. They face great tragedy in their lives. They wrestle with deep depression and demonic powers. And they feel all alone. They cry out to God in their suffering and they wonder if He hears their cries. I often take them back to these verses from Exodus.

Surely the people of Israel must have wondered if God had forgotten them. Remember, God has not yet revealed Himself on Sinai. He has not yet given them the Law nor the plans for the Tabernacle. They have not seen His presence. They have not witnessed His miracles. The Red Sea. The wilderness wandering. The journey to the Promised Land. All of that is still in the future. All they have to go on is a few stories that have been handed generation after generation about a God who chose the family of Abraham to be His people. That's it. And now they've lived in Egypt for many years. They've multiplied greatly. They've been enslaved. They've been abused. They've even suffered genocide as Pharaoh attempted to kill all their male children. Such is life when one serves a man who sets himself up as a god-king.

Thankfully, the Bible says, God "remembers" His covenant promises. God "hears" the groaning of His people. God "sees" their suffering and pain. God "knows" what's happening. These words are what's known as "anthropomorphisms." They are human attempts to describe God. Due to our limited, finite understanding, we human beings often project onto God our own human attributes. It's our way of trying to make sense of things. In the fullness of time, God calls Moses to deliver His people. In the fullness of time, God sends Moses and Aaron to confront Pharaoh. In the fullness of time, God will make Himself known not only to His own people but to all people everywhere. He will clearly demonstrate for the world who is God and who is not. He will do this by bringing the world's mightiest empire and the world's mightiest ruler to their knees. He will harden Pharaoh's heart. Not allowing him to escape until God has had His way. He will rain down plague after plague until all the magicians in Egypt are exhausted and spent. He will defend and protect His people from any and all harm. In this way, they will know and come to understand their special place His chosen, set apart ones.

Friends, God still remembers His covenant promises. It's why He sent His one and only Son. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all God has promised. He is the Second Adam. The Faithful Israelite. He lives a life of perfect obedience. He is the perfect Passover lamb who is sacrificed on our behalf. He delivers us from the powers of sin and death and evil by dying on the cross. He parts the Temple curtain so that we might gain access to God. He clearly demonstrates His authority over Satan and all his demonic forces by rising from the dead. All this He does for us. All this He does to deliver us. All this He does to save us. Yes, in this world we will face suffering. In this world, we will face trials and

temptations. In this world, we will experience pain but we look to Jesus and take heart. In Christ, we know God sees us. God hears us. God remembers us. And God answers us.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 5-6, Matthew 17

January 27, 2021

MEETING THE LORD

Readings for today: Exodus 5-6, Matthew 17

Too often we make the mistake of reading Scripture through 21st century eyes. We subconsciously assume the people we read about think like we do. But there is a massive cultural gap between 21st century America with our ideals of freedom and liberty and justice for all and ancient Egypt where Pharaoh was worshiped as a god. Pharaoh did not consider himself to be a man like any other man. He ruled the greatest empire at the time. His domain stretched for thousands of miles in every direction. He was wealthy beyond belief. His armies were feared. His power unquestioned. He truly believed he was divine. He truly believed his people existed to serve his needs and his purposes. So it comes as no surprise when Moses approaches him with a demand from Yahweh to let the Hebrews go that Pharaoh would have laughed. "Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover, I will not let Israel go." (Exodus 5:2) For all Pharaoh knew, this Yahweh was just another small-time, tribal god who had no power. After all, this Yahweh had allowed His people to become slaves for hundreds of years. Clearly, He was not a god to be respected, much less feared.

The Exodus story has so many layers and we make much of the drama between Pharaoh and Moses. But the real story is the conflict between Pharaoh and Yahweh. Yahweh is using Pharaoh as an instrument to reveal His true glory to the world. He will say as much in Exodus 9:13-16, “Then the Lord said to Moses, "Rise up early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, "Let my people go, that they may serve me. For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.” The Apostle Paul underscores this same idea in Romans 9:14-18, “What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.” The reality is God is not going to relent with Pharaoh until he reaches a place of complete and total submission. God will not stop with the plagues until Pharaoh is completely broken and grasps the difference between himself and Yahweh, the Lord of the Universe. So plague after plague after plague rains down. The people of Egypt suffer. Their lands and livestock are largely destroyed. Fear begins to permeate the land as the Egyptians realize that the god they’ve come face to face with is no tribal deity! He is Yahweh! He is the Lord! He is God!

And God isn’t just revealing Himself to the Egyptians, He is re-introducing Himself to His people. “Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord.” (Exodus 6:6-8) After four hundred years of silence, God is once again on the move. He is fulfilling His promises in His time. Now some may ask why God waited so long? What about the people who don’t get to experience the miracle of the

Exodus? What about those who had lived and died under the lash of the Egyptians? Here WE come face to face with the fact that our God is no tribal god. His primary purpose is NOT to meet our needs. It's NOT to make sure we remain safe and happy and live a blessed life this side of heaven. No, God has a better plan for us. To live with Him in His eternal Kingdom forever. He has a greater plan in mind and that is to reveal His glory to the world. This is why God delivered His people. To show forth His power and glory to the world. To leave no doubt as to who is God and who is not.

So the question then comes to us...will we believe this God? Will we trust this God? Will we worship this God? Or, will we harden our hearts like Pharaoh? Will we cling to our pride and continue to act like "little gods?" Or, maybe like the Israelites, our spirits have been broken by the pain we've suffered in this world. Perhaps belief is beyond us because of how beaten down we feel. Will we pray the prayer Thomas prayed, "Lord, help my unbelief?" Friends, God will answer such prayers if we cry out to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 7-10, Matthew 18:1-20

January 28, 2021

GOD ISN'T FAIR

Readings for today: Exodus 7-10, Matthew 18:1-20

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

"But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you." (Ex. 7:3)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So what does this mean for us? Does it mean we should be scared of God? Does it mean we are at the mercy of a God who is arbitrary and capricious? Not at all. In Jesus Christ, God demonstrates His great love for us. In Jesus Christ, God proclaims His desire that all should be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. In Jesus Christ, God has provided the perfect Passover lamb. He has become the sacrifice that saves. His precious blood delivers us from death. All so that we might go forth to proclaim the glories of His grace to the world!

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 11-12, Matthew 18:21-35

January 29, 2021

THE SCANDAL OF FORGIVENESS

Readings for today: Exodus 11-12, Matthew 18:21-35

“Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother or sister sin against me, and I forgive them? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.” (Matthew 18:21-22)

I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve asked Jesus this same question. Lord, how many times must I forgive? How many times must I forgive the one who hurt me? How many times must I forgive the one who betrayed me? How many times must I forgive the one who abandoned me? How many times must I forgive the one who let me down. Frankly, most of the time, that “other” person has been the guy staring back at me in the mirror. He seems to be the hardest for me to forgive but there have been others as well.

I think of a person I knew many years ago. I was doing church planting work in Wisconsin. We built a friendship. I thought we might even become partners in the work God was doing. He seemed friendly enough. We had meals together. We spent time with him and his wife. Our children loved staying over at their house. But about six months in, something changed. To this day, I do not know what happened. What I do know is he started to sabotage the work I was doing with the board. He planted rumors questioning my integrity. He attacked my character constantly behind my back. When I would speak to him face to face and ask him what I had done wrong, he would become evasive. When I would ask him for forgiveness for whatever it was that I had done to hurt him, he would refuse to acknowledge it. Week after week. Month after month. I met with him regularly seeking reconciliation. Sadly, it never happened. Things only escalated and eventually reached a point where he physically threatened me. Outraged, I ended the relationship.

Unfortunately, the damage was done. The church planting work we were engaging in imploded all around us. I was utterly broken. My wife was utterly broken. I resigned my position. It was the darkest time of my life. For a few months, I averaged about 2-3 hours of sleep a night. I would pace the living room floor, yelling at God. Angry with Him for all that had happened. Blaming Him from bringing me to this place. Allowing me to fail. Subjecting me to all kinds of hurt and pain. God held me close in those months. Closer than I realized. Finally, my anger was spent. I was exhausted. And there in the darkness as I lay on the floor worn out by all my raging at God, He spoke to me. Told me He loved me. Told me everything I was going through was part of His will to break me down so I could be built back up in His image. I surrendered. I accepted. His grace overwhelmed me.

A few weeks later, one of my daughters got sick. It was H1N1 and it was serious. We rushed her to the hospital and discovered she had double pneumonia. They drained her lungs. We sat and prayed by her bedside for days. During that time, I got a call. It was the person who had threatened me. They wanted to let bygones be bygones and come to the hospital. I felt the familiar anger well up inside. God intervened. He was quick to remind me of the grace He had shown me. I felt a peace come over me. I shared with the person that I forgave them for all that had happened. I was thankful for the ways God had used our broken relationship to bring me to a deeper, richer faith. I shared with them how much I appreciated their love and concern for our daughter. And I also shared with them that I was not comfortable with them coming to the hospital to visit as we needed to focus all of our energy on our daughter. They were disappointed but understood.

Forgiveness is hard. Because it is so hard, so few seem to practice it. Including Christians. I cannot tell you the number of believers who have told me they would “never be able to forgive” this person or that person for what they have done. I cannot tell you the number of Christians I know who have walked out on relationships. Walked out on churches. Walked out even on God because they simply could not bring themselves to forgive. They forget that forgiveness is a divine act. It is not something we can muster up the strength to do ourselves. It only comes as we reflect on the grace we’ve been given in Jesus Christ. We can only forgive as we ourselves are forgiven by our Father in heaven. If you are struggling to forgive someone in your life today, let me encourage you not to dwell on all they have done to you but all that the Father has done for you. Reflect on the immensity of the grace given to you so that can then extend that grace out to others. The one who has been forgiven much, forgives much. The one who has been forgiven little, forgives little.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 13-15, Matthew 19:1-15

January 30, 2021

GOD'S LOVE FOR CHILDREN

Readings for today: Exodus 13-15, Matthew 19:1-15

"Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." And he laid his hands on them and went away." (Matthew 19:13-15)

There's something special about children. Especially little children. No matter where you go in the world, you find little children playing. Laughing. Dancing. Exploring. They have an almost insatiable curiosity. An irrepressible joy. An unshakable faith and trust. They see the world through rose-colored glasses. They endure hardships that would break an older person. They bounce back from grief and loss. They are tremendously resilient.

I've played games with children as they received chemotherapy. I've drawn pictures in the dust with children living in life-threatening poverty. I've held children as they watched a love one pass from this world. I've taken walks with children, making sure to smell every flower and touch every tree along the way. I've played all sorts of games with children at Vacation Bible School. I've taken hikes with children and watched in amazement at how they persevered when their little legs got tired to make it to the end. I've spoken to many children over the years about the love of God and seen their eyes light up. It's a beautiful thing.

Jesus has a special place in His heart for little children. When He gets bum rushed by a bunch of kids in the passage we read today, the disciples try to shoo them away. Perhaps they thought Jesus had more important things to do. Perhaps they believed the children were just a nuisance. Perhaps they were just tired and irritated and didn't have time for them. I know I've felt all these feelings and more over the course of my life. It's easy to get so wrapped up in me and my stuff that I lose sight of the miracle of spending time with a little child and seeing the world through their eyes.

Jesus says the kingdom of heaven belongs to little children. Why is that? I think it has to do with how they see their world. Full of wonder and beauty. New adventures around every corner. An imagination running wild with all the possibilities of each new day. They do not worry about tomorrow. They do not carry the burdens we adults like to bear. They do not stress over things they do not have. They simply find ways to make the most out of each moment of each day. Faith comes easy to them. Trust seems natural. And God is very present with them and among them.

Have you ever taken time to think back to your own childhood? Years ago, I was challenged to do an exercise where I broke my life down into five year increments and wrote down what I could remember. I filled page after page of memories. Not all of them were positive of course. Our lives are full of suffering and pain. Even as children we experience these things though we may not always understand the impact until much later in life. But there were many precious memories as well. Riding in the combine with my grandfather. Jumping on the trampoline with my cousins. Sleepovers out on the screened-in porch with friends. Pickup baseball at the empty lot next door. Saying prayers to a God I did not know but in whom I believed even from a very young age. It was a wonderful exercise that reminded me yet again of the value of the simple things in life. Finding joy in the ordinary and everyday. Rest from all the stress of striving. This, friends, is the kingdom of heaven and it belongs to those who come to Jesus like little children.

Readings for tomorrow: None

February 1, 2021

OPEN HANDS

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

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

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

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

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

February 2, 2021

MT. SINAI

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: 23-25, Matthew 20:17-34

February 3, 2021

GOD'S LAW

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 26-28, Matthew 21

February 4, 2021

AS IT IS IN HEAVEN….

Readings for today: Exodus 26-28, Matthew 21

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

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

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

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

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

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

February 5, 2021

RENDER UNTO CAESAR?

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

"Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21)

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

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

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

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

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

February 6, 2021

WORSHIP

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

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

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

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

Moses is quick to respond. He prays one of the most important prayers in human history. "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people." (Ex. 32:11-14) Moses is quick to remind God whose people He's really talking about. These are God's people. They are the people God delivered by His own hand. If God were to destroy them, God's reputation would suffer. The Egyptians - before whom God has made Himself known - would begin to doubt and question Him. The promise God had given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would become null and void. This is an incredible prayer of faith. Praying not for mercy but trusting God to be true to Himself. Trusting God to stay true to His character. Trusting God to stay faithful to His

promises. There is no question in Moses' mind that God will remain true to Himself and so Moses prays his prayer in faith.

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: None

February 8, 2021

KNOWING GOD

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

Today's reading is one of the most significant in all of Scripture. Moses appearing before God yet again on the top of Mt. Sinai. Moses receiving a second copy of the Ten Commandments as God turns aside his wrath and renews His covenant. Moses getting a chance to see the Lord as He descends in a cloud. "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7) Can you imagine actually hearing the sound of God's voice? Actually seeing the rocks tremble and cry out at the coming of His presence? It's incredible.

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

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

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

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

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

February 9, 2021

THE PRESENCE OF GOD

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

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

First and foremost, I would argue Leviticus - in some sense - really begins at the end of chapter forty of Exodus with the coming of the presence of God into the Tabernacle. "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys." (Exodus 40:34-38) The people of Israel have dedicated so much time and energy and resources to the construction of this sacred space. They have followed every command to the letter. They have prepared a house for God to dwell in. A tent to carry with them where God Himself will meet with them. And God is pleased. He comes to dwell in the tent of meeting. During the day, He appears as a cloud. A hovering mist for all to see. During the night, He is the fire that burns from within its folds, giving light to the entire camp. Can you imagine it? God being so fully present you can actually see Him? Speak with Him? Consult Him for wisdom? It's truly incredible and unique in the ancient world.

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 2-3, Matthew 24

February 11, 2021

Living Intentionally

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

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

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

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

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

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

February 12, 2021

SACRIFICE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

February 13, 2021

DANGEROUS WORSHIP

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: None

February 15, 2021

LESSONS ON COVID FROM LEVITICUS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

February 16, 2021

THE HUMANITY OF JESUS

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

Matthew 26 is a powerful chapter that speaks to the humanity of Jesus. Eating at a table with his disciples. Enjoying one last meal with his closest friends before his arrest and execution. Then there is his time in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is sorrowful and troubled. His fears and anxieties rise. His soul in great distress. In agony, He weeps. He sweats great drops of blood. Some theologians speculate that what Jesus was experiencing in that moment was the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit. The withdrawal of the Father's abiding presence as He begins to take on His shoulders the full weight of human sin. The dark reality of what He is about to suffer hits Him with full force. He begs the Father to take the cup away. But the Father is committed to this course of action. The Cross awaits the Messiah.

The disciples flee. All their hopes are dashed as Jesus commands them to put away their swords. Their secret dreams of an uprising that would overthrow the Romans and re-establish the Kingdom of God on earth come to an end when Jesus heals the wounded soldier. One can imagine their bitter disappointment when Jesus DOESN'T call on legions of angels to fight at His side. So they abandon Him. They finally see where all this headed and it doesn't look good.

But Peter isn't quite ready to give up. He follows at a distance. Maybe waiting for an 11th hour miracle that would justify the last three years of his life. Has it all been a waste? Have all the sacrifices he's made been for naught? Leaving his business? His home? His family? So he sits in the courtyard of the high priest hoping to hear news of the verdict. A servant girls sees him. He denies knowing Jesus and gruffly moves away to the entrance. She follows. Again, he denies knowing Jesus. A crowd has now gathered. Finally, he lets out a curse and swears he has never been with the man. In that moment, Jesus turns and looks at him. Peter sees His Lord on His knees being brutally beaten by the Romans. The religious elite jeering and cursing and spitting on Him. Peter is utterly broken. This is really happening. All hope is truly lost.

I've often wondered what Jesus must have felt in that moment as well. His most faithful disciple. The one He loved perhaps more than any of the others. The man He had poured so much of His life into over the last three years abandoning Him. Betraying Him. Denying Him. Though expected, it must have cut Him deeply. Jesus is now all alone. His followers are all gone. The Spirit has withdrawn His presence. The angels are no longer at His side. He must face His suffering alone. He has been forsaken. And this is just the beginning. It is the Father's will that He drink this cup to its dregs in order to save us from our sins.

"Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted...Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." (Hebrews 2:17-18, 7:25)

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 17, Matthew 27

February 17, 2021

THE BETRAYAL OF JESUS

Readings for today: Leviticus 17, Matthew 27

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

Then comes the Cross. Nothing beautiful about it. It stands unparalleled in human history as a horror. A terror. An act of unspeakable evil. It represents the ultimate betrayal. The Cross is where we hung God. The Cross is where we murdered God. The Cross is where we executed God. Creation despising and rejecting her Creator. Humanity lynching her Savior. Sin having it's way. Satan rejoicing. His victory seemingly complete.

Jesus' suffering was unimaginable. After having been flogged and beaten. His flesh in tatters. His blood loss immense. Jesus is forced to shoulder a 300 lbs. Roman cross. (If He just carried the crossbeam - far more likely - it was still 100 lbs.) He carries it some two thousand feet up Golgotha where nails are driven into his hands and feet. The soldiers offer Him wine mixed with gall to numb the pain. He refuses. They strip Him naked so His humiliation and shame will be complete. Crowds gather to make a public spectacle of Him. Even the criminals being executed alongside Him take pleasure in His pain. Finally, He cries out, "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken Me?" Is this even possible? The Father forsaking - dare I say betraying - His only Begotten Son? Darkness falls. The ground shakes. The Temple curtain protecting the Holy of Holies is torn in two. Tombs are thrown open. The dead are raised. The natural order of things is thrown into chaos as the Author of Life dies.

Jesus didn't just suffer physically. It was existential. Impacting his heart, mind, and soul. His cry of God-forsakenness reveals the depths of His pain. His body torn. His mind shattered. His heart utterly broken. His soul rent asunder. There is nothing that can compare to the agony He endured as He bore the sin of the world on His shoulders. He hung there alone. Forsaken by all who knew Him. Betrayed by all who loved Him. Even His Heavenly Father. Jesus hung between heaven and earth, making atonement for humanity in the ugliness of all her sin and satisfying the holy justice of God in all it's beautiful glory. A price had to be paid. God's righteous wrath had to be turned away. And Jesus - fully God and fully Man - was the only one who could do it.

What Jesus suffered on the Cross is a foretaste of hell. For those who wonder what hell is like, they need look no further than Jesus' crucifixion. It is truly terrifying. There is no escape. There is no hope. There is nothing redemptive or beautiful or pleasurable about it. It is awful. It is brutal. It is horrible. And it is just. It is what we deserve. Human beings are born sinners. Born rebellious. Born treasonous and seditious. Our hearts naturally oriented away from God. Our desires naturally opposed to God. Our loves naturally self-centered. There is nothing beautiful about sin. Nothing beautiful about evil. We are foolish to think otherwise.

God forbid we ever get comfortable with the Cross. God forbid we ever take for granted what Jesus had to endure. God forbid we despise His sacrifice on our behalf. Jesus suffered and died for my crimes. My wickedness. My sin. What He endured, I rightfully deserve. On this Ash Wednesday, it is good for my soul to consider the depth of my betrayal. To ponder the depth of my Savior's pain. It is good for my soul to reflect on the unfathomable cost of my salvation. It is good for my soul to contemplate how truly fierce and loyal and steadfast and unshakable is the love of God for me.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 18-20, Matthew 28

February 18, 2021

THE GOLDEN RULE

Readings for today: Leviticus 18-20, Matthew 28

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

February 19, 2021

SACRED RHYTHMS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

February 20, 2021

LIFE IN GOD'S KINGDOM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: None

February 22, 2021

A NEW EDEN

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 2-3, Mark 3

February 23, 2021

WAS JESUS CRAZY?

Readings for today: Numbers 2-3, Mark 3

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 4-5, Mark 4

February 24, 2021

SOWING SEEDS

Readings for today: Numbers 4-5, Mark 4

How do you respond to the Word of God? How do you feel when you hear it preached? When you read it during your devotional time? When you listen to it on your way to work? Do you find your heart open to its message? Is it comforting? Challenging? Life-changing? Do you find yourself wanting more of the Word or is it a struggle to read? Are you intentional about applying its lessons? Aligning your lifestyle with its laws? Submitting yourself to its authority? Do you trust its promises? Do you believe its truth? Do you hold fast to what it says no matter how much opposition may arise? As you think back over the course of your life, do you seek growth? Spiritual maturity? Are you bearing fruit?

These are important questions to reflect on and Jesus offers a great diagnostic tool for such reflection in the parable of the sower. Jesus is the sower. He is at work even now in the world spreading the seed of the Word of God. He works through preachers and pastors as well as ordinary men and women to spread the good news of the gospel to the ends of the earth. As the seed is sown throughout the world, people respond in different ways. Some hearts are hard. Like a paved road. the seed cannot penetrate. It is rejected. It never takes root. And the enemy comes and steals it away. Some hearts are shallow. There is an initial response. Driven by the emotions of the moment. By all outward appearances, it looks like the seed has taken root. There is joy. There is excitement. But such feelings gradually wane. The seed cannot put down roots. The heart drifts away towards other things. Some hearts are divided. They receive the seed. Roots are put down. But the soil is mixed. There are weeds and thorns and thistles. As the seed springs up so do these other things and eventually the growth is choked off. The fruit never ripens. Their spiritual growth is stunted. Finally, there is the open heart. The humble heart. The heart that is good soil. Ready to nurture and water and grow the seed. These hearts hold fast to the Word and what it teaches. They seek to align their lives with the Word and over time, they bear much fruit.

Now it's time for an honest assessment. We've been reading for a two months. Where do you find yourself? What have you learned thus far? What lessons have you sought to apply to your life? Put another way, where do you find yourself in the parable? Is your heart hard? Unwilling to receive what Jesus says? Unwilling to submit to His ways? Unwilling to surrender to His Lordship? Is your heart shallow? You hear the Word but don't do it. Your devotion to Jesus only goes skin deep. In fact, reading the Bible. Worshipping Jesus. Spending time in prayer. These things are boring and often feel like a waste of time. Is your heart divided? Are there other activities that take priority over spending time with God? Do you find yourself rejecting God's Word along the way in favor of other desires? Other needs? Other wants? Have you fallen prey to the cares and worries and riches and pleasures of this world? Do you presume on the grace of God and assume God will overlook your sin? Is your heart true? Do you prioritize your time in God's Word? Do you intentionally seek to submit your life to His way? Do you allow God's Word to confront as well as comfort? Disrupt as well as affirm? When push comes to shove and God reveals something in your life that needs to go, do you obey? When doubt creeps in - as it always does - do you make the conscious decision to hold fast to the promises of God?

Friends, the seed is being sown. The Word is being proclaimed. God is making Himself known. How will we respond?

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

February 25, 2021

THE BLESSING

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

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

THE BLESSING song https://youtu.be/PUtll3mNj5U

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

February 26, 2021

WAITING ON GOD

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

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

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

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

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

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

February 27, 2021

HUMILITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 descendents 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 heartbreaking.

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. Made her different. 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 descendents 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 Arimethea. 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 if 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

April 1, 2021

WITNESS

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

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

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

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

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

I know reading through the Bible in a year is not easy! It indeed is a “monument of imposing size!” But as sit with God’s Word and prayerfully reflect on all He has to say, we are shaped and formed in ways we cannot begin to imagine.

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 23-24, Luke 6:27-49

April 2, 2021

BLESSINGS

Readings for today: Joshua 23-24, Luke 6:27-49

Recently, I've been reflecting on all the blessings I've been given in my life. Blessings I did not earn. Blessings I did not seek. Blessings I could never have gained on my own. I grew up in a family where hard work and commitment were prized. My father's family spent their lives farming in western Nebraska. My mother's family spent their lives ministering in southern Indiana. Both sets went through periods of hardship and struggle. Both sets experienced success and failure. Both sets persevered. Family was a priority. Faith was the rule rather than the exception. Children were expected to work alongside the adults. Talent and ability was identified at a young age and nurtured. Education was seen as the key to creating greater opportunity. Sacrifices were made in order to help the next generation build on what previous generations had built. When I was young, I took my upbringing for granted. Now that I am older, I am learning just how rare it can be. I travel the world and meet people from all walks of life and I can tell you firsthand that I am blessed beyond measure. I had access to resources most people can only dream of growing up. I have been given so many opportunities along the way. None of this was my doing. It was all the Lord.

Perhaps that's why I love these words from the end of the Book of Joshua so much. "I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant. Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:13-15) Israel was a blessed nation. Chosen by God. Not because she was the strongest or the greatest but simply out of grace. God gave her a new name. A new identity. A new Law. A Tabernacle in which to worship. A Promised Land in which to dwell. Abundant resources to harvest. Power over her enemies. And all He asks in return is faith. All He wants from His people is for them to love Him with all their hearts. Worship Him exclusively as He rightly deserves.

When you think back over the course of your life, what do you see? Do you see abundant blessings that can only come from God? Blessings not just in material wealth but blessings that are spiritual, emotional, and relational? Do you see God at work even the hard times? Amidst the failures? Does He show up in the middle of your pain and suffering to bring comfort? Are these not also unlooked for blessings that we have not earned nor have a right to expect? In light of all God has done for you in the course of your life…in light of all God has done for you on the cross…will you choose to serve Him? Love Him? Place your faith in Him? This is the choice Joshua sets before Israel and it is the choice God sets before us this Good Friday. Choose this day whom you will serve. The gods of this earth who exploit and oppress and ultimately take everything from you or the God of the universe who gives up everything - including His very life - to save and deliver you.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 1-2, Luke 7:1-35

April 3, 2021

EVANGELISM

Readings for today: Judges 1-2, Luke 7:1-35

"And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them." (Luke 7:22)

The gospel is good news. Somehow that message has become twisted in our world. So many see the gospel as bad news. They see it as restrictive. Oppressive. Ignorant. Unjust. Judgmental. Condemnatory. But nothing could be further from the truth. When people encountered Jesus, they found new life. Literally. The blind would begin to see. The deaf would begin to hear. Lepers would be cleansed and restored to community. The dead were raised. Everywhere Jesus went, new life broke out. Joy was His constant companion. Restoration and reconciliation followed in His wake. And yet, it was never enough. Eventually the praise turns to hate. The cries of adulation turn to calls for condemnation. Crucifixion. It would be the most baffling thing in the world except that it's nothing new.

The people of Israel have just buried another great leader. A leader in mold of Moses. A man who led them faithfully for decades. They've come a long way since Egypt. No longer slaves. No longer living under tyranny and oppression. No longer a foreign people in a foreign land. They have come through the fire. They have come through the flood. They have come through the wilderness. And God has provided every step of the way. He gave them food to eat. Water to drink. He gave them victory over their enemies. All of this is good news! It's something every Israelite should know by heart. And yet we read this heartbreaking verse, "And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel." (Judges 2:10) How is this possible? How is it possible to forgot the good news?

Sadly, I see the same thing happening all around us today. A generation rising who has forgotten the good news of the gospel. A generation who do not know the Lord or the work He has done. A generation who has bought the lie that the good news is actually bad news. And just to be clear, this has very little to do with age. This isn't about young or old. This is not a complaint about "kids these days." It has to do with the spirit of our day. We are living in a time when everyone wants to do what is right in their own eyes. Everyone wants to be free to follow whatever desires seem good to them. It's very similar to the time of the Judges. A time in Israel's history where she suffered horribly. A time in Israel's history where terrible and tragic things took place on a regular basis. It was a time in Israel's history where sin held sway and wreaked havoc on people's lives. So we shouldn't be surprised when a mass shooter opens fire in a King Soopers. We shouldn't be surprised when sexual abuse scandals come to light in Washington DC, Hollywood, and even in the sacred precincts of the church. We shouldn't be surprised when parts of the world starve to death while other parts live in abundance and plenty. We should grieve and weep and our hearts should break but we shouldn't be surprised. After all, when the good news is rejected, all we are left with is bad news. And the world is full of bad news these days, amen?

So what's the answer? The church. The people of God filled with the Spirit of God walking in obedience to God going forth to share the love of God with the world. The church has always been God's answer to the problems that exist in the world. Jesus Himself said, "whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me

anything in my name, I will do it." (John 14:12-14) Imagine a church who loves the way Jesus loved? Imagine a church who sets her heart on serving the poor? Healing the sick? Visiting those who are in prison? Imagine a church who gives sight to the blind? Helps the deaf to hear? Embraces the lepers of our day? Imagine a church who laid down her arms in the culture war? A church who laid aside her pursuit of power and wealth and cultural privilege and instead gave herself away for the sake of the gospel? Would this not be good news? Would not the world catch a glimpse of the Kingdom?

You say, it's not possible. I know how you feel. I too find it easy to despair. But then I see the good news in action. I see it in the lives of ordinary people who do extraordinary things in the name of Jesus. I see it in the lives of foster parents who take children into their home. I see it when business owners give ex-cons a second change. I see it when couples fight for their marriages. I see it when addicts find healing and embrace in community. I see it when rich and poor come together in real relationship. All of a sudden needs are met. Lives are changed. All in the name of Jesus. I see it globally as entire villages come to know Christ. Abuse rates drop. Addiction rates plummet. Communities start to experience the blessing of a new way of life. The sick are healed. The dead are raised. Yes, I've seen these things with my own eyes. The good news is real, friends! It's news our world is desperate to hear and experience for themselves. As we celebrate Easter this year, let's remember where we go from here. We cannot keep this message to ourselves! It is a message designed to be personally delivered to every person on the face of the earth. Who are you sharing the good news with today?

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 3-7, Luke 7:36-8:39

April 5, 2021

THE STRUGGLE IS REAL

Readings for today: Judges 3-7, Luke 7:36-8:39

“Life is pain, highness.” - Dred Pirate Roberts

I grew up in the 1980’s so the Princess Bride is one of my favorite movies and the line above is one that’s always stuck with me. The Dred Pirate Roberts lived a life of incredible struggle and heartache and pain. He’s persevered through hardship and suffering. He’s overcome incredible obstacles. He’s survived impossible odds. The princess, on the other hand, lived a life of privilege. Growing up amidst all kinds of wealth and splendor. Servants to meet her every need. At the same time, she too has suffered loss. Heartbreak. She grieves over the one she loves whom she believes is dead. I don’t want to spoil the ending for those who haven’t see it but suffice to say both characters have learned and grown and battled through life. It’s not been easy.

“Now these are the nations that the Lord left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before...They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.” (Judges 3:1-2, 4)

Israel failed. She lost her nerve. She took her eyes off of Yahweh and succumbed to fear. As a result, the Promised Land was not fully conquered. The pagan nations not fully driven out. They remain as a perpetual test to Israel’s faithfulness. Would they stay true to the commandments of the Lord or would they follow the ways of the Canaanites? The Book of Judges tells the tragic tale of Israel’s descent into idolatry and spiritual darkness. All the skeletons in Israel’s closet are exposed and put on display for generations to read. The moral character of many of the judges is suspect. Their conduct immoral. Their decisions unwise. It’s a story of compromise. A story that depicts what happens when we try to embrace the ways of God and the ways of the world. It’s a story where the faithfulness of God is revealed in His discipline and loving correction. Over and over again, He will give the people of Israel over into the hands of their enemies. He will withdraw His protective hand from them. He will allow the nations around them to conquer and pillage and destroy; all in order to bring Israel back to repentance. Back to faith. Back to Himself.

Israel must learn to fight because life is a struggle. In the ancient near east, the struggle was literal. It took place on battlefields and within cities. It was a violent, brutal, harsh world full of pain. Israel would need to know how to fight back and defend herself. In the 21st century, we still fight battles. I think of our military men and women who go all over the world to defend the weak and oppressed. They fight against tyranny with such courage. I think of our police officers who put themselves in danger in the line of duty each and every day. Every call that comes in is a potentially violent situation they will be forced to handle. I think of our firefighters who are called to save lives, often at great cost. I think of dear friends I’ve had who’ve spent a lifetime fighting against systematic racism, abuse, and oppression. I think of Christian leaders I know around the world who are persecuted and have their lives threatened. I think of so many impoverished in our world today who, day in and day out, experience life-threatening suffering firsthand. They are well-acquainted with the pain. They know the heartache. And they fight. They struggle. They battle through each and every day. Perhaps even more pervasive are the battles we all face on the inside. The battles with depression, anxiety, and fear.

Despite the incredible wealth and privilege and blessing we live with in my community, we've never been more stressed. More discontent. More anxious and afraid.

We are being tested, friends. Day in and day out. Will we keep the commands of the Lord? Will we spend time with Him every day? Will we worship Him as He deserves each week? Will we honor the Sabbath? Will we give sacrificially and generously? Will we allow our hearts to be shaped by deep reflection on His Word? Will we surrender to His Spirit? Life is struggle. Life is pain. Life is not safe or easy. And anyone who says differently is selling something. (Again with the Princess Bride lines...) Does this mean things are hopeless? Should we just throw in the towel? By no means! God promises He will bear His fruit in the lives of those who walk with Him! Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control. These are the gifts of God for the people of God. In the midst of all life is throwing your way, turn to Christ! Let Him be your strength and your shield for the battles you fight!

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 8-10, Luke 8:40-56

April 6, 2021

HUMILITY

Readings for today: Judges 8-10, Luke 8:40-56

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

I think we can all agree humility is a virtue sorely lacking in our world today. The spirit of our age is arrogance, pride, criticism, entitlement, and self-indulgence. It infects our politics. It infects our workplaces. It infects our schools. Our homes. Our neighborhoods. Even our churches. Perhaps especially our churches. It's the spirit of the Pharisee. The spirit of self-righteousness. An unwillingness to submit to any other authority in our lives except our own. This includes God. Sure, we know how to say the right things. "God is first in my life!" "I love God the most!" "God is my all in all!" We sing songs that declare these truths. We sit through sermons where these truths are proclaimed. We tell these things to our Christian friends. But one look at our schedule. One look at our bank account. A glance at our Twitter feed, Instagram, or Facebook account. A moment of honest self-reflection. All these conspire to reveal what we really believe. We are our own gods.

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

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

Rest assured, such a life is not easy to live in our world today. Not with the demands on our time. Not with the demands on our resources. My wife and I were talking about this all the time. Even this past week, we had to make choices as my twins wanted to attend a swim team banquet on Maundy Thursday. Their connection to their teammates is part of what has got them through the last few months

under the restrictions of COVID. So we let them go. Was this the right choice? We aren't sure to be honest but we are having conversations all the time in our home about how we humbly honor and serve the Lord even in this particular season.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 11-12, Luke 9:1-27

April 7, 2021

JEPHTHAH'S SACRIFICE

Readings for today: Judges 11-12, Luke 9:1-27

When we travel to Ethiopia, we often head into the rural areas to visit village churches. As we walk along the dirt paths, we pass home after home. Most of them are mud huts surrounded by a little brush fence. In the evenings, we see children driving whatever livestock (donkeys, chickens, goats, sheep etc.) the family owns into the enclosure. This keeps the animals safe and the house warm. It's a common custom all over the Middle East even to this day.

Hopefully, this places Jephthah's tragic vow in context. He fully expected the first thing to greet him when he returned home to be a goat or a sheep or some other animal. He most certainly did NOT expect it to be his daughter! So when she comes dancing out of the home with her tambourine, he tears his clothes. He instantly regrets the vow he made. He feels trapped. And how does his daughter respond? Her reaction is perhaps the most surprising part of this story. She willingly lays down her life for her father. She faces her fate with courage and faith. Taking two full months to say goodbye and grieve with her friends. Two full months to weep over what could have been.

It's a story that baffles us on a lot of levels. How could Jephthah sacrifice his own flesh and blood? How could Jephthah's daughter willingly lay down her life? And where is God in all of this? The cultural distance between this world and our own is almost insurmountable. However, one key to understanding is Judges 11:23-24, "So then the Lord, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the Lord our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess." Everyone in the ancient near east believed in gods. Dagon for the Philistines. Chemosh for the Amorites. Molech for the Ammonites. Every tribe had their own deity. Make the right sacrifices and you were awarded with great wealth, military might, and political power. Make the wrong sacrifices and your deity would turn his face from you, resulting in defeat. Tragically, the same began to hold true for Israel. As they adopted the ways of the Canaanites, Yahweh ceased, on some level, to be the One True God and became just another tribal deity to be appeased. Thus, Jepthah's tragic choice to sacrifice his daughter and her tragic choice to accept her fate. And the most important takeaway from the whole account is God's silence. Nowhere does the Bible say God is pleased with Jephthah's decision.

Excursus: One of the common mistakes that happens when we read the Bible is to assume God endorses everything that happens. This is a misapplication of the doctrine of inerrancy. Just because we believe the Bible is inspired and without error doesn't mean that God approves of every action His people take. For example, just because David had multiple wives and was a man after God's own heart doesn't mean God approves of polygamy. The story of the Bible is the story of God meeting His people where they are. Speaking to them in the cultural context in which they live. Revealing Himself through categories they can understand. The same is true for today.

As Christians, we claim to worship the supreme God of the universe. We claim to know the King of kings and Lord of lords. We claim to be heirs of His eternal Kingdom. But do our lives reflect this truth? If we are not careful, we can fall into the same trap Israel fell into. Accommodating our beliefs to the ways of this world. Bringing God down to our level. Limiting Him to our tribe. Reducing Him to our personal deity. When we do, we remake God in our image and He ceases to be God at all.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 13-14, Luke 9:28-62

April 8, 2021

DESIRE

Readings for today: Judges 13-14, Luke 9:28-62

Samson is a cautionary tale. He is a man ruled by his appetites. Driven by his desires. An addict enslaved to the basest of emotions. His life is a study in contrasts. Miraculously conceived. Set apart from birth as a Nazarite. (No wine, cutting of the hair, or touching of dead bodies) He single-handedly delivers Israel from their enemies. At the same time, he despises his birthright. He intermarries with Philistines and sleeps with prostitutes. He eats honey from the carcass of a lion he's killed. He tells Delilah (yet another Philistine) the supposed secret of his strength and she cuts his hair. He is imprisoned and tortured but exacts vengeance on his enemies in one final act of martyrdom.

I have met Samson. Every time I look in the mirror I am reminded I too was once driven by sinful desire. Enslaved to the flesh as the Apostle Paul might put it. Sexual desire drove me to pornography. My drinking habits bordered on alcohol addiction. I've struggled with depression and despair in my life. It's been hard. At the same time, I'm blessed with an amazing family. A godly wife and four kids I love with all my heart. I've got great friends. A career I absolutely love. But my inner life used to be a mess. I too often believed the lie that I was at the mercy of what I feel. That I had no choice. Thankfully, I received great spiritual counsel and a lot of therapy over the years. Mentors, counselors, friends who acted as a spiritual and emotional guides to help bring peace to my soul. Most of all, I immersed myself in God's Word. I gave His Spirit the microphone in my life. I wanted Him to be the loudest voice in my head. The loudest voice in my heart. Constantly reminding me who I was created to be. Constantly encouraging me to live in light of God's transforming love.

I am not the only "Samson" out there. I cannot tell you the number of people I have counseled over the years in my office who seemingly cannot control their desires. Sexual appetites. Drug and alcohol addiction. Co-dependence. Suicidal ideation. It's heartbreaking. These are gifted people who have been blessed in every measure by God. They have families. They have friends. They have careers. They make good money and experience professional success. But their inner lives are a mess. Their souls are in turmoil. They feel trapped and enslaved and ruled by their passions. They buy into the lie that they were "made" this way and therefore have no choice. There are so many voices in their heads and hearts clamoring for attention. Demanding that they listen. It's paralyzing. It's crippling. And it breaks the heart of God.

Here's the truth of the gospel, friends. You have been set free! For freedom Christ has set you free so do not submit again to a yoke of slavery! Do not turn back to your former ways! Do not believe the lie that you are at the mercy of what you feel. You are not defined by your desires. You are not a slave to your emotions. Love the Lord with all your heart! Submit your desires to Him! Allow His Spirit to sanctify your emotions and your feelings. Keep in step with the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. In fact, you will find yourself beginning to desire what God desires. Holiness. Purity. Grace. Mercy. Compassion. These things flow from a heart surrendered to God.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 15-17, Luke 10:1-24

April 9, 2021

THE HARVEST

Readings for today: Judges 15-17, Luke 10:1-24

“The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road.” (Luke 10:2-4)

This is one of my favorite passages to teach on in Ethiopia. Every time I prepare to go over there, I marvel at all God has done. In the last eighteen years, we have preached the gospel to 3.5 million people. Over 600,000 have now come to Christ. Our indigenous leaders have planted over 5000 churches and baptized over 100,000 new believers. And still the harvest remains plentiful! What God is doing in Ethiopia has spilled out into South Sudan and Uganda. In fact, we will be holding two training conferences there in just over a month. We already have our first church plant in Djibouti and planted 25 more in Myanmar. I fully expect this revival to reach Somalia and Eretria in a few years and then jump the Gulf into Saudi Arabia and Yemen. By the time I die, I am praying God gives us a chance to plant churches in Mecca.

The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. We are asking God to raise up more church planters from our indigenous partner denominations. We are asking God to raise up more churches in America to join this work. We are asking God to bring His resources to bear so we don’t become the limiting factor in who God is seeking to reach. We need laborers who will pray. Laborers who will give. Laborers who will go. Laborers who will lead. There is an urgency to this mission! We cannot delay! We cannot let our fears get the best of us! God is sending these men and women out as lambs amidst wolves. The work will be hard. There is pain and suffering and persecution. Joining God on His mission always costs us dearly. But the price is worth it!

Every time I come back, I get asked the same question. Why do we not see the same revival happening in America? Why is the American church in decline even as the church in Ethiopia grows? My answer is always the same. The harvest is plentiful. Even here. Even in our country. But the laborers are few. In my experience, so few Christians have a passion to share their faith much less know how to do it. They struggle with self-confidence. They don’t want to be laughed out of the room. They shy away from conflict. I sometimes wrestle with these feelings myself. But God’s call still remains. Jesus tells His disciples to pray to the Lord of the harvest to raise up laborers and then in the same breadth sends them forth. If we want to see revival come, we must join Jesus in His prayer and His work. We are part of the solution, friends! We are part of the answer to their own prayers! We have been called by God to go into the harvest field to reap what God has sown. You cannot be a Christian without being a laborer! You cannot be a follower of Jesus without being sent! You cannot be a disciple without being a missionary! Get engaged, friends! Join your brothers and sisters around the world and start reaping the glories of serving Christ!

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 18-19, Luke 10:25-11:12

April 10, 2021

INHUMANITY

Readings for today: Judges 18-19, Luke 10:25-11:12

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

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

Horror. It's a good word to describe what we read today from the book of Judges. There simply is nothing redemptive in the story. Nothing good. Nothing godly. Man's inhumanity to man is on full display. It's dark. It's evil. It's terrifying. Sadly, we see some of the same dynamics in play in our world today. Even amidst a global pandemic, many of our political leaders can't stop lying and using the crisis for personal gain. Many of them can't stop attacking each other with rhetoric that only incites further violence. It's horrifying. But it's not just them. It's us as well. The isolation of the past year has set everyone on edge. Our emotions are raw. Anxiety is high. We are reaping what we've sown. Tragically, the daily injection of fear into society has resulted in greater and deeper divisions. Judgment and condemnation have replaced grace and compassion. We have become less resilient. Less tolerant. Less able to accept difference. Instead, we fight over masking protocols. We assume the worst of the health professionals who've worked so hard to keep us safe and frankly, many of them assume the worst of us which is why we have to resort to public health orders in the first place. We cut off relationships with family members, friends, and our brothers and sisters in Christ over political, social, and cultural disagreements. We embrace rage, anger, and hate because it makes us feel powerful. Self-righteous. Safe. But the reality is we've never been more fragile. More vulnerable. So we take it another step further. We demand action. We restrict freedom. We call for a more totalitarian approach to life where speech is monitored. Different groups labeled and scapegoated. Blatant attempts are made to grab hold of power under the guise of either "draining the swamp" or "political reform." All this lays the groundwork where extreme elements open fire in grocery stores or attack Asian-Americans in the streets. It's all quite frightening and sadly, all too familiar.

If we're totally honest, we know all of us are guilty on some level. I give into fear. I give into anxiety. As the stress builds, it can bring out the worst in me. Darkness that I've tried very hard to bury deep starts to emerge. As I read our passage today, I realize all of us are perpetrators. All of us are victims. We are the Levite. We are the concubine. We've sacrificed others and we've been sacrificed for the sake of self-protection and self-gratification. In the Bible's judgment, "None is righteous, no, not one;

no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Romans 3:10-18)

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

Readings for tomorrow: None

April 12, 2021

FINDING HOPE IN THE ORDINARY

Readings for today: Judges 20-21, Ruth 1-4, Luke 11:13-12:3

Without a doubt, Judges is a tough read. Especially towards the end. It's hard to see a culture descend into chaos. Hard to watch the people of God abandon the ways of God and do what is right in their own eyes. It's hard to watch evil flourish and good languish. And if we are honest, it raises all kinds of questions. Where was God in the time of the judges? Why didn't He do something? Was He powerless to stop what was happening? Or worse, did He just not care?

In many ways, the Book of Ruth is the Bible's answer to these questions. "In the days when the judges ruled the land…" there was a widow named Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law named Ruth. Two ordinary people from an ordinary town called Bethlehem whom God would use to bring about His salvation purposes. The story is a tender one. Naomi initially has it all. A faithful husband who cares for his family. Two sons to carry on the family line. They have enough means to travel to Moab to escape a famine in their hometown of Bethlehem. Once there, disaster strikes. Elimelech dies followed by both his sons a decade later. This would have been devastating in the ancient world. The three widows would immediately drop to the lowest rung on the socio-economic ladder. Each day would be a struggle to survive especially since Naomi was so far from her home and kindred and country. With little access to resources and certainly no social net to protect them, Naomi makes the decision to go back home. She encourages both her Moabite daughters-in-law to return to their families where they can get the support they need and perhaps marry again. Ruth refuses and makes this incredible statement of faith, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16) What transpires next is nothing short of miraculous. They return back home to Bethlehem. Ruth finds favor in the eyes of Boaz, a kinsman-redeemer. She eventually marries him and they conceive a son named Obed. Obed is the father of Jesse. Jesse the father of David. David will become the greatest king in Israel's history.

So let's just pause and reflect for a moment. The last verse in the Book of Judges says, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." (Judges 21:25) The final verses of the Book of Ruth give us the genealogy of David the king. The man after God's own heart. The king who would lead Israel to a deeper and more righteous relationship with the Lord. No longer would the people of God do "what is right in their own eyes" because they now have a king who will show them how to do what is right in God's eyes. It's a beautiful picture of how God uses the ordinary things of this world to accomplish the extraordinary!

When we ask the question - "Where is God?" - in the face of all the evil and sin and suffering we see around us; we often betray our false expectations. Unless God acts in miraculous ways, we don't seem to take Him all that seriously. We tend to discount the ordinary. The everyday. The moment by moment when God shows up in our lives. But if God can use the plight of three desperate widows in the time of the Judges to change the course of a nation's history, why can't He use you? Why can't He use me? Ruth did nothing special except remain faithful. She loved her mother-in-law. She worked hard to provide for them. She took advantage of the opportunities God presented to them. She was both bold and humble. And God honored her prayers. What does faithfulness look like in your life these days? Are you working hard to provide for those who depend on you? Do you take advantage of the opportunities God sends your way in the ordinary course of daily life? Where do you need to act with humility and boldness? May the Lord honor your prayers as you seek to love and serve Him.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 1-2, Luke 12:4-34

April 13, 2021

GOD IS FAITHFUL

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 1-2, Luke 12:4-34

"And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. And I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever." (1 Samuel 2:35)

Today's reading represents a turning point in salvation history. The time of the Judges is coming to an end. Eli and his "worthless" sons will die and a new prophet will arise. One who will remain faithful. One whose heart will be true. One who will seek the Lord and lead the people well. Samuel will be the last of the judges. He will be the bridge from the days when Israel had no king and everyone did what was right in their own eyes to a day when the Davidic monarchy was established and a golden age for Israel ushered in.

I love where Samuel's story begins. With a barren woman who is losing all hope of ever bearing children. Sounds so familiar does it not? God bringing something beautiful out of our barrenness? Making a way where there seems to be no way? Making possible what otherwise seems impossible? He did it with Sarah. He did it with Rachel. Now He will do it with Hannah. Hannah is a faithful woman. She prays fervently for a son. So fervently, Eli believes she is drunk! Her desire is so strong, she promises to dedicate her son to the Lord from birth. "O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head." (1 Samuel 1:11) Miraculously, the Lord answers her prayer. Opens her womb. And Samuel is conceived.

Now is where the true test will begin. Will she make good on her promise? Will she dedicate her son to the Lord? Will she give Samuel over to Eli to be raised as a prophet and a priest for Israel? Hannah's faith is amazing. Listen again to what she tells Eli after Samuel has been weaned…"Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord." And Samuel worshiped the Lord there." (1 Samuel 1:26-28)

It's a powerful story of God's faithfulness. God already knows what's going to happen to Eli and his sons. He knows the plans He has for them and He has prepared a successor to be raised up to replace them. A priest who will be faithful and true. Who will lead Israel well as she moves through this transition. Samuel will seek God with all His heart and mind. He will love God and honor Him all the days of His life. And when the time comes for him to hand off his leadership to a king, Samuel doesn't hesitate. He humbly submits to the will of the Lord.

Friends, God remains faithful! He will raise up leaders for God's people who seek Him with all their heart and mind. He will judge the "worthless" who lead out of pride or greed or a desire for influence and power. He will replace them with men and women after His own heart. Even now, He is at work. Perhaps in ways we cannot see. Who knows how many Hannah's are out there praying for a child? Who knows how many parents are out there who have dedicated their children to the Lord? Who knows how many of those children will rise up in the years ahead to lead us to repentance and revival? God is faithful. He will never abandon or forsake His people. No matter what you are going through, know He is with you.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 3-6, Luke 12:35-59

April 14, 2021

NEW HOPE

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 3-6, Luke 12:35-59

With God, there is always hope. As bad as things get, God always preserves a remnant. He will not abandon His chosen people. He will be faithful to His covenant regardless of how His people may or may not respond. As the Book of 1 Samuel begins, the people of Israel are in bad shape. They do not honor God. They do not have leaders who honor God. They are simply going through the motions of worship. Saying all the right things. Making all the right sacrifices. But in their hearts, they reject God. They rebel against His Law. Their priests are a disaster, engaging in sexual immorality. Making a mockery of the sacrificial system. Abusing their spiritual authority. Eli and his sons are the last in the line of the judges. A corrupt time in Israel's history that heartens back to the days of the Great Flood, the Tower of Babel, and slavery in Egypt. But all is not lost because God is still at work! He raises up a new leader. A godly leader. A leader who would seek Him with all their heart and be "blameless" (not perfect) in their generation. Who was this great leader? His name was Samuel.

Noah. Abraham. Moses. God has used each of them in turn to spark revival. Spiritual renewal. To draw God's people back to Himself. Now it's Samuel's turn to take up the mantle of leadership and do the same. Samuel represents a bridge from the time of the Judges to the time of the Kings. He will oversee a major transition in the life of Israel as they go from a bunch of tribes, each with their own identity, to one nation under a strong, centralized monarchy. Another thing that's striking to note is Samuel's age when he receives this call. Noah, Abraham, and Moses were all old men. Well beyond their prime. Samuel is a young boy. Not yet come into his own. The message here? God can use anyone at anytime to accomplish His purposes.

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

Several things stand out in this passage. The Word of the Lord was rare. There was no vision. Eli, the current judge and spiritual leader of Israel, was going blind. All of these are connected and important. As leaders go, so goes a nation. Eli's blindness is not just physical but spiritual as well and it has a devastating impact on the people He leads. Israel was so mired in sin that God had gone almost silent. But even though Eli may be blind, God is not. He sees all. He knows all. We see this dynamic in play throughout the Scriptures…

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

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

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

God will not allow His people to persist in their sin. When God's people embrace sin instead of turning to Him in faithfulness, He will withdraw His presence. He will withhold His Word. He will "give them

up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity...give them up to dishonorable passions...give them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done." (Romans 1:24, 26, 28) God is as faithful to judge as He is to forgive. And that is exactly what took place in Israel and in Eli's own family. Eli failed to discipline and restrain his sons. Hophni and Phineas are the very definition of corrupt religious leaders who manipulate the faith for their own benefit. By the way, we see these same things happening in our world today. I think of the health and wealth preachers who speak to thousands every week. The Christian self-help gurus who masquerade as preachers. The many preachers who have fallen into sin, reject any kind of accountability or spiritual authority or process of repentance, and then get back into the pulpit. As incredible as it seems, faithlessness is often very popular and faithfulness unpopular.

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 7-9, Luke 13:1-21

April 15, 2021

WALKING WITH OPEN HANDS

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 7-9, Luke 13:1-21

I am learning to walk with open hands before the Lord. He is reminding me that nothing I possess is actually mine to own. Nothing I've achieved is mine to hold. Nothing I've gained is mine to hoard. Not money. Not influence. Not position. None of it is mine to grasp. Instead, I must release. I must let go. I must walk with open hands and let the Lord fill them with whatever He may will.

Let me illustrate what I mean. When I first graduated from Princeton, I was blessed to be called to a special church in Mobile, AL. The people there embraced me and my family as their own. They loved me well and put up with my crazy ideas. They prayed for me. They challenged me. They accepted me. They followed me. The result was a wonderful six years of fruitful ministry as the Lord blessed the work of our hands. I was then called to plant a church outside of Madison, WI. The experience could not have been more different. I struggled. I suffered. I didn't handle things well. My insecurities and fears rose to the surface and crippled my ability to see beyond myself and my own pain. I was rejected over and over again. I was abused in many ways. Those 19 months almost cost me my marriage. My family. My ministry. Everything I held dear was put at risk. In the wake of those two experiences, close friends asked me if I had misunderstood God's call. If I had heard Him incorrectly. If I had made a mistake in leaving Mobile. The answer is no! As hard as it is to accept, God sometimes calls us to suffer. Sometimes calls us to experiences that are hard and heartbreaking. All to teach us how to walk with open hands.

Think of what we read today from Samuel's story. Here's a man who's served God and His people almost from birth. He was born to lead Israel. Set apart by God for this purpose. His is was a testimony to God's great faithfulness. He's led Israel to great victories. He's led Israel to spiritual revival. For decades, he's gone from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah in order to keep God's people on the right spiritual track. As he got older, he enlisted his sons to help him in his work. Tragically, they did not follow in the faithful footsteps of their father and Samuel's credibility as a leader began to erode. His sons took bribes and perverted justice to the point where the elders of Israel finally came to Samuel and demanded a change. "Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations." But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed to the Lord." (1 Samuel 8:5-6) No one likes to hear they are too old. No one likes to hear they are considered to be washed up. No one likes to be fired or let go because they simply don't have what it takes to lead anymore. Samuel is hurt by their words. I imagine all sorts of responses ran through his mind. Perhaps he even had the votes to remain in power if he chose to go that route. But Samuel loved the Lord. Samuel walked with open hands. So instead of reacting in anger, Samuel went to prayer. He took their request and his disappointment to the Lord.

And how did the Lord respond? "And the Lord said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them." (1 Samuel 8:7-9) What an affirmation and yet what deep conviction! You have not been rejected, Samuel. They are rejecting Me. I am sure this grieved Samuel's heart even more. After all, Samuel's greatest desire was for the people to return to the Lord with all their hearts, putting away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among them and directing their hearts to the Lord in order to serve

Him alone. (1 Samuel 7:3) But Samuel obeys the Lord. He gives the people what they desire. He identifies a king for them and humbly relinquishes all his power and authority.

I want so much to be like Samuel. I want to be the kind of person who walks through life with open hands. I want to hold onto the things the Lord brings into my life loosely. I want to place all that I have at His disposal. I want Him to take all my treasure, my time, my talent and use it as He sees fit. I want to be poured out like an offering before the Lord so that at the end of my life I can honestly say I held nothing back but gave everything up in service to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 10-12, Luke 13:22-35

April 16, 2021

THE SPIRIT-FILLED LIFE

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 10-12, Luke 13:22-35

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

The people of Israel found themselves in a time of crisis. Samuel, the faithful judge who had led them for so many years, was failing. His sons did not possess the character of their father. It would not be much longer and Israel would have no leader. No spiritual authority. No one to point them to God and protect them from their enemies. So they called for a king. Giving into their fears and anxiety, they asked Samuel to anoint someone to take his place. Someone who would reign and rule over them like the other nations. Someone who would guide and protect them. Someone they could look to in difficult times. God grants Israel's request. He gives them a king named Saul. A man with great leadership potential. A charismatic leader who can rally Israel and deliver them from their enemies. However, what truly sets Saul apart is the Spirit of the Living God. After Saul meets Samuel and is anointed king, Samuel tells him to expect something miraculous to happen. Saul will actually be changed into a different man by the Holy Spirit. God Himself will rush upon Saul, giving him all he needs to be successful. I love how the Bible describes it, "When Saul turned his back to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart." (1 Samuel 10:9) Wow. What a gift! All Saul has to do from this point forward is walk in the newness of life he has received and Israel will be saved.

Friends, God is still in the salvation business. God still "rushes" on His people in times of great crisis. He is there to provide when our needs are great and our strength is small. When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit rushes upon us and we are reborn. We are changed into different men and women. We are given new hearts. God empowering and strengthening us for the work He's called us to in this world. Unlike in the Old Testament where the Spirit of God would come and go on a person, in the New Testament the gift of the Spirit is permanent. God comes to take up residence in our hearts. God comes to dwell with us on a regular basis. God fills us eternally with His very presence. The results are amazing. We are given gifts like wisdom, knowledge, understanding, discernment, boldness, evangelistic zeal, tongues, prophecy, even miracles. The list is endless because God is endless. We are also given great grace to become new people. The fruit of a life lived in humble submission to God is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. Taken together, these gifts and graces become the resources a believer draws on as she/he seeks to serve the world in Jesus' name.

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

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

Don’t worry about having all the answers! Don’t worry about getting everything right! Don’t worry about making mistakes! Trust the Spirit to lead you! Trust the Spirit to guide you! Simply “do what your hand finds to do for God is with you!” (1 Samuel 10:7)

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 13-14, Luke 14:1-24

April 17, 2021

WAITING ON GOD

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 13-14, Luke 14:1-24

Recently, I took on the responsibility of taking our two dogs on their daily walk. Frankly, I got tired of the dogs tearing up my house because my teenagers would "forget" to take them. ;-) We go on a three and a half mile track around our neighborhood to wear them out and they love every minute of it. One of my dogs - Dusty - walks the entire time at my side. He never gets ahead. Never lags behind. He's always in step with me. The other dog - Dusty Jr. - strains at the leash the entire time. He's constantly pulling to get ahead. Constantly wanting to go his own way. Now, admittedly, DJ is still a puppy. Still learning. But it's a great lesson for me on how to wait on God. You see, I am too often like DJ. Constantly pulling and straining on God's leash as I seek to get ahead or go my own way. What I need to learn is how to be like Dusty. I need to learn that the destination is less important than simply being in my Master's presence.

Saul strains at the leash. His anxious. He's afraid. His people are trembling. They are beginning to desert in droves. Saul's not sure he can continue to hold things together. He has waited the required seven days. He has done his part. Now is the time for action. Now is the time to make things happen. So he offers the sacrifice. Right as he finishes, Samuel shows up and asks Saul what he has done. Saul's response is telling. "When I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines had mustered at Michmash, I said, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the favor of the Lord.' So I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering." (1 Samuel 13:11-12) Saul lost faith. Lost faith in himself. Lost faith in Samuel. Ultimately, he lost faith in the Lord. All because he didn't have the patience to wait on the Lord.

What was Saul's problem? He saw God as a means to an end. He saw the sacrifice as a means to gain the Lord's favor which in turn would give him a victory over his enemies. Saul didn't have a "heart after God." His heart was for himself. His glory. His power. His authority. His position as king. And that's why Samuel responds the way he does. "But now your kingdom shall not continue. The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart, and the Lord has commanded him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you." (1 Samuel 13:14) Samuel could see the selfish nature of Saul's heart. It was selfishness that ultimately drove Saul's impatience. It was selfishness that drove him to offer the sacrifice too early. And it was selfishness that cost him the kingdom in the end.

Friends, waiting on God is different than waiting on an outcome or a particular answer to prayer or the fulfillment of a heart's desire. Those things are not bad in themselves but if we find ourselves growing impatient with God's timing, it's most likely because we value the gift over the Giver. We treasure the answer more than the One who graciously hears our prayers. We long for the destination more than we long for the presence of the One who faithfully walks with us every step of the way. So where are you waiting on God today? And are you truly waiting on Him or are you waiting on an answer? Do you find yourself growing impatient? Stop straining at the leash. Relax. Rest. Abide in God's presence and trust Him to carry you all the way home.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 15-19, Luke 14:25-15:10

April 19, 2021

WHOLE-HEARTED

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 15-19, Luke 14:25-15:10

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

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

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

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

So time to take stock. Time to step back and honestly examine your own heart. Are you half-hearted or whole-hearted in your devotion to God? Half-hearted or whole-hearted in your love for Jesus? How do you know? We’ve already seen that it doesn’t necessarily depend on our outward appearance or achievement. It can’t be measured by the wealth we accumulate during the course of our lives. We can’t count on the image we project to the world to save us. No, we have to be courageous enough to take the inward journey into the heart. We have to plumb the depths of our soul. We have to plunge deep enough to come face to face with the real person we too often like to keep hidden inside. When we take this journey, who do we find? A man or woman after God’s own heart? A man or woman deeply and fully and completely in love with God? A man or woman of whole-hearted devotion to their Savior? Do we find in our hearts a hunger and thirst for righteousness? A deep awareness of the poverty of our own spiritual condition? Do we grieve over our sin? These are important questions that serve as a “diagnostic” to help us discern the spiritual condition of our hearts.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 20-21, Luke 15:11-32

April 20, 2021

THE GOD OF PRODIGALS AND PHARISEES

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 20-21, Luke 15:11-32

I've read this story a thousand times. The story of the prodigal son is one of my favorites in all the Bible. Probably because I am the prodigal. I've been a drunk. I've engaged in all kinds of lustful behavior. I've been lazy and flunked out of school. I've lied to everyone I love. I've lived a double life. I've been arrogant and prideful. I've been selfish and vain. I've chased money and possessions. I've been blind to my own prejudices and biases. And I wish I could say I've grown beyond such sinful behaviors but the honest truth is they remain, lurking down deep in the depths of my heart.

For years, I believed the answer to my problem lay in self-discipline. After I came to know Christ, I fought hard to change these deep-seated patterns of behavior. I memorized Scripture. I went faithfully to worship every single Sunday. I did my daily quiet time with the Lord. I sought out accountability from my brothers in Christ. I prayed my heart out for God to change me. And I grieved every time I fell into sin. I was judgmental of myself and others. I was quick to condemn people for even the littlest mistakes. It was black or white for me with just about everything. There was so little grace in my life. Looking back, I realize now I had simply flipped to the other side of the coin. I had become a Pharisee. And I wish I could say I've grown beyond such sinful attitudes but the honest truth is they remain, lurking down deep in the depths of my heart.

Then a few years ago, I found myself focusing on the father in this story. I marveled at how he listened without bitterness or resentment or any apparent hurt to his younger son's request. He knew his son was basically telling him he wished he were dead. He knew fulfilling his younger son's request would impoverish the family. He knew what it would cost to let his younger son go and still he shows him grace. I marveled as well at his treatment of the older son. The one who did everything right. The one who remained faithful on the outside but on the inside was burning up with anger and hatred. He knew what it would cost if his older son refused to embrace his brother. He knew how it would impoverish the family and threaten their future together. And still he shows him grace. I marveled yet more at how the father runs to both his sons. Meeting them where they were at. Refusing to be separated from them in their shame. He embraces each of them in turn. Reaffirming his love for them. Reaffirming their place in the family. He simply will not let them go.

Friends, true freedom is not found in chasing every desire. True freedom is not found in exercising strict self-control. True freedom can only be found in the Father's love. It is His love and grace that sets us free. It is His Son who breaks the power of sin in our lives through His death on the cross. And it is His Spirit who goes to work transforming us from the inside out. No matter where you find yourself today - playing the Prodigal or the Pharisee - may you place your trust in the God who loves them both with all His heart.

Readings for tomorrow: Samuel 22-23, Luke 16:1-13

April 22, 2021

LETTING GO

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 24-26, Luke 16:14-31

Imagine having everything you ever wanted within your grasp? Position. Power. Peace. You have the opportunity with a single stroke to bring it about. Imagine spending your life defending yourself against injustice. On the run for crimes you did not commit. Falsely accused by your enemy. And now you have the chance to end it. All you have to do is take matters into your own hands. A sudden strike in the darkness and you could lay hold of all God had promised.

The temptation to bring about the will of God in our own way and own time is very real. David faced it in the cave when Saul came in to relieve himself. Jesus faced it in the wilderness when the enemy offered him all the kingdoms of the world without the cross. You and I face it everyday as well in big and small ways. Yes, we know the will of God for our lives. We know His Word. We know His Truth. We know His Law. We know what He desires for us. But we get impatient. We get frustrated. We get anxious. We get afraid. And in our fear, we take matters into our own hands.

I remember vividly sitting down at a coffee shop one morning in Sun Prairie, WI. Kristi and I had been seeking God's will for many months. God had led us to resign from a difficult and painful ministry position. He had led us to a great church family who welcomed us in to help us heal. He had provided a sixty day severance package that we lived on while we waited for Him to reveal what was next. Through a mutual friend, God had connected us to a church in Parker, CO that was just beginning their search for a new senior pastor. But these things take time and I was growing anxious. I was afraid. The church in Parker was literally my only job prospect. I had no other options. How would I feed my family if it fell through? How would I pay the rent? Was my career in ministry over? Was it time to go do something else? All these thoughts ran through my head as the weeks passed and the wheels of the search process slowly turned. I was getting about two to three hours of sleep a night. I would pace the hours away praying and crying out to God.

One Saturday evening, I made up my mind. Enough was enough. I needed to expand my search. I needed to look at other ministry positions. I needed more options. So I told Kristi I would start looking the next morning. She and I went to bed. She tossed and turned all night, suffering from the sudden onset of a migraine. I did my normal pacing routine. We were both deeply unsettled. Eventually, morning dawned. I showered. Got dressed. Headed over to the coffee shop, laptop in hand to begin my day. I ordered my regular cup of black coffee. Sat down at my favorite table. Opened up the browser on my computer. Just as I went to type, I heard the word "NO" in my mind. It was clear. It was loud. It was startling. I looked around. Shook my head. Went to type. Again came the word..."NO!" This time I jumped a little. I looked around again. No one else was in the shop. Just me and the barista who was in the back. So I tried a third time to type. "NO!" I sat back. I looked out the window. I knew it was the Lord. Calling me to trust. Calling me to be patient. Calling me to wait on Him to reveal His will rather than make my own plans. I called Kristi. Told her what had happened. Told her God wasn't allowing me to apply to any other positions and that we just needed to wait for Him to reveal what would happen with the church in Parker. Immediately she felt the pain from her migraine lift and relief flood her body. It remains one of the most incredible moments in our lives.

God's ways are not our ways. All of us would have counseled David to take Saul's life in the cave that day. Put an end to the running. Put an end to the civil war. Kill your enemy and take your rightful place on the throne of Israel. All of us would have counseled Jesus to avoid the cross. To accept the deal the

devil was offering. Accomplish all the Father has sent You to do without the suffering and pain. We all compromise. We all rationalize. We all have our excuses for why we don't follow the will of God. Why we don't walk in His ways. Why we don't wait on His timing. The reality is we are always looking out for number one. We are always looking out for our own interests first before we look to the interests of others. Even God. But David was a man after God's own heart. He refused to take matters into his own hands. He refused to lift his hand against the Lord's anointed even though Saul was an evil and corrupt king. He trusted all God had promised would be fulfilled in God's time and in God's way. Just like Jesus did in the wilderness. Just like Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Friends, take a step back. Take your hands off the wheel. Relinquish control. Let go. Trust God to fulfill His promises in His perfect timing and according to His perfect will.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 27-29, Luke 17:1-19

April 23, 2021

SERVANT-MINDED

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 27-29, Luke 17:1-19

I remember driving back from a weekend getaway in Boston with Kristi when it hit me. We had been married for three or four years. We had our ups and downs as we tried to figure out life together. Things got more challenging because of a heartbreaking pregnancy loss and a cross-country move. We were generally happy but I think we both felt like our relationship could be so much more. I remember looking over at Kristi as she slept in the seat next to me. I remember asking the Lord what I could do to make our marriage truly great. God gave me one word, "serve." Serve her with all your heart and with all your might. Make it your goal in life to support, encourage, and empower her to be a strong woman of faith. Don't be the stumbling block. Don't let the temptation to be selfish get a foothold. When she's hurting, drop everything to comfort her. When she's angry and lashes out, let it all go and forgive her. When she succeeds, celebrate her for all she's worth. Something changed in me that day. My attitude shifted. My perspective changed. And our marriage has only gotten better and better over the years. All because I dedicated my life to serve.

In the reading from Luke's Gospel today, Jesus is teaching His disciples a similar lesson. They are never to put a stumbling block in anyone's way. They are never to let their anger, their frustration, their selfishness, their desires tempt those around them to sin. They are to forgive easily and often. They are to serve faithfully and selflessly. I love the disciple's response…"Increase our faith!"…because it was mine that day in the car! How else could it happen? How else could I become the husband I needed to be? I'm only human after all. Of course, so were the disciples. Broken by sin just like all of us. Subject to the same temptations and pressures and anxiety that everyone else feels. They are not supermen. They have no spiritual superpowers. They do not have the strength or wisdom to be able to do what Jesus is calling them to do. So they cry out for more faith. More faith to believe. More faith to live. More faith to be the servants Jesus was calling them to be.

All of us need such faith if we are to serve. For it is only by faith that we can let go of our need for recognition. Our need to have our desires fulfilled. Our need to have our own needs met. True servant-mindedness and servant-heartedness lets go of these things. The true servant understands they are simply doing their duty. Doing what's expected. They find joy in the act of service for they know they are serving a Master greater than themselves. Jesus is both Master and Servant. He came not to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many. He refused to use His power and authority in demanding or coercive ways. He refused to repay evil for evil. In short, He never put a stumbling block in anyone's way. He forgave easily and often. He served faithfully and selflessly all the way to the end of His life. And He didn't need any recognition for it. He simply embraced it as His role in His Father's divine plan.

Jesus expects the same servant-mindedness from His disciples. He expects us to cultivate a servant's heart in every relationship in life. He expects us to give away our lives in service to others. And this, indeed, will take faith. More faith than we can ever muster on our own. It will take faith to work for no earthly rewards. Faith to set aside any earthly desire to be recognized for all we do. Faith to trust Jesus with all our needs. It takes faith to work for no other affirmation than to hear those words from Him at the end of our lives, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master."

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 30-31, Luke 17:20-37

April 24, 2021

EPITAPH

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 30-31, Luke 17:20-37

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

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

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

So back to us? What will future generations say about you when you're gone? The writers of the Chronicles were looking back at their history. They looked back at their leaders and they judged them primarily based on their fidelity to the Lord. Good leadership looked to Yahweh. Evil leadership looked to other gods. A good life was one defined by faithfulness to God. An evil life was one defined by selfishness, greed, and the worship of idols. Saul will forever be remembered by his epitaph in 1 Chronicles 10:13-14. David will forever be remembered as the "man after God's own heart." What legacy are you leaving behind?

Readings for tomorrow: None

April 26, 2021

THE SECRET TO PRAYER

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 1-5, Luke 18:1-19:10

I was recently talking to a friend about a situation they are facing in their life right now. It is hard. It is challenging. It is heartbreaking. It has to do with someone they love and the challenges they face. And my friend asked me how they should pray. You see, they are mad at God right now. Frustrated by the unjust treatment of the one they love. They want to know why God seems silent in the face of their fears. Why won't He answer the deepest cries of their hearts?

It's a common experience. As believers in Jesus Christ, we find our hearts breaking for the world around us. It is full of so much depression. So much despair. So much disease. So much injustice. Tensions are high. Divisions are many. Distrust is the rule of the day. Natural disasters like hurricanes, cyclones, drought, and famine cause terrible suffering. Violence and wars rage around the globe and often in our own backyards. Our lives are touched by tragedy. We cannot escape it. And so we pray. We come before God. We lay our burdens before Him. We cry out to Him in the midst of our grief. We beg Him to act. We rage at Him when He seems silent and distant. We wonder why He won't hear us? Why He won't answer us? Why He won't respond to ease the suffering of those we love?

In today's reading, Jesus teaches us about prayer. Three things, He says, you need when you come before God in prayer. Starting at the end of the passage and working our way back to the beginning, Jesus calls us to pray like children. "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." (Luke 18:17) Children often don't have the big picture. They often can't understand the decisions of their parents. If your kids are like my kids, they often say things like, "I don't understand why things have to be this way." But as their father, I know better. I often know what they need even before they ask. I know their hearts. I know their fears. I know their struggles. I know what's good for them even if they don't know it themselves. We need to pray with the attitude and perspective of a child. Our Heavenly Father knows best. He knows what He's doing. He has a plan and it is good.

Second, we pray with humility. "But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:13-14) We are sinners. We are broken. Our view of the world is warped. Our understanding of life is corrupt. Our feelings cannot be trusted. We do not place our faith in our own understanding. We do not place our faith in our own pride and privilege. We do not place our faith in our own wisdom and strength. Instead, we come before God on our knees. We bow before His wisdom and understanding. In all our ways, we acknowledge His Lordship and we trust Him to make our paths straight. He is gracious. He is merciful. He is steadfast in His love and faithfulness.

Finally, we pray with persistence. "And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming." (Luke 18:3-5) God invites us not just to knock politely on the door to the throne room of heaven but to literally beat it down! We come before God continually. Constantly bringing our requests before Him. He never tires of hearing our needs. Never tires of listening to the desires of our hearts. Never falls asleep. Never gets bored. Never

takes a break. Never slams the door in our face. He simply embraces us. Pulls us into His lap. He draws near to us when we are broken hearted and crushed in spirit. He is with us in the darkest of times to bring comfort and peace. And often in the fullness of time. According to His perfect will. An answer is waiting.

I want to encourage you in prayer today, friends. Do not relent. Do not let go. Do not let up. Stay persistent. Come before your God humbly. With the faith of a child. And trust your Heavenly Father is good and has your best in mind.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 6-8, Luke 19:11-27

April 27, 2021

UNLESS THE LORD BUILDS THE HOUSE…

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 6-8, Luke 19:11-27

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

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

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

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

Unless God builds the house. Unless God builds David's house. Unless God builds our house. We all labor in vain. This was the message God was sending me during my devotional time. I was spending so much energy working hard to be successful. To stand out among my peers. To be faithful to God. And all the while God was calling me to rest. To trust. To stand back and let Him do the "building" of my life. Let Him guide and direct my path. Let Him have the glory for the success I was seeking to achieve.

Since that time, I've continued to learn. Continued to grow. Continued to grasp on ever-deepening levels the meaning of those God-given words for my life.

Obscurity - I labor in a small town overshadowed by a big city. I work in a church on the eastern edge of that town off the beaten track. The church I serve is growing but we'll never top the Outreach 100 list. We're making an impact locally and globally but no one will ever write us up in the history books. We're just an ordinary group of people seeking to serve God and love each other well.

Anonymity - I am released from the pressure to perform. To succceed. To self-promote. No one knows my name. This work isn't about me. I love the fact that I don't always have to be up front. Don't always have to preach. Don't always have to be in charge. I am simply one of God's many servants at my church.

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

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Where do you need to step back and let God build in your life? In what areas do you need to hand over the tools, stop working so hard, and let God take over? Whose blueprint are you operating from? Yours or God's?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 9-11, Luke 19:28-48

April 28, 2021

AMAZING GRACE

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 9-11, Luke 19:28-48

There's a famous story told about John Knox, the founder of Presbyterianism in Scotland. He had a nightmare as he lay dying. When he awoke, he told all his friends that he had just been tempted to believe he had earned heaven through the faithfulness of his life and ministry. But he quickly followed that up with these words, "Blessed be God who enabled me to quench the fiery dart, by suggesting to me such passages of Scripture as these; "What hast thou that thou didst not receive?" (1 Cor. 4:7) "By the grace of God I am what I am." (1 Cor. 15:10a) "Not I but the grace of God which was with me." (1 Cor. 15:10b)

It is so easy to think we deserve God's grace. It's so easy to believe we've done enough. We're good enough. We're strong enough. We've worked hard enough. Yes, most of know the dictionary definition of grace - "unmerited favor" - but if we're honest, deep down we like to think we deserve it. If you don't believe me, take a moment and consider how much we tend to take God's grace for granted. How little we value our time with Him. How easy it is for us to prioritize other things. Think about how hard it is for us to forgive those who hurt us. Reconcile broken relationships. Extend grace to others. Think about how easy it is for us to play the critic. To assume the worst rather than the best of others. Become angry or dismissive toward those with whom we disagree politically, socially, or spiritually. Yes, grace is a hard concept for us to grasp much less live out on a daily basis.

In today's reading, we come face to face with a marvelous example of grace in the story of David and Mephibosheth. David is now king. He has the nation firmly united behind him. He is winning battle after battle. Expanding their territory. Gaining tribute. Philistines. Moabites. Syrians. Edomites. All fall before him. Most ancient near east kings, in their efforts to consolidate power, would seek out the last surviving members of the former royal family and have them put to death. After all, you do not want to give any of your enemies a potential rival to rally behind. Not David. David remembers his covenant with Jonathan. David remembers his promise to Saul. He seeks out the last surviving members of Saul's family in order to honor them. Bless them. Extend grace to them.

Enter Mephibosheth. Crippled. Weak. Broken. Living in abject poverty - Lo-debar literally means "no pasture" - where he has fled to hide. For years, he has eked out an existence hoping to escape the notice of the new king. He knows what would likely happen should he be found out. But now he's been betrayed. His location is known. The king's soldiers show up to bring him before David. One can imagine his fear. One can imagine all the nightmare scenarios running through his head. He comes before David and bows his face to the floor at his feet. He begs for mercy though he knows he doesn't deserve it. And what's David's response? Grace.

Friends, we are Mephibosheth. We are crippled. Weak. Broken. We too live in abject spiritual poverty. We too have fled to hide from the King. Many of us have lived this way for years. Putting our heads down and barely eking out an existence. Enslaved to our sin, we tried as best we could to escape God's notice. But the Holy Spirit sees all and knows all. He found us out! He sought us out! He brought us before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Perhaps you remember the day that happened? The first day you actually humbled yourself before Jesus? I remember it well. I remember the exact spot I was standing on the campus of the University of Colorado in Boulder. I remember feeling the full weight of my sin for the first time. I remember the sense of despair I felt at the way my life was going. I remember how unworthy I felt before the Lord as I prayed to accept Him into my life. And what I

remember most of all is feeling utterly overwhelmed as His grace washed over me. For the first time in my life, I knew things would be okay. I knew I was loved with an everlasting love. I knew I was not alone. My heart, once so dry and empty, was immediately filled with joy and peace. It was amazing.

Friends, grace has nothing to do with us. Nothing to do with what we've done. Nothing to do with how good we think ourselves to be. It has everything to do with God. By showering us with grace, God is being faithful to Himself. Faithful to the covenant promises He has made. Grace takes the wounded, crippled, and broken and sets a place for them at God's table. Grace seeks out the spiritually disabled, those lost and wandering in darkness, enslaved to sin, dead in their trespasses and presents them before God. Grace goes to the most barren places, rescues the spiritually poor, and brings them to a place of plenty, where we are fed with the richest of fare. Most of all, grace takes those orphaned by sin and adopts them into God's own family!

Now here's what we most often miss about grace. It doesn't take away our brokenness. Mephibosheth remained crippled for the rest of his life. In the same way, we too remain crippled by our sinful nature. Why does God allow this? Again, the answer is grace. As Mephibosheth limped around the palace, leaning on his crutches, he was reminded over and over again of the amazing grace of the king. As you and I continue our struggle with sin. Tempted. Afflicted. Oppressed. We are being reminded over and over again of the amazing grace of our own King. That takes a wretch like me. Once lost. Now found. Once blind but now can see.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 12-14, Luke 20:1-26

April 29, 2021

HYPOCRISY

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 12-14, Luke 20:1-26

Hypocrisy killed my grandmother. Her life was one for the history books. Literally. Widowed at a very young age with three young children, she moved them all from a small farming town in western Nebraska to Switzerland to live for two years. She traveled all over Europe during that time. Her kids learned multiple languages as well as how to ski in the Alps. When they came back home, she settled back in. Ran the family farm. Eventually remarried and added three more kids to the mix. One of them died at age 18. She lost her second husband during open heart surgery. Once the kids were out of the house, she pursued her nurses' license. Studied a foreign language herself. She literally never stopped moving. However, the grief in her life eventually caught up to her and she looked for a way to ease her pain and guilt. Tragically, she got caught up in a cult. They convinced her to give them her land and her wealth. They convinced her to move to California. Her relationships with her children became strained. Right before the end of her life, the cult leader died. His successors publicly repented of their ways. They let all their followers know they intentionally been deceitful. My grandmother's heart broke. She realized what she had done. She had acted against some of her most deeply held convictions. She literally spent hours writing in every book she owned, "Esther is a hypocrite." I remember talking to her towards the end of her life, attempting to win her back to Christ. She and I talked about forgiveness. We talked about unconditional love. We talked about God dying for all our sin and guilt and shame. We talked about the power of the Holy Spirit to renew and cleanse and make us whole again. I still remember the day she called the house. I picked up the phone. All she said was, "Doug, you're right." (She had significant dementia by this point.) And then she hung up. It was the last time I spoke to her. I will remain forever grateful to the Lord for those final words because I know she had finally let go of the shame she felt over her hypocrisy and accepted the grace of God into her life.

Hypocrisy always leads to death. For David, it led to the tragic death of his infant child. It led the death of the peace and prosperity and unity of his reign. David was nothing before he met God. He was a shepherd in a field of a small backwater town that barely appeared on a map. Everything David achieved was because of God. Everything David now owned came from God's own hand. All his victories. All his success. All his wealth and power and privilege. All of it came from God. But it wasn't enough. David betrayed his deepest convictions when he raped Bathsheba. He compounded his crimes when he ordered the murder of Uriah. He sealed his fate when he attempted to cover up his sin. So God sends him a prophet. Nathan confronts David. Forces him to face the consequences of his hypocrisy. Thankfully, David repents. "For thus says the Lord…you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.'" David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die." (2 Samuel 12:12-13) But it is too late for his household. He has sown the wind and will reap the whirlwind. Civil war. Exile. The death of so many of his children.

Hypocrisy is the reason our nation is dying. I forced myself to watch all the speeches last night from both parties. Once again, I was bitterly disappointed. It's astounding to me how many of our political leaders twist one another's words to further their own agendas. They refuse to share any credit. They assume the absolute worst of those on the other side of the aisle. They do not act in good faith. In some cases, they simply outright lie. And the lack of integrity is tragically bipartisan. As such, they betray the very oaths they took when they raised their right hand and promised to do what is best for our country.

Hypocrisy is the reason the church in America is dying. Far too many priests and pastors abuse their positions of spiritual authority in all sorts of ways. The widespread scandal of sexual abuse of the most vulnerable in congregations is horrifying. The spiritual abuse of the people they serve is more subtle but just as destructive. The lure of celebrity is seemingly too hard to resist. The opportunity to leverage one's position to accumulate great wealth and power and cultural influence is too tempting for many. Add to that an inability to humbly confront our own sinful legacies of pride and hate and is it any wonder so many are leaving the faith?

Hypocrisy is the reason I am dying on some level. Every time I betray my own deeply held convictions, I reminded of how easy it is for me to play the hypocrite. Every time I fail to serve my wife. Fail to honor my children. Fail to listen to those who are hurting in my own congregation. Every time I fail to assume the best of my critics. Fail to love those who are hard for me to love. Fail to pray for my enemies. I too am "that man" that Nathan talks about. And I would be lost indeed without my Savior Jesus Christ. He alone is faithful. He alone is steadfast. He alone is true. He is my Rock and my Redeemer. And His grace is enough. It was enough for my grandmother. It was enough for King David. It is enough for you. It is enough for me. It is enough for the church. It is enough for our nation. It is even enough for the world. Thanks be to God.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 15-16, Luke 20:27-47

April 30, 2021

THE TRAGEDY OF UNFORGIVENESS

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 15-16, Luke 20:27-47

There are consequences when we fail to forgive from the heart. Consequences when we fail to reconcile. Consequences when we fail to follow God's will and seek to restore broken relationships. The impact of those consequences tend to be commensurate with the authority and power and influence we wield. So a parent who refuses to take this step with their child can impact future generations. An employer who refuses to take this step with employees can cost a company. A pastor who refuses to take this step with her/his congregation can disrupt a congregation.

David was a king. A man who held the power of life and death in his hands. A man whose authority was supreme and final. The impact of his decisions impacted not just him or his household but a nation. This is true not only in the Absalom narrative but also at other times in David's life. There is a ripple effect to the decisions he makes. When he makes good and godly decisions, the nation is blessed. When he makes poor and ungodly decisions, the nation is cursed. As we read yesterday, David's refusal to execute justice when his daughter Tamar was raped creates a crisis in his family that eventually spreads to the nation. Absalom takes matters into his own hands leading to his exile. David brings him back but refuses to forgive him from the heart and restore him to his place. In his isolation, Absalom's bitterness grows and it leads him to conspire to steal the kingdom. David seems blissfully unaware as Absalom executes his carefully laid plans. He's almost caught completely by surprise when the news finally comes and he has to flee for his life. The ripples grow as allegiances shift and new alliances are formed. Ahithophel sides with Absalom. Hushai with David. Joab goes with David so Absalom makes Amasa his new general. Abiathar and Zadok stay in Jerusalem as priests but remain loyal to David. Shimei curses David. Ziba makes his move to take over what's left of the household of Saul. Everyone, it seems, is looking out for themselves. Such is the chaos that happens when forgiveness and reconciliation are ignored. It leads to all kinds of brokenness, suffering, and pain.

We've all probably had this experience. A friend says something or does something that hurts us. We refuse to forgive. Now the rest of our friends are forced to choose sides. A marriage breaks up. Divorce papers are signed. Once again, friends and family feel forced to take sides. A business deal goes south. Partners split up. Lawyers are called to divide up the assets. Clients and customers are pressured to shift their loyalties. Seasons of ministry come to an end. Pastors are let go. Forced out in some cases. Congregations split. Such experiences are painful and never easy. Too many of us take the path of least resistance which is avoidance. Abandoning the relationships we once enjoyed because forgiveness is too hard. Reconciliation too much. The way of Jesus too difficult.

And yet, Jesus' words continue to haunt us…"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us...For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matthew 6:12, 14-15) "Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:21-22) "And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." (Mark 11:25)

Friends, forgiveness and reconciliation are ESSENTIAL to the Christian life. Coming to terms with our brothers and sisters is REQUIRED by Jesus if we are to call ourselves His disciples. We are not given

any other options. Any other choices. Jesus wants His family to be unified not just in name but from the heart. Think of the pain that could have been avoided had David listened to God. Think of the pain in our own lives that could be avoided if only we would listen to God. Who is Jesus calling you to forgive today?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 17-18, Luke 21:1-19

May 1, 2021

HUMAN NATURE

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 17-18, Luke 21:1-19

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

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

Now consider our own situation. A pandemic still rages all over the world. The recent photos of the funeral pyres in India serve as a sobering reminder of the danger so many remain in. Yes, vaccinations are largely available but only in those countries that can afford it. Only in those nations who have the logistical infrastructure to transport and store them safely. And even after COVID fades, the deep political and social divisions it exposed remain. We are more polarized than ever. Those on the other side of the aisle are no longer colleagues with whom we respectfully disagree but enemies we must crush. Those who take a different position socially are no longer friends with whom we can respectfully disagree but hate-filled bigots who must be cut out of our lives. We are all looking for someone to blame. Someone to attack. Someone to degrade. But the sad reality is there is no win here. No way out. We’re engaged in a zero sum game. There is just something dark and deep in our nature that continues to defile us.

So where do we find hope? Only in Christ. Christ gives us the compassion to walk in another person’s shoes. Christ gives us the grace to allow people to make mistakes. Christ gives us love for those with whom we disagree or those who we call our enemies. Christ gives us joy even in the midst of our trials. Christ gives us strength to persevere through our suffering. Christ gives us the humility to ask for help. Christ gives us peace in the midst of the storm. Friends, we have reached the horizon of our lives. We have reached the end of our resources. No amount of government intervention or social engineering can possibly save any of us from ourselves. Only Christ can deliver us. Only Christ can save us. Only Christ can set us free.

May 3, 2021

OUR ONLY HOPE

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 19-23, Luke 21:20-22:23

A few years ago, I attended a prayer luncheon where the keynote speaker shared his testimony. Brought up Communist, he became a rising star and leader in a student revolutionary movement in college. His influence became dangerous which led to him leaving his studies to hide out in the mountains of his country. There he continued to draw followers until he and his small group of friends had amassed an army of 150,000. They engaged in guerilla warfare for a number of years until they eventually invaded the capital city and overthrew their own government. He became Prime Minister. For five years he held his position until he was betrayed by his close friend and imprisoned on crimes of corruption. It's tough to know what's true and what was politically motivated but in the man's own words, "he was the chiefest of the chiefs of sinners." He was a man of violence. A man who lived with a gun in his hand. He was a man of power. A man who enjoyed exercising authority over others. He was a man of great appetites. Using his power and influence to gratify his own desires. His end came as swiftly as his rise to power.

Because of his great influence, he was put in solitary confinement for years. No bed. No toilet. No place even to wash his hands. He suffered tremendously. He was lonely. He was afraid. One night, he had a vision. Jesus appeared to him. Offered him release in exchange for belief. He didn't answer right away. Things got worse. In the depths of his pain and heartache, he cried out for Jesus' return. The next night, the vision came back and this time the man got on his knees. He gave his life to Christ and everything changed.

As I listened to this man's testimony, I was reminded of King David. David too was a man of violence. A man who was raised from a young age to a position of power and influence. A man who used that power and influence to gratify his own desires on more than one occasion. David too was a man of great contradictions. Capable of amazing love and generosity and grace in one moment and brutal, horrifying, seemingly capricious violence in the next. In many ways, he was just like any other ancient near east ruler and yet God still loves him. And he loves God. Even here at the end of his life, he is still finding new and fresh ways to praise God!

What are we to make of such a man? Wrong question. What are we to make of such a God? Much better question! What do we make of a God who would love a man like David? A man like the one I mentioned at the beginning of this devotional? A man like me? The reality is we are all people of great contradictions. All of us are capable of great good and great evil. Capable of great beauty and great ugliness. Capable of amazing acts of generosity as well selfish acts of greed. Perhaps this is why David kept writing his poetry? Perhaps he knew this truth deep down? Despite all his sin. Despite every mistake. Despite the people he had hurt along the way. David knew his only hope was in the Lord.

"The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my savior; you save me from violence. I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies." (2 Samuel 22:2-4) Where is your confidence today, friends? Is it in the Lord? Is He your rock? Your fortress? Your deliverer? Have you taken refuge in Him?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 24, 1 Kings 1, Luke 22:24-38

May 4, 2021

PRIDE, POWER, AND POPULARITY

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 24, 1 Kings 1, Luke 22:24-38

More and more studies are being conducted on the impact of social media on our mental health. The results are scary. It is becoming clear that prolonged social media use presents like addiction with similar accompanying symptoms. (Neglect of personal life, mental preoccupation, escapism, etc.) When people attempt to stop using social media, they go through something akin to withdrawal. The more we use social media, the less happy we seem to be and the more socially isolated we become. The comparisons social media invites between our lives and those with whom we are connected is not good for our well-being. Furthermore, social media (which includes all the different apps with a social component to it) is specifically designed to trigger dopamine "highs" in the brain. Dopamine release is triggered by unpredictability, small bits of information that can be digested quickly, and most importantly, reward cues. (i.e. number of "likes" on FB, number of "followers" on Instagram, number of "retweets" on Twitter, streaks on Snapchat, etc.)

I think about the number of people I know who draw at least part of their self-worth off of the number of friends they have on Facebook. The number of times people hit the "heart" button on an Instagram pic. The number of retweets and likes a pithy phrase gets on Twitter or the amount of views on a YouTube video. Especially young people. Especially the young people in my own home. But it's not just social media. I think of the number of pastors I know who draw their self-worth off the number of people who show up on a weekend for worship. I think of the drive there is in most churches for numerical growth. I know some pastors who seem to live or die based on whether they make OutReach Magazine's Top 100 list every year. I think of the uncritical assumptions too many Christians make that larger churches must be doing something "right" and smaller churches must be doing something "wrong." Or the reverse. I once belonged to a denomination where the salaries of all the pastors in each region were published and voted on each year. I remember one older man who came from a very small church standing up to rail against large church pastors whose salaries were more than his entire church's budget. Never mind the differences in scale or complexities of the job. He just didn't like big churches and made his opinions known.

Why are we so obsessed with numbers? It does seem to be an American phenomenon. I travel the world regularly. I've been to China, South Korea, Mexico, Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, etc. I've interacted with pastors in all of those settings and in my experience, they just don't seem as hung up as we are on numbers. I think of one young pastor in his early twenties who leads a house church of thousands in China or the village pastor in Ethiopia whose church numbers around 50 of the poorest people in the world. I think of the South Korean pastor whose church is largely made up of teenage refugees from North Korea or the Rwandan bishop whose primary flock is the aboriginal people of the forests near his home. Each of these pastors cares deeply about his people. None of them ignores the numbers. They pay attention to their flock. They evaluate how they are doing especially as it relates to reaching the lost in their communities. They are wise and discerning. But there isn't the emotional attachment American Christians, and especially American pastors, seem to have with attendance, buildings, and budgets. It's like we get a dopamine "high" every time the sanctuary's full.

It's why I find this story about David in 2 Samuel 24 so convicting. David wants to number his people. He wants to know the size of his army. He wants to measure his power. His influence. His accomplishments. He wants to feel secure. Safe. In control. The images I have in my head are of third-world despots throwing military parades to show off their strength. David is clearly feeling insecure

and in that moment, Satan strikes. He comes along and tempts David according to 1 Chronicles 21 and God allows it to happen according to 2 Samuel 24. The results are tragic. “The word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David’s seer, saying, “Go and say to David, ‘Thus says the Lord, Three things I offer you. Choose one of them, that I may do it to you.’” So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, “Shall three years of famine come to you in your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days’ pestilence in your land? Now consider, and decide what answer I shall return to him who sent me.” Then David said to Gad, “I am in great distress. Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man.” (2 Samuel 24:11-14) God is going to teach David a lesson in humility. He is going to teach David where to find his true strength. He is going to teach David where true security lies.

70,000 die from the plague. This is horrific and we cannot understand why God would do such a thing. At the same time, we have to remember that such events take place at the mysterious intersection of God’s will and human freedom. David’s decision has consequences and because David is king, the consequences impact his people. The same is true even for today. The decisions our politicians make impact real people in real life and can cause real pain and suffering. David decides to number his fighting men and around the same time, a plague begins. It is brutal. Virulent. And it kills. Somewhere in David’s mind. In the prophet Gad’s mind. Probably in Joab’s mind and the minds of so many others, these events are related. The plague is perceived as God’s punishment on Israel for David’s sinful choices. And perhaps it is. We cannot dismiss the possibility out of hand for God’s ways are not our ways and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. He has clearly told His people over and over again that there are consequences...real, life-threatening consequences...for sin. God’s justice and righteousness will not be mocked.

So how do we respond? What does this mean for our lives? First and foremost, it leads us to confession. Repentance. It calls to mind all the times we too have placed our faith in numbers. Or our mental health and well-being in the number of likes we get from social media. I am not immune. Nor are you. So we confess our sin before God. Second, it leads us to the cross. To the place where the penalty for our sin was paid. To the place where God’s judgment was fully and completely and utterly satisfied by the death of our Lord. We am not condemned. We need not feel any shame. For God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. Third, it inspires us to live for Him today. To live from that place of grace knowing God has torn down the dividing wall of hostility that exists between us and made peace with us by the blood of His Cross. We am forgiven so we can forgive others. Grace was extended to us so we can extend it to others. Love was shown to us so we can show love to others. We are secure in God’s hands.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 2-3, Luke 22:39-71

May 5, 2021

THE GODFATHER

Readings for today: 1 Kings 2-3, Luke 22:39-71

Every time I read 1 Kings 2, I think of one of The Godfather. I picture Michael Corleone at the altar taking his baptismal vows as his henchmen settle score after score after score. Carlo. Tessio. Virgil Solozzo. Tattaglia. Cuneo. Stacci. Barzini. It's a classic scene. At the end of David's life, there is yet another struggle for power. His son, Adonijah, sees his opportunity to take the throne. He gathers some of David's inner circle around him. He sacrifices sheep and oxen. He calls all the leaders of the nation to join him with a few notable exceptions. But he miscalculates. He moves too soon. David is not yet dead. The timing is not right. And the results are disastrous.

Solomon is crowned king by David to the acclaim of all the people. But David's not quite finished settling scores. He has a long memory. He knows who has wronged him. He knows who has betrayed him. And one gets the sense that he's been waiting. Biding his time. Getting ready for the right moment to strike. Joab. Shimei. Abiathar. Adonijah. All fall to the sword or are exiled as Solomon works to secure his throne. This is real life in the real world and whereas we may not assassinate our political enemies anymore, we certainly do all we can to discredit them and "assassinate" their character. Things haven't much changed since Solomon's time.

What do we take away from today's reading? Well, the biblical authors make it clear that God is using broken, imperfect people to bring about His righteous judgment. Joab is executed for committing the cold-blooded murders of Abner and Amasa. Shimei is executed for the curse he put on David as he fled for his life. Abiathar is exiled for his treason, thus fulfilling a decades old prophecy about Eli's family being expelled from service at the house of God. Adonijah is executed for his treason and sedition. Though it may make our modern sensibilities squirm, God's righteous judgment is a critical component of His eternal character.

A God without justice is a God who is powerless in the face of evil. A God without justice is soft and sentimental. A God without justice cannot stand against the violence and tyranny of this world. A God without justice is weak. But our God is a God of justice! And He executes His righteous judgment on sin and evil in this world! This is why the Psalmist can declare, "Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers!...For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land...The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him, but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming...For the arms of the wicked shall be broken, but the Lord upholds the righteous....But the wicked will perish; the enemies of the Lord are like the glory of the pastures; they vanish—like smoke they vanish away." (Psalms 37:1, 9, 12-13, 17, 20) Though it may not happen in this life, the promise of God is sure! Evil will get its due! Evildoers will not inherit the Kingdom! Satan and his demonic horde will eventually be bound and thrown into the lake of fire! God will make His victory complete! His justice will reign upon the earth!

Until that great day comes, what to make this reading in our own lives? God is a God of justice. He sees our sin. He sees the evil we commit not just with our hands but in our hearts and minds as well. Our evil thoughts. Our evil intentions. Our sinful and selfish ways. Sins of commission and sins of ommission. We cannot escape the justice of God! And this should bring us to our knees in worship before the Crucified and Risen Christ who literally stood in our place. Took our punishment. Bore the wrath we deserved. Satisfied God's justice once and for all! Thanks be to God for what He has done!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 4-5, Luke 23:1-25

May 6, 2021

THE POWER OF WISDOM

Readings for today: 1 Kings 4-5, Luke 23:1-25

“At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I shall give you." (1 Kings 3:5)

Put yourself in Solomon’s shoes as you think about the readings from yesterday and today. You have a glorious vision of God. He literally bends the heavens to come down and enter your dreams as you sleep. He says to you, “What shall I give to you?” “What is it you want?” “Tell me your heart’s desire and I will make it happen.” What would you say? How would you respond? What would you ask for?

Don’t let yourself respond too quickly. Let the Spirit search your heart as you ponder and reflect. As you think, let me encourage you to get in touch with your deepest fears. We all have them. Secret fears we harbor in our hearts that we spend a lifetime running from or protecting ourselves from. So much of how we choose to live our lives is in response to primordial fears we all carry inside. Fear of failure. Fear of not having enough. Fear of being unsafe. Fears for our children or our children’s children. Fear of insignificance. Fear of disease. Fear of death. What do you think Solomon was afraid of? As a young man, he had just inherited a powerful kingdom in the Middle East. (Not the safest or calmest place in the world, especially back then!) He was surrounded by powerful neighbors with powerful armies. He faced enemies both at home and abroad. As fabulous as his wealth was, it was fleeting in the ancient world. It could be here today and gone tomorrow. There was no FCC to guarantee his money. His people were looking to him for guidance and wisdom. What if he failed? What if he couldn’t live up to his father’s incredible legacy? All eyes turned to him as he ascended the throne. Would he be able to hold it? Would he preside over a period of peace and prosperity or would the nation crumble under his leadership? What if famine struck? What if the rains didn’t come? What if harvests failed? Plagues struck his livestock? So much responsibility at such a young age!

I imagine Solomon’s dreams were often filled with anxiety and fear. The pressure to perform had to be enormous. So when the Lord came to him with this question - “What shall I give to you?” - Solomon responds from the depths of his heart. “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?” (1 Kings 3:9) Centuries later, a man named James would encourage God’s people to pray a similar prayer. “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” (James 1:5) It’s a potent prayer. Transcending time and place and circumstance. Solomon is clearly not simply focused on the present or even the short-term. He knows the challenges he will face. He knows the years will weigh heavy. He knows there will be trials and tribulations and struggles and heartache. He knows all of this and so he asks for divine wisdom to make good decisions for the sake of God’s people. How selfless! How humble! How insightful!

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus teaches His disciples, saying, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” (Matthew 7:7) Isn’t that amazing? Essentially, Jesus is asking his disciples the same question He once asked Solomon. What is it you want? Ask and I will give it to you! Seek it out and I will show it to you! Be persistant in prayer and I will open the door for you. I will let you into my presence. I will answer all your questions. I will meet all your needs. I will give you what your heart desires.

Wait a minute, you say! That cannot be true! We've all prayed lots of prayers that were never answered! We've all prayed lots of prayers that just seemed to bounce off the ceiling! We've all prayed lots of prayers and gotten the silent treatment - so we thought - from the Lord. So what's really going on here? What's Jesus really saying?

Jesus is no genie. We're not Aladdin with a magic lamp. Expressing to God our deepest desires and deepest needs is not the same as making three wishes! God probes the deepest recesses of our hearts. Psalm 42:7 describes it like this, "Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me." The Apostle Paul says it like this in Romans 8:26-27, "For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." This is why Paul can say with confidence that God works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose! Because God responds to the deepest needs of the human heart. The needs we can't give voice to. The needs we don't want to admit to. The needs are most afraid to express.

The most amazing thing about Solomon is that he's in touch with his needs. He knows he is weak. He knows he is young. He knows he is immature. He knows he is unable to carry the burden that has been placed on his shoulders. He acknowledges all of this and his prayer therefore comes from that deep place within as he asks for divine wisdom to bear up under the challenges that will come. And God answers his prayers. "And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore,"(1 Kings 4:29) Are you in touch with your deepest needs? Have you spent time reflecting on your fears? Have you come face to face with your failure? Do you acknowledge your weakness and insignificance and are you willing to bring those needs before God? This, friends, is prayer. Humble. Heartfelt. Authentic. Real. Honest to goodness prayer. And such prayers God will NEVER dismiss or despise! Thanks be to God!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 6-7, Luke 23:26-43

May 7, 2021

BUILDING WITH GOD

Readings for today: 1 Kings 6-7, Luke 23:26-43

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who labor, labor in vain. Unless the Lord establishes our steps, we will stumble and fall. Unless the Lord has commissioned our work, it will fall apart. Unless the Lord is with us, our ways can never be pure.

I think about this Psalm each year when I hit these chapters describing the ambitious building projects Solomon undertook. He spends seven years building the Temple of God. The glorious building that would become the beating heart of Israel for generations. Then he spends thirteen years building his own house which includes these different halls where he will conduct the business of the nation. The people labor for twenty long years to bring Solomon's vision to pass. It is a mighty work. It is a hard work. On some level it is the Lord's work. It would never have come to pass without the Lord's resources and the Lord's gifts and the Lord's blessing.

Reading this passage always causes me to wonder…what work is God doing in my life? What "house" has He called my to build? I distinctly remember a period of time in my own life where I made my own plans. I tried to build my own house without the Lord's blessing. I remember my mentor, Steve Hayner, telling me, "Doug, I want you to remember something as you go to Wisconsin. You are not going to plant a church. You are going to get involved in what God is doing. Whatever church comes out of it will simply be a byproduct of you joining the Lord in His work in your city. Don't ever forget this!" Unfortunately, that's exactly what I did. Steve was trying to keep me from making a massive mistake. He was trying to keep me from putting the cart before the horse. From getting out in front of God. But in my arrogance and pride, I thought I had it figured out. My way was pure in my eyes. How could it get any more pure than planting a church for Jesus? My heart had already put together a plan but I failed to grasp that it would be the Lord who would establish my steps. And when it came time for the Lord to weigh my spirit, I was found wanting.

It is so easy for us to fall into this trap. To "assume" because we are doing God's work. Because we are engaged in ministry. Because we are taking care of our families. Because we are having success. Because everything we touch turns to gold that somehow God must be pleased. So we keep making plans. We keep dreaming dreams. We keep doing our thing and we forget all about God. We rarely consult Him. We rarely ask Him what He thinks. We rarely bring our plans before the Lord in prayer. Except when things go wrong, of course! When we run into barriers. Roadblocks. Failure. Then we cry out to God. What happened? Why me? What went wrong.

There's a wonderful spiritual practice called the daily examen. It is the simple practice of bringing the details of our day before the Lord morning and night. Each morning when we wake up, we take our schedule of activities to God in prayer. We pay close attention to our hearts as we do. What makes us anxious today? What brings us peace? What are we excited about? What causes us fear? As we bring those things to God, we ask Him to bring consolation. To lead and guide us. To give us wisdom. And then at the end of each day, we repeat the exercise as we look back. What went well? What was hard? Where did we sense God's abiding presence? Where did He feel absent? What did we learn? It doesn't take that long and yet it can make a huge difference in helping us understand the difference between asking God for His plan or asking God to bless our plan for our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 8-9, Luke 23:44-56

May 8, 2021

THE REALITY OF GOD

Readings for today: 1 Kings 8-9, Luke 23:44-56

"And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord." (1 Kings 8:10-11)

The Christian faith is more than a philosophical idea. It's more than a code of ethics. More than a list of moral rules and regulations. At its most fundamental level, it is an encounter with the Living God. The Maker of heaven and earth. The Lord of the universe. Our God is not made with human hands. He is not a cultural artifact. He is no empty idol. He is not make believe. He is no fantasy or fairy tale. He is no myth. He exists. He is real. In fact, He IS existence. He IS reality. More elementary than any quark or boson. More fundamental than any atom or protein. More foundational than any building block of life. Without Him, creation goes dark. The world grows cold. The universe collapses in on itself. Life shrivels up and dies.

Don't rush by what's taking place in our reading today. God is literally making His dwelling place on earth. God is literally showing up and showing out at the dedication of His Temple. His Holy place. A cloud descends. The glory of the Lord fills the Temple. The priests drop to their knees in wonder and awe. Solomon stands up to pray. He does so in full confidence that the One he addresses is actually present. He prays with the sure and certain knowledge that God sees and God hears and God responds to the heart cries of His people. "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart…" (1 Kings 8:22-23) There is only One God. All other gods are myths and legends. There is only One True God. All other gods are falsehoods and lies. There is only One True and Faithful God. All other gods are capricious and arbitrary and undependable. There is only One True and Faithful and Loving God. All other gods are selfish and greedy and evil. Solomon is making a statement here. A statement based on reality. A statement based on history. A statement based on the record of interactions between his God and his people.

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place. And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive." (1 Kings 8:27-30)

The Christian faith is the only faith whose God actually descends to earth. The Christian faith is the only faith whose God condescends to us. Speaks to us in language we can understand. Meets us where we are in the midst of our broken and messed up lives. For the ancient Israelites, God appeared as a glory cloud filling the Temple. For the first century Israelites, God appeared in the Person of Jesus Christ. His glory contained in a human being. His divine nature joined with a human nature, co-mingled in some mysterious way and yet distinct. For 21st century believers, God appears in the Person of the Holy Spirit. Indwelling the heart of each believer. Filling us with His glory so that we might bear it out to the world. As such, we become living testimonies to the reality of God. We are living stones

being built into living temples so that those who do not yet know God might meet Him as He reveals Himself through us.

Will God indeed dwell on earth? It's a crazy idea. Will God indeed dwell in us? Even crazier. Heaven and earth cannot contain Him and yet He lives in you. He lives in me. He will never leave us. He will never forsake us. He will never abandon us. He keeps His promises. He keeps His covenant. His love is steadfast and faithful and true. So walk before Him with all your heart today, friends! And know there is never a single moment when you walk alone!

Readings for tomorrow: None

May 10, 2021

THE LOVE OF MONEY

Readings for today: 1 Kings 10-14, Luke 24:1-35

“Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the Lord?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.” (Proverbs 30:8-9)

We tend to think of wealth as a blessing from God. We rejoice when our ship comes in. We are thankful to live in beautiful homes. Drive nice cars. Take nice vacations. Build plenty of wealth to retire on and enjoy the twilight years of life. What we fail to consider is the very real spiritual dangers that accompany such wealth.

Solomon was fabulously wealthy. During his reign, Israel enjoyed a period of great peace and prosperity. The economy was strong. Unemployment was down. Silver was so plentiful it ceased to hold any value. His annual income was astronomical. 666 talents of gold equals almost 40,000 pounds of gold each year. An ounce of gold on the current market is almost $1,300 dollars and Solomon was bringing in 640,000 ounces of gold each year! In today’s numbers, his annual income would run into the hundreds of millions. Incredible! No wonder he overlaid everything with gold! No wonder he sat on an ivory throne! But with all that wealth came temptation. The temptation to become self-sufficient. The temptation to become self-reliant. The temptation to forget God as the One from whom all blessings flow. And that’s exactly what happened. Solomon forgot God. Influenced by his foreign wives, he began building shrines to different gods. Trusting in his own strength, he failed to see the danger before it was too late. Unlike his father David, there is no indication in Scripture that Solomon ever repented of his sin. And though he finished his reign in relative peace, the nation would fracture after his son came to the throne.

“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.” (1 Timothy 6:10) It is often said that money itself is not evil but only the love of money. That is true. However, we are all sinners so when you place money in our hands, we naturally tend to fall in love with it. We simply can’t help ourselves. Our hearts - without Christ - are enslaved to our passions. The simple truth is we always want more. We always crave more. We all have an insatiable hunger inside us that is never satisfied.

Now consider where I live. Douglas County routinely ranks among the wealthiest counties in the country. The average household income is well above six figures. This places us in the top tenth of a percent of the world’s wealthiest people. Furthermore, when one considers the broad sweep of human history, we are richer than some of the greatest kings and queens the world has ever known. And while there are great blessings that come with such wealth, we have to acknowledge there is also great spiritual danger. We have a tendency to forget God. We have a tendency to be self-reliant. Self-sufficient. Is it any wonder then that our rates of addiction, depression, anxiety, fear, and suicide continue to climb? In our “affluenza”, we have lost sight of God. Our only hope is to repent and turn back to Him. To find our satisfaction only in Christ and be set free from the ravenous hunger that lurks deep inside. To sacrificially and generously give away our wealth so that it loosens its grip on us. We must heed the words of Jesus and seek to store up treasures in heaven for where our treasure is, so our heart will be also.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 15-16, Luke 24:36-53

May 11, 2021

FEAR. DOUBT, AND FAITH

Readings for today: 1 Kings 15-16, Luke 24:36-53

I love Jesus. I love how Jesus is not afraid to meet us in the midst of our fear. In the midst of our confusion. In the midst of our doubts. In the midst of real life. In our passage today, the Risen Christ is appearing to His disciples. He is making Himself known in all His resurrected glory. And the initial reaction of the disciples is disbelief. They simply cannot wrap their hearts and minds around the fact that Jesus is alive. They cannot believe their eyes. They cannot believe their ears. So Jesus encourages them to touch Him with their hands. “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” (Luke 24:39) He encourages them to watch Him eat. “And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them.” (Luke 24:41-43) Jesus knows resurrection was the last thing anyone expected. Jesus knows they have no categories to help them process His rising from the grave. Jesus knows their weaknesses. Jesus knows their doubts. Jesus knows their fears. Jesus knows their disbelief. And rather than judge them or condemn them or dismiss them, He meets them where they are and helps them understand.

Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. His compassion is the same. His love is the same. His tenderness is the same. He meets us in our fear. He meets us in our doubt. He meets us in our weakness. We are such fragile creatures. Yes, we are made in God’s image but that image has become defaced and deformed by sin. Yes, we are beloved by God but we struggle to accept that love, thinking it must be earned before it will be given. Yes, by faith we are adopted as God’s children but we wrestle to accept our new identity in Christ. It seems to good to be true. The grace of God too amazing. The love of God too wonderful. The idea of God dying and rising again in order to secure our salvation too mysterious for us to ever truly understand. So we doubt. We disbelieve. We wonder, down deep, if it’s all just a myth or fairy tale or something we made up to make ourselves feel better.

Thankfully Jesus is faithful. He meets us where we are. When you think about it, God could have saved us in any number of ways. God could have made Himself known through a vapor trail in the sky or some other miraculous manifestation of His presence. In fact, the Old Testament is littered with such appearances. The problem is we struggle to trust miracles. We struggle to trust anything outside our own experience. This is why God made Himself known in Jesus Christ. All of us can understand babies. All of us know what it’s like to grow up. All of us know what it’s like to experience hunger and thirst and heat and cold and pain and suffering. And God experienced it all and more. He came to be with us. He came to meet us. He came to help us cast out our fears, settle our doubts, answer our questions. We can actually walk where He walked. We can see the places He’s been. We know where He died. We can see where His body lay. These are facts of history not stories we make up. They are living reminders that the faith we cling to is not just another human philosophy or code of ethics. It isn’t based on rational thought or warm feelings. It is based on a real, living, breathing Person who became one of us.

So come to Jesus. Bring all your doubts and fears and anxieties and hopes and dreams and questions and frustrations. Jesus is not afraid of these things. He’s a big boy and can handle it! Let Him show you the wounds in His hands and feet and side. Let Him show you the proof of His great love.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 17-18, John 1

May 12, 2021

ELIJAH

Readings for today: 1 Kings 17-18, John 1

Elijah is one of my favorites. A powerful prophet in Israel. A man with the courage to stand up to kings and queens. A man of conviction who stakes his life on God. A man who has the faith to perform miracles. A man who literally lives not by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. But what makes Elijah truly great is his humility. He knows he is not the hero of this story. He knows he is not the center of attention. He knows his job is to point people beyond himself to the God he serves. The God who desires to make Himself known. The God who reveals Himself to those who love Him and fear Him.

Elijah is such a man. He's a man who loves and fears God. Why else would he leave his home and family and community to obey when God tells him to live by a brook and be fed by ravens? Why else would he leave Israel to go to Sidon and live with a Gentile widow on the brink of starvation in a town called Zarephath? Why else would he have the faith to challenge the widow to trust the Lord for her food and for the life of her son? Why else would he leave Sidon and return to Israel to confront Ahab and Jezebel? Why else would he call for a public demonstration of divine power on the top of Mount Carmel in front of all Israel? Why else would he mock and taunt the prophets of Baal as they cried out to their god? "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." (1 Kings 18:27) Why else would he leave no doubt by drenching his own sacrifice with water three times before calling out to God? Elijah is truly a man of deep and abiding and courageous faith.

The temptation, of course, is to assume Elijah was graced with special powers. It's tempting to assume Elijah had some kind of special access to God not available to regular men and women. It's tempting to think we could never live like Elijah. Believe like Elijah. Do the things Elijah did or say the things Elijah said. But nothing could be further from the truth. I've met men and women just like Elijah. No one knows their names. They will never go viral on social media. They will never be interviewed on cable news. They are men and women of deep faith just like Elijah who go to unnamed villages all over the Horn of Africa. Places that don't show up on any map. God uses them to perform miracles of healing and resurrection and exorcism. They pray for rain and the rain comes. They pray for an end to pestilence and it ends. Their crops and herds flourish as God blesses them with His divine favor. Like Elijah before them, they call the people they serve to faith. They call them to place their trust in Jesus Christ rather than the pagan or tribal gods they worshipped before. It's truly amazing.

And it begs the question…what about us? What does it look like to have the faith of Elijah in our lives? Here in America? In a place like Douglas County? Where we are blessed with so much and therefore are tempted to trust God with so little? First and foremost, I think it requires us to build space in our lives for quiet reflection. To sit in silence before the Lord and allow the noise of our lives to die down so we can hear from Him. I think it means creating unhurried space in our lives where we are not rushed. God is not on a clock. We aren't expecting God to move according to our schedule. Second, I think it means cultivating a courageous spirit of obedience. Bravely walking in His ways in the midst of an increasingly hostile world. Faithfully clinging to the wisdom of God which will appear as foolishness to those around us. Much like John the Baptist - who is Elijah reborn according to Scripture - we too must be willing to "zig" when the world says "zag." We must be willing to stick to the narrow path while the rest of the world chooses the six-lane highway. We must be willing to hold fast to our convictions in world where such convictions are now considered old-fashioned, out of date, even

dangerous and oppressive. Ultimately, like Elijah. Like John the Baptist. Like so many saints who have gone before us. We must be willing to be a “lone voice crying in the wilderness…prepare the way of the Lord!”

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 19-20, John 2

May 13, 2021

GOD STILL SPEAKS

Readings for today: 1 Kings 19-20, John 2

I love the story of Elijah. I love his faithfulness. I love his courage. I love his passion. I love his heart. What makes Elijah so great was his ability to listen to the Word of the Lord. His sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. His humble submission and willingness to sit in God's presence in silence. As I mentioned in yesterday's devotional, there was nothing great about Elijah. Nothing unusual. Nothing out of the ordinary. He was simply a human being. A human being like any other human being. A man just like any other man. But he was called to play a specific role in God's Kingdom and the life of Israel.

Elijah was a prophet. A man set apart to hear the Word of the Lord and deliver it to God's people. The Word of the Lord came to Elijah, telling him there would be a famine in the land and to go and live by a brook where the ravens would feed him. When the brook ran dry, the Word of the Lord came to Elijah and told him to go to Zarephath where a widow would care for him. When the widow's son died, the Word of the Lord came through Elijah to raise him the dead. The Word of Lord challenged Elijah to risk his life and confront King Arab. Queen Jezebel. 450 prophets of Baal. After a miraculous victory, the Word of the Lord opened Elijah's eyes to see the coming rain. When Elijah ran for his life, the Word of the Lord again came to him bringing comfort and peace.

This one of my favorite stories in all of Scripture. Elijah falling into a deep depression after his greatest victory. He must have wondered to himself, "What more can I do? I literally just called down fire from heaven and still it is not enough to bring Ahab and Jezebel to repentance." But once again, Elijah leaned on the Word of the Lord. He traveled to the mountain of God. The same mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments. The same mountain where God revealed Himself to Israel in fire and smoke and great darkness. On this same mountain, Elijah meets with God. The wind howls. The earth shakes. Fire breaks out. Finally there is silence. God speaks. Whispering His will to His beloved prophet.

I have no idea what life is like for you right now. Perhaps you are feeling buffeted by hurricane force winds. Perhaps you feel the earth giving way beneath your feet. Perhaps fire has broken out threatening to burn everything you've built to the ground. Maybe you've just won an incredible victory. Achieved a lifelong dream. Found professional success. Perhaps you're depressed and lonely and anxious and afraid. Maybe you're even considering taking your life. Let the story of Elijah encourage you. God is not done with you! He meets you in every season of life! He is with you on the mountaintop when everything is going so well. He is with you in the valleys when it feels like you can barely go on. He is speaking to you. He has some things to say to you. You are His beloved and He will never leave you or forsake you.

How can you tune into what He's saying? You have to do what Elijah did. You have to get quiet. You have to build time in your life for silence. Turn off the devices. Turn off the television. Turn off the ringer on your phone. Get by yourself. Find a spot to be alone. It could be in your home. Out on a trail somewhere. Even in your car. God speaks to us in whispers. He will not raise His voice to compete with the chaos of our lives. He will not talk over us. He will not interrupt us. He simply will wait until we are ready. Wait until we slow down. Wait until we get quiet. God wants you to hear Him today. He wants you to hear the things He has to say. Listen, friends. Give Him the space to speak and you will find the peace and comfort your soul craves.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 21-22, John 3:1-21

May 15, 2021

Streams in the Desert

Readings for today: 2 Kings 1-3, John 3:22-36

On one of my many trips to Ethiopia, we met with a group of denominational leaders in the southern region of the country to launch a new regional training center. The people in that part of Ethiopia are beautiful and industrious. They engage in backbreaking work every single day. They are mainly pastoralists who live a semi-nomadic lifestyle depending on the rains. They herd cattle and sheep. They raise camels and goats. They grow mouthwatering fruit. However, they are located pretty far from Addis Ababa which is the nation's capital. Because of the distance, they do not get a lot of aid from their government or even their denominational leadership. In addition, their remote location and nomadic lifestyle makes it difficult for them to connect with NGO's and Christian non-profits. Different church groups have come and gone over the years but the challenges are too much for them to overcome.

The leaders we met with that day shared all this with us as we talked about what a partnership might look like moving forward. One of them referenced the story we read today from 2 Kings 3. He told us it felt like they've been wandering in the wilderness for years with no water. Their people were tired. Their churches struggling. What little resources they did have were long gone. He said they had been praying for God to do what He did for Elisha and the kings. Fill the dry streambeds with water. Flood their valley and their land and their churches with resources so they could help their people and bring them to Christ. As he listened to us outline the details of our partnership agreement, tears came into his eyes. He let us know he truly believed the Petros Network was an answer to their prayers and he has been right. The partnership God led us to forge with these brothers and sisters is leading to incredible fruit as hundreds of churches are now being planted and thousands brought to Christ. Further plans for education and clean water access are also being made as we continue to pray for God to fill the dry steams with Living Water!

Where do you need Living Water in your life? The prophet Jeremiah warns us not to try to quench our thirst in the broken cisterns we tend to make for ourselves. Instead we are to quench our thirst in Christ! We are to come to Him and let Him refresh and renew us every day. Too often, we make our plans just like the kings did. We do not consult God. We do what we think is best. And we end up in the desert. Wandering in the wilderness. Struggling to survive. Today's passage calls us to "inquire of the Lord" when we find ourselves in those spaces. To seek His will through His Word and in prayer. To engage in worship as we seek His presence. Intimacy with Christ is the only thing that can truly quench our thirst and satisfy our hunger. His abiding Presence is the source of Life itself and our connection to Him is vital if we are to flourish.

Engage in self-examination today. Ask Christ to reveal to you those areas of your life where you are trusting in your own wisdom and strength. Engage in prayer today. Ask Christ to give you a hunger and thirst for His Presence. Meditate on God's Word today. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal His will to you through the text. Most of all, trust Christ is for you. He loves you. Christ longs to become a spring inside you eternally flowing with Living Water so you will never be thirsty again.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 4-9, John 4

May 17, 2021

OPEN OUR EYES

Readings for today: 2 Kings 4-9, John 4

I have heard it said that the world has yet to see the power that would be unleashed through one man or woman who's sold out to God. I disagree. I think we see such power all the time. Certainly in Scripture. Take the story of Elisha for instance. The dude is a one-man wrecking crew when it comes to Syria. Ben-hadad wanted to destroy Israel. Invaded time after time. He had the best generals. Mighty men of valor like Naaman. He had all the resources. All the men. All the horses and chariots. The odds were surely in his favor. But Israel had one advantage...Elisha. A man who loved God with all his heart. From Elisha's deep faith sprung wisdom and insight and even prophetic utterances. He thwarted the plans of Ben-hadad to such an extent that his counselors believed it was like Elisha was hanging out in Ben-hadad's bedroom!

Elisha posed such a great threat that Ben-hadad sent his entire army on a seek and destroy mission. Find him. Kill him. Destroy whatever city is giving him refuge. So Elisha and his servant wake up one morning only to see the Syrian army arrayed before them in all its might. It must have been an intimidating sight. The servant is immediately afraid. What will we do? How will we survive? But Elisha doesn't miss a beat. He asks God to open the eyes of his servant so that he can see what Elisha sees. Horses. Chariots. The mountains ringed with fire from the army of the Lord.

This is one of my favorite stories in all of Scripture because of the reminder that though my circumstances may seem bleak. Though I may undergo all kinds of trials and tribulations. Though I may suffer and struggle and hurt. Though the enemy wage war against me. Though the government or culture or society grow increasingly hostile to the gospel. No matter what may come, my adversaries - as numerous as they may be - are no match for the armies of the Lord! His sovereign hand continues to lead and guide and protect. His power cannot be measured. His wisdom cannot be fathomed. And if I will simply lift my eyes above the hills, I will see where my true help comes! (Psalm 121)

"Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all." (Ecclesiastes 9:11) I frequently find myself in positions where I am weak. I have no power. No authority. I am not strong or swift or wise or wealthy. In those moments, I am tempted to despair. And that's when God has me right where He wants me! God does His best work when I come to the end of myself. God does His greatest work when I get out of the way. God is at His most glorious when I am weak and afraid and lonely and have nowhere else to turn. All I have to do is open my eyes. See the power He has brought to bear. Sit back and watch Him go to work. Trust Him for the victory.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 10-11, John 5:1-29

May 19, 2021

THE STEADFAST LOVE OF GOD

Readings for today: 2 Kings 12-14, John 5:30-47

Every time I read through the histories of the Old Testament, I am struck by the same tragic pattern that seems forever stuck on repeat. Humanity has been singing the same sad song since the Fall. Cain and Abel. The state of the world just before the Flood. Tower of Babel. The time of the Judges. Left to her own devices, humanity inevitably descends into godlessness. Violence. Suffering. Pain. God grieves over all He has made and executes His righteous judgment. Humanity drowns. Languages are confused. People scatter. Enemies oppress and enslave. God using all of it to bring humanity to her knees. To bring humanity to repentance. To bring humanity back to a right relationship with Him.

The time of the kings is no different. Good kings turn their hearts towards God and the people are blessed. Evil kings do what is right in their own eyes and the people suffer. God sends prophets like Elijah and Elisha to call them to repentance but they are largely ignored. Finally, God sends judgment. He raises up adversaries both within and without Israel. Rebellion. War. Death. Kings are murdered. Families are decimated. God's righteous wrath over sin on terrible display.

Humanity never changes. No matter how much "progress" we make technologically, scientifically, culturally, intellectually, you name it…we remain morally depraved. Our hearts are hard towards God. Our necks are stiff. We refuse to bend the knee. The world around us is still awash in injustice and violence. We simply cannot escape our corrupt human nature. Our will to power. Our lust for pleasure. Our craving for wealth. The Bible's diagnosis is incisive and true. "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." (Romans 3:10-12) And just when it seems like all is lost. The end is near. All hope is gone. God relents. God reaches out. God intervenes once more.

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

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 15-17, John 6:1-21

May 20, 2021

WE ARE WHAT WE WORSHIP

Readings for today: 2 Kings 15-17, John 6:1-21

There are lots of forces in this world that shape a person. Genetics. The environment we grow up in. Family of origin. Socio-economic status. Level of education. Exposure to social media. Peer pressure. But there is one force we often neglect and that is worship. Worship has the power to shape us in profound ways. It can form and de-form. It can build up or tear down. It can purify or corrupt. It can straighten out or warp how we think about God, ourselves, and the world around us.

Throughout the books of the Kings and Chronicles, we read about the high places Israel refused to tear down. Sacred shrines where they often worshipped false gods. Baal. Asherah. Molech. The list goes on and on. Some of these false gods demanded child sacrifice. Some of them demanded sexual orgies. Some of them demanded cutting and self-harm like we saw with the prophets of Baal who Elijah confronted a few chapters back. These false gods and goddesses were capricious and arbitrary. They placed no value on human life. They didn't care at all about the people. And this makes perfect sense because they were not real. They were simply a projection of humanity's worst fears and corrupt fantasies.

Some might be tempted to assume that because such gods are not real that there can be no harm in worshipping them. Not true! Listen to what God says in 2 Kings 17:15, "The people of Israel went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them that they should not do like them." You see, we can't help ourselves. We become what we worship. When we worship something false, we become false. When we worship something evil, we justify all kinds of evil in our own hearts. When we worship like the pagan nations of the earth, we lost sight of our high calling to be a "chosen people, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people for God's own possession."

A few years back I was talking to a friend of mine who grew up Hindu in India. He now lives and works in the U.S. and is functionally atheist. Over dinner, we talked about a wide range of topics. The state of the world today. The value of human life. Our goals and dreams and aspirations. What emerged was two very different visions of the "good life." For my friend, human life held no intrinsic value in itself but only as one pursued "dharma" or the right way of living. Good and evil were relative terms depending on one's station in life. The goal of existence is to leave the material body behind to join with Brahman. These beliefs shaped how my friend engaged politically, socially, and culturally. They shaped who he voted for, what public policies he supported, and how he perceived others. Especially those who disagreed with him. They even shaped how he understood himself on some level.

After listening to my friend, I had the opportunity to share what I believed. I shared with him my understanding that all human life has intrinsic value because every human being is made in the image of God. I shared with him how good and evil are immutable categories to a great extent because they are defined by God Himself. Finally, I shared with him how much God loves the world and all that is in it. In fact, He loved it so much He gave His life for it so the goal cannot be to escape this world but to redeem it. These beliefs shape how I engage politically, socially, and culturally. They shape who I vote for, what public policy I support, and how I perceive others. Especially those who disagree with me. They even shape how I understand myself on some level.

It was a rich and respectful conversation that validated a fundamental principle for me…we are what we worship. What we believe about God shapes everything. It shapes how we think about ourselves. It shapes how we think about others. It shapes how we think about the world. So who do you worship? Is it the God who revealed Himself fully and completely in Jesus Christ? Or is it a god of your own making? Is it the God who loved and valued you so much, He gave His only begotten Son for you? Or is it a false god on whom you project all your fears and fantasies? If we worship false gods, we become false ourselves. If we worship the true God, we become more truly ourselves. The people God created and calls us to be!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 18-19, John 6:22-59

May 21, 2021

REVIVAL

Readings for today: 2 Kings 18-19, John 6:22-59

“The world has yet to see what God will do with a man fully consecrated to Him.” - Dwight L. Moody

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

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

I know a lot of Christians who pray for revival. They pray regularly for a fresh movement of God’s Spirit through their lives, churches, communities, and their nation. If that describes you...and I hope it does!...I want to encourage you to follow Hezekiah’s example. Don’t wait! Don’t delay! Simply begin to seek God’s face right where you are! If you are a mother or father, seek God’s heart for your home and children. If you are a student or employee, seek God’s heart for your school or place of work. If you are a business, community, or church leader, seek God’s heart for the people you serve. If you are a

national leader, seek God's heart for your country. The secret to Hezekiah's success had very little to do with his authority as king. It had everything to do with his heart for God.

I want to challenge you to pray this prayer or one like it for yourself. "Father, I want to do what is good and right and faithful before You. Every work I undertake at my job, in my home, with my friends, at my church I do in accordance with Your commands. I am seeking You, Father. I want to serve you with all my heart. May everything I do prosper in order to bring glory to Your great name." Now you try. Insert your name. Insert your situation. Insert your circumstances and seek God with all your heart. Put Him to the test. Call on His faithfulness. I trust you will be amazed at what takes place.

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

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 20-22, John 6:60-71

May 22, 2021

LEADERSHIP

Readings for today: 2 Kings 20-22, John 6:60-71

Everything rises and falls on leadership. Several years ago, I spent time in Rwanda. One of the most impactful moments of my trip was visiting the National Genocide Museum in Kigali. Standing at the mass graves of over 250,000 people was sobering to say the least. In all, the genocide claimed the lives of over 1.1 million people. Most of whom were killed by friends, neighbors, even family members. A national trauma survey by UNICEF estimates that 80% of Rwandan children experienced a death in their family in 1994. 70% witnessed someone being killed or injured and 90% believed they would die. How could such a thing happen? Leadership. An unholy alliance between the racist government of Juvenal Habyarimana and the "Hutu Power" promoting media run by Hassan Ngeze combined to create the conditions whereby such a horror was possible. Aided and abetted by the French government who supplied arms and training, the government worked hard to gain control over the country as they prepared to implement their own version of Hitler's "Final Solution." As the international community turned their backs on Rwanda, evil was allowed to flourish and the results were beyond tragic.

Such leaders are not unknown in the Scriptures. Manasseh reigned for over fifty years and in that time, "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel." (2 Kings 21:2) He reinstituted pagan idol worship, rebuilding the high places his father had torn down. He defiled the Temple by setting up altars to foreign gods. "He burned his sons as an offering in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and used fortune-telling and omens and sorcery, and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger." (2 Chronicles 33:6) In short, he did more evil is reign than all the kings who had come before him and after he died, his son Ammon continued in his ways. It was the darkest period in the southern kingdom's history and the people were led astray. Everything rises and falls on leadership.

All of us are leaders. Leadership begins with self. Learning to control our thoughts and desire and channel them to godly action. Leadership continues in the family. We lead our families as fathers and mothers and teach our children to walk in God's ways. We lead at work as we use our influence - whether supervisor or employee - to impact the health and well-being of others and our organization's future. We lead at church by the way we worship and serve our brothers and sisters in Christ. We lead in every sphere of life so here's the critical question...what kind of leader are you? When the final analysis is in and the impact of your life is measured, will it be for good or for evil in the eyes of the Lord?

Everything rises and falls on leadership. How are you doing?

Readings for tomorrow: None

May 24, 2021

SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

Readings for today: 2 Kings 23-25, 1 Chronicles 1-2, John 7:1-52

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.

Those words always run through my head when we read about the final days of the Kingdom of Judah and the end of Zedekiah. It's a pretty gory picture. The King of Babylon captures him as he tries to escape the destruction of Jerusalem. Makes him watch while he slaughters his sons and then puts out his eyes. It's that last detail that I find myself pondering yet again. It's just a painful reminder of how utterly broken Zedekiah had become. I also wonder if there wasn't something more symbolic at work as well. After all, Zedekiah had been spiritually blind for years. He reigned for eleven years in Jerusalem but did evil in the sight of the Lord. He did not honor God. He did not walk in God's ways or according to God's commands. He disdained the Word of the Lord and rejected the worship of the Lord. So perhaps his physical blindness is simply the logical consequence of his spiritual blindness and that's why it's mentioned more than once in Scripture. (See Jeremiah 39 and 52)

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 3-5, John 7:53-8:11

May 25, 2021

CONNECTION

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 3-5, John 7:53-8:11

There is an old story about a pastor who went to visit a parishioner whom he had not seen for a while. It was a cold morning so when the pastor showed up, the man had the coffee hot and a roaring fire going in the fireplace. They both sat down and the pastor asked how things were going. The conversation ranged from work to family to health to life in general. The man was doing well. Finally, the conversation got around to faith. And the man started to talk about how he didn't need the church to worship God. He was doing just fine on his own. Praying. Reading the Bible. Walking through the woods. As he spoke, the pastor didn't judge. Didn't condemn. He simply reached over and with the tongs, took a coal out of the fireplace and placed it on the hearth. As the man spoke, his eyes kept going to the coal. At first it burned nice and hot but as time went on it began to grow cold. Having lost it's connection to the fire, it eventually burned out.

Life with God is like that. Life with community is like that. I cannot tell you the number of people I have spoken with over the years who have experienced this loss of connection. Their lives are so busy. Their feelings of isolation and loneliness so strong. The pain they carry is so great and my heart breaks for them. So many of them have nowhere to turn. Their relationship with God has grown cold. Their connection to community is tenuous at best. They have no one to call when they are in crisis. No one to lean on when times get tough…as they always do.

God designed us for relationship. We are made in His image after all and He exists eternally in relationship with Himself - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As such, we have a deep longing in our souls for connection. Connection with God. Connection with each other. It's why one of the worst forms of punishment is solitary confinement. It's just not good for us to be alone. It's why I've learned to love reading through the genealogies in the Bible. It reminds me I am surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Men and women of God who have walked this road before me. People with a story to share. Each name represents a person and each person represents a connection to God and to the people of God and ultimately, to the promises of God. Maybe it's David, the man after God's own heart. Maybe it's Jabez who prayed to God for protection. Maybe it's Judah who experienced the grace of God covering His sin. Over and over again, these names tell a story. Our story. This is our family history, friends. Our family tree. And as we tap into this story, we experience a deep connection to the One who made us. The One who loves us. The One who has come to rescue us. Even Jesus Christ.

As we emerge from the isolation of this past year, how are you intentionally rebuilding your connection to God and to His people? How are you helping others rebuild their connection? It's not easy. Especially when we've gotten used to being apart. It takes hard work and intentionality to re-introduce ourselves to each other. To shake another person's hand or give someone a hug. It may be uncomfortable at first as we exercise relational muscles that have atrophied over the last year. But it's absolutely essential if we are to thrive moving forward. So if you don't know where to start, let me recommend four spiritual practices that will help…

Daily Devotional Time: Spend time each day in prayer and reading/reflecting on Scripture. Find fifteen minutes or thirty minutes or an hour just to be with God. Use your commute. Use your lunch hour. Use your break time. Accept God's gracious invitation to spend time with Him.

Weekly Gathered Worship : Find a local church and plug in. Gather physically when you are able with God's people for worship each week. Don't approach it as a consumer experience (i.e. what did I "get out" of it today) but rather trust God to create a "cascading" effect in your life on a subconscious level through His Spirit as He draws you to Himself.

Join a small group: Find a few Christian friends and start meeting together intentionally for encouragement, vulnerable sharing, and accountability. Pray for each other. Talk to each other. Intentionally do life together. Will it be messy? Yep. Pursuing authentic relationships always is because we are all "authentically" sinful! :-) Press through the difficult conversations. Practice forgiveness and grace. You will find deep connection as you do.

Find a place to serve God's Kingdom: Don't just build this "connection" for yourself! Find a way to share it with others. As you go out to serve Christ and His Kingdom, you will become someone else's point of connection to God and to community. Isn't that awesome? God will use YOU to be His hands and feet in another person's life.

Do these four things over the course of a lifetime and I guarantee...GUARANTEE...you will grow a deep, abiding relationship with Christ and with God's people. Will there be disappointments along the way? Yes. Will you feel hurt at times? Absolutely. Is it easy? Nope. Not in our world. But nothing worth doing is EVER easy and that is particularly true when it comes to the most important relationship in our lives! So place your trust and your hope in Christ and let Him lead you to the abundant life He promises!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 6-7, John 8:12-38

May 27, 2021

GENEALOGY

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 8-10, John 8:39-59

One key verse from today's reading is 1 Chronicles 9:1, "So all Israel was recorded in genealogies, and these are written in the Book of the Kings of Israel. And Judah was taken into exile in Babylon because of their breach of faith." Why are all these names important? Why are the generations laid down with such detail and specificity? Why record Israel according to their respective tribes? What's at stake here? Identity. Connection. History. Even their relationship with God. Israel took their history seriously. They took God's Word seriously. Even after they were carted off to exile in Babylon and were faced with the temptation to intermarry and lose their connection to their past, Israel remained faithful. They knew God had set apart the Levites to serve Him as priests. So the Levites remained set apart even in exile. They knew God had given authority to the tribe of Judah to reign and to rule. So the tribe of Judah continued to serve as princes and leaders for God's people. They knew David and Samuel had set apart certain families as gatekeepers, guardians of the Lord's treasury, etc. So they made sure these families retained those roles. And when Israel finally did return from exile, you see the descendents of these great men and women re-connecting to their glorious past.

Many of us have never been carried into exile. We've not had our identities wiped out. We've not had our history erased. We've not had our connection to our ancestors severed. At the same time, many of us have had this terrible and tragic experience. I think of my Native American friends. Their people lived on this continent for hundreds of years before the arrival of the first European explorers. Their land was stolen. Their tribe forcibly relocated. They were compelled to forgo the key rituals and give up the key rhythms that connected them to their history and their tribal identity. Their stories are terrible and heartbreaking. I think of my African-American friends. Their ancestors were brought over on slave ships across the Atlantic. Their connection to their homeland severed. Their connection to their history erased. Their connection to their past lost. They were given new names. They were forced to take on new identities. They suffered in slavery for hundreds of years. Even after the Civil War, they suffered under intense, systematic economic and political oppression. Their stories are terrible and heartbreaking. Sadly, these stories are all too common no matter where you go in the world today.

It's vital for those of us who have not suffered at the scale of others to humble ourselves and listen to those who have endured tremendous pain and loss. It is important for us to become advocates for them and allies with them in their fight to re-connect to their glorious past. We must pluck up the courage to face the difficult and complex issues that arise as a result. Issues such as national repentence, formal apologies, legal and economic reparations, etc. are not easy to tackle. There are no easy answers here. At the same time, we can look back at events like the restoration of the nation of Israel in 1948 for the inspiration we need to work for a similar restoration for our friends of color who've suffered so much right here at home.

I certainly don't pretend to have all the answers. I'm often overwhelmed when I stop to think about all the complexities involved. But I have to believe as we work for the good of one another. As we refuse to resort to guilt and shame and fear to force change but instead allow faith, hope, and love to be our guide. As we celebrate the history and culture and diversity God has created among human beings on this planet. As we help each other re-connect to something deeper. A deeper identity. A deeper story. A deeper truth. I have to believe God will reveal Himself in that process in a powerful way because this "genealogical impulse" exists within all of us. In a very real sense, Israel's story is our story for all of us can ultimately trace our lineage back to the same common source. Adam and Eve. The first man.

The first woman. Made in the image of God by the hand of God for the glory of God. This is truly our heritage.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 11-13, John 9:1-23

June 21, 2021

God of the Impossible

Readings for today: Nehemiah 1-5, Acts 2:1-41

I just returned home after 24 days in Africa. We hosted four training conferences in four different regions of Uganda and Ethiopia. We trained and interviewed and prayed over 743 indigenous church planters from South Sudan, Uganda, and Ethiopia. 351 of those are brand new church planters who were commissioned and sent out to villages where they have never heard the gospel. These men and women go out as sheep amidst wolves. They contend against very real spiritual forces of evil. They are often persecuted and beaten and imprisoned and threatened with death by witch doctors, Muslim imams, and other followers of pagan, tribal religions. Some even pay the ultimate price for their faithfulness. From a human perspective, the task they face is impossible. The challenges are insurmountable. There is no rational way they can possibly succeed. They have no political power. Very little in the way of worldly wealth. They lack education. And yet God is using them to change the world, one village at a time.

Our God specializes in doing the impossible. Our God loves to show up when the odds are stacked against us. He does His best work when all hope seems lost. Consider the dire straits of the people living in Jerusalem. They had been faithful. They had answered God's call. They had left their lives in Babylon to return home to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple. They had rededicated themselves to living according to God's Law under the leadership of Ezra. But they were still oppressed. Still at the mercy of the enemies who surrounded them. They had no protection. No way of defending themselves. The lack of a city wall was an open invitation to marauders to come in and destroy all they had worked so hard to build. I am sure many requests had been made over the years to the Persian kings to rebuild the city. All had been turned aside. The rebellious reputation of their city was well-known. The Persians purposefully left it in ruins to serve as a deterrent to the region. Decades of royal precedent stood in their way. The sheer size and scope of a potential rebuilding project was overwhelming. The political opposition was powerful and well-connected. In short, a change seemed impossible.

But Nehemiah believed God could do the impossible. So he prayed for the impossible. For days he prayed and fasted and wept before the Lord. He cried out to God on behalf of his people. He cried out to God on behalf of his city. He cried out to God to be faithful to His promises. But Nehemiah didn't just pray for the impossible, he also prepared for the impossible. He prepared for the day when he would be given the opportunity to present his request to the king. He put together a timeline for the project. Made a list of the materials he would need. When Artaxerxes asked him what he needed to make it all happen, he was ready and the king agreed. Finally, Nehemiah didn't just pray for the impossible. He didn't just prepare for the impossible. When the time came, he stepped out in faith to do the impossible. Like Noah building the ark before the rain or Moses stepping into the Red Sea before it parted or the widow of Zeraphath feeding Elijah her last cake before her jars of oil and flour refilled; Nehemiah went forward trusting the hand of the Lord to be upon him. He knew the project would be daunting. He knew the people would get discouraged. He knew the opposition would be fierce. But he never wavered in his faith. He knew God could do the impossible. "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build…" (Nehemiah 2:20)

Jesus once said, "Ask and you will receive." James once said, "You have not because you ask not or you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions." You see, the reason we do not see God do the impossible is often because we do not ask for it or we do not ask for it rightly. We are far too content with our lives. We settle for comfort and security when all the while Jesus is calling us to risk everything for

Kingdom-greatness. The men and women I train have nothing so they rely on God for everything. They pray in expectation for miracles to take place and God answers their prayers. He does the impossible by healing the sick, delivering the demonic, and raising the dead. He does the impossible by converting witch doctors and Muslim imams. Sacred trees are cut down to build church buildings. Mosques become Christian houses of worship. Yes, they suffer. Yes, some of them even die. But they keep their eyes on Christ. They belong to a Kingdom that is not of this world. It's simply incredible to witness. Nehemiah risked it all as well. He gave up the comfort and security of the king's court to take on the impossible task of rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. He prayed in expectation that God would be faithful. He prepared in expectation that God would answer his prayers and change the heart of the king. He took action in expectation that the hand of God would be with him until the project was complete.

God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He's the same over here as He is over in Africa. He's the same today as He was back in Nehemiah's time. He's still the God of the impossible. So what impossible thing are you facing in your life today? What insurmountable challenge is confronting you right now? Are you willing to give it to God? Are you willing to surrender it to God? Are you willing to leave it in God's hands and trust Him with the outcome? Will you commit to pray for the impossible? Prepare for the impossible? And when God calls, step out in faith to do the impossible?

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 6-8, Acts 2:42-3:10

June 22, 2021

Fundamentals

Readings for today: Nehemiah 6-8, Acts 2:42-3:10

I love it when both New and Old Testament passages come together to convey the same eternal message. Today, the people of Israel gather to hear the reading of the Law. They build Ezra a pulpit and he preaches for days. Teaching. Exhorting. Encouraging. Challenging the people to submit their lives to God's Word and live according to His ways. The Levites are there alongside him. Interpreting the Law so God's people can understand and apply it to their lives. It's not a hard sell. The Spirit of God has clearly been at work in the hearts of His people, preparing them for this moment. I love how the Bible describes their reaction…

"And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law." (Neh. 8:3)

"And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground." (Neh. 8:6)

"And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them." (Neh. 8:9-12)

Then I flip over to our New Testament reading. These are some of my favorite verses in all the Bible. It describes the heart of the first church. They've just heard the first Christian sermon ever preached. Miraculously, they each heard it in their own heart language. They were cut to the heart. Thousands were baptized. And then they must have looked at each other and said, "Now what?" There was no history to rely on. No tradition to fall back on. This whole "church" was brand new. At the same time, they were Jews. Their people had been walking with God for ages. They remembered their history. Perhaps Peter's preaching reminded them of Ezra! So they do what's natural for them. They devote themselves to the apostle's teaching. They devote themselves to each other in deep, spiritual fellowship. They share meals together, especially the Lord's Supper. And they pray. They don't need programs. They don't need some big vision. They don't set hairy, audacious goals. They simply commit themselves to the same ancient spiritual disciplines that have always guided God's people.

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." (Acts 2:42-47)

I talk to people all the time who long for a deeper life with God. They always seem to be looking for the silver bullet or some magic formula. They want to know the secret. The key. The one thing that will help them pierce the veil that they believe separates them from experiencing the fullness of God's love. But here's the honest truth. There are no shortcuts. There is no easy five-step process. It requires a life-long obedience in the same direction. It requires a faithful, consistent, daily engagement over the long haul with God's Word and God's people to grow in our faith. Yes, God is always there for us. But He is no cosmic bellhop. Yes, God always loves us. But He is not co-dependent. He doesn't need us in the way we need Him. Yes, God's grace is endless, boundless, and free. But He will not save us from the consequences of our sin. Instead, He promises to use even our pain to grow us into the image of His Son.

Friends, you may think you don't have time to add one more thing to your already overloaded day. You may believe you don't have the bandwidth to spend time with God each day or gather with God's people each week. You may think it's enough that you raised your hand and invited Christ into your heart. But if you want to experience then fullness of God's presence. If you want to experience the greatest depth of communion with your Creator. If you want to live in the confidence of knowing you are loved with an everlasting love, you must re-orient your life around the fundamental spiritual disciplines of prayer, God's Word, worship, and fellowship with other believers.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 9-11, Acts 3:11-4:22

June 23, 2021

Signs and Wonders

Readings for today: Nehemiah 9-11, Acts 3:11-4:22

The signs and wonders of God are a marvel to behold. I have seen the sick miraculously healed. I have seen the chains of addiction be loosed in a person's life. I have seen the demonized set free. I have seen relationships irreparably broken by restored. I have seen the hardest of hearts be softened by the gospel. I have even seen the dead raised with my own two eyes. Each and every one a miracle. Each and every one a divine intervention by Almighty God. It's easy to be dazzled by such displays of power. It's easy to get caught up in the joy and excitement of it all. It's easy to fall into the trap of craving more and more of God's blessings. More and more of God's good gifts. More and more of God's eschatological goodies and miss out on the main point of it all. The Giver is greater than the gift. The Blessed One is more than His blessings. A relationship with God is more precious than all the silver and gold in the world.

In the passage we read today, the people marvel at the healing power that flowed through Peter when he made the lame man walk. The man had been crippled from birth. Everyone knew him because he was carried each day to the Beautiful Gate of the Temple where he would ask for alms. For forty years, he had been in this condition and now the people see him dancing and singing and shouting praises to God. It must been a wonder to behold! Immediately a crowd gathers. They want to know how and why this happened. They want to meet the man who could perform such miracles. But Peter is quick to point them beyond himself. "And when Peter saw it he addressed the people: "Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk?" (Acts 3:12) Peter knows he's just God's instrument. He's just the conduit through which God has made Himself known. He also knows why God performed the miracle. Signs and wonders are never an end in themselves. They are designed by God to create an opportunity for the preaching of the gospel.

One of the things we get to do when we are over in Africa is interview church planters. We only send them to unreached villages. To people who have never heard the name of Jesus. They are often attacked. Persecuted. Beaten. Imprisoned for their faith. But usually somewhere along the way there is a power encounter. A sign is performed. Someone is healed. The dead are raised. The demonized are set free. And such miracles draw a crowd as you can imagine. That's the moment the church planter has been praying and waiting for. The gospel is preached. Many come to Christ. A church is planted. It's amazing to witness.

Friends, the same God who is at work over in Uganda and Ethiopia is at work in America as well. The same God who performs miracles in villages and communities all across Africa is performing miracles in places like Parker and Elizabeth and Denver as well. He is at work in our homes. He is at work in our communities. He is at work in our lives. He is making Himself known through signs and wonders so that we will get the opportunity to share the gospel with those who do not yet believe. God wants to make Himself known for there is salvation in no one else. There is no other name given under heaven by which we might be saved but the name of Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 12-13, Acts 4:23-37

June 24, 2021

The Danger of Compromise

Readings for today: Nehemiah 12-13, Acts 4:23-37

It usually starts small. A tiny step. A shift of one degree. One little compromise. We justify it in all sorts of ways. Surely God will understand. Surely God will make an exception this one time. Surely God knows we aren't perfect. But then the compromises keep coming. A tiny step turns into several larger steps. One degree turns into two degrees then three. One little compromise opens the door to other, more significant compromises and the next thing we know, we are in full rebellion against God's commands.

The last chapter of Nehemiah details a list of reforms he instituted for the people of Israel. It's a startling way to end a book. No "happily ever after." No "riding off into the sunset" for Nehemiah. His story ends in conflict. His story ends in confrontation. He even loses his temper and starts beating people and tearing out their hair! All this coming after an amazing time of worship where the entire population of Jerusalem gathered to sing the praises of God!

It is so easy for us to compromise. So easy for us to slide back into old habits. Someone once told me that humanity's ability to sin is only surpassed by her ability to justify her sin. I believe it. I see it in my own life. The people of God compromised in all sorts of ways. They allowed people of foreign descent, people who worshipped other gods, to join them in worship at the Temple. For the sake of political expediency, they gave Tobiah - one of their sworn enemies - his own room in the Temple. They neglected to care for the Levites and other Temple servants by refusing to tithe, forcing them to fend for themselves. They refused to honor the Sabbath. They married foreign women. Even their spiritual leaders desecrated their priestly office by intermarrying with those who did not worship Yahweh. In each case, I can almost hear the justifications. I can imagine the rationale. Our wives promised to put away their foreign gods! We're trying to rebuild our lives and local economy and have work on the Sabbath! If we give Tobiah a place of honor, perhaps he'll leave us alone. From a human perspective, it all makes sense.

If I am honest, I too fall into these same traps. It's easy for me to justify neglecting my time with God. It's easy for me to enter into worship and make it all about me and what I get out of it. It's easy for me to justify working 24/7 without ever taking a break. It's easy for me to give in to certain people in my life simply to avoid conflict. It's easy for me to compromise my convictions for the sake of those I love. Frankly, it never ends well. Eventually all the little compromises I make start to stack up along the way, creating a burden far too heavy for me to bear. Eventually, the house of cards I build comes crashing down around me, leaving me far worse off than I could have imagined. God demands my obedience. Jesus Himself says, "If you love Me, you will obey My commands." Following Christ is not easy. Following Christ requires great sacrifice. Following Christ means dying to "Self" with all its disordered desires and unrestrained passions. Take an honest assessment of your life. Where are you compromising? Where are you rationalizing away your sin? Turn and confess, knowing God is faithful and just to forgive you for your sin and cleanse you from all unrighteousness.

Readings for tomorrow: Esther 1-3, Acts 5:1-16

June 25, 2021

Powerful Women

Readings for today: Esther 1-3, Acts 5:1-16

I love the women of the Bible. They live in incredibly difficult times. They live in cultures where they are treated more as property than people. They are subject to all kinds of abuse and neglect. They have no rights and no legal recourse. They are prized for their physical beauty and cast aside when it fades. Their worth is determined by the number of male children they bear and they are shamed if they cannot produce. It's a brutal, harsh existence and it would be easy for the women to throw up their hands in despair. It would be easy for them to feel helpless and hopeless. Resign themselves to their lot in life and try to make the best of things. But then you read stories about women like Vashti and Esther. Women who are powerful. Fierce. Courageous. Bold. They dare to stand up to the men in their lives. They dare to be different. They refuse to accept the social and cultural restraints placed upon them.

One of the common mistakes we make when we read the Bible is to assume that because every word is "inspired" it must mean every word has God's endorsement. For example, I've seen our passage from today used to support all sorts of misogynist thinking. Rather than celebrate Queen Vashti's courage for refusing to bow down to the drunken wishes of an abusive king, they take the king's side. They worry that Vashti's example will cause all women to "look on their husbands with contempt" or they use Esther 1:22 where it talks about "every man being master in his own household" as a proof text for hierarchical notions of spiritual leadership. Such thinking is toxic and betrays a lack of understanding on how to appropriately interpret Scripture. Nowhere in the text does the king's behavior receive God's endorsement. In fact, God isn't mentioned a single time in the entire book! The reason this book is included in the Bible is to teach us how God often works behind the scenes through the courage of His people. People He strategically places in pagan culture to carry out His sovereign will. People like Esther for example. "The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants; it was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity." (Esther 2:17-18) It's important to note the king's lecherous behavior never seems to change. He is a man driven by his unrestrained passions. As such, he is vulnerable to all sorts of manipulation. Left on his own, he would have killed all the Jews in his empire. But thankfully God was at work! Behind the scenes. Under the radar. Hidden from view. He orchestrates things in such a way that Esther is placed on the throne. And though she presumably has to endure some of the same abuse her predecessor Vashti did, she leverages her position to save her people.

We still live in a world full of abuse. A world where women are often dismissed, neglected, or ignored. A world where women are not treated as equals. They often do not receive equal pay or equal access or equal opportunity. Their rights are now being further eroded as more and more men identify as women. I know many men who are intimidated by strong women. I know many men who are afraid of strong women. I know many men who weaponize Scripture in order to subjugate women. Thankfully, Scripture itself attests to the truth that women are made in the image of God. Women are co-heirs to the Kingdom of God. Women are co-equals in the eyes of God. Furthermore, Scripture gives us example after example of women of deep faith who courageously buck their traditional cultural roles as they seek to serve and honor God. Jesus Himself affirmed the women who sacrificed everything to follow Him. They were among His first and most faithful disciples. I myself have been incredibly blessed to be married to a strong, godly woman and to be raising three strong, godly daughters. For the Christian,

“there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male or female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28)

Readings for tomorrow: Esther 4-6, Acts 5:17-42

June 26, 2021

Suffering for Christ

Readings for today: Esther 4-6, Acts 5:17-42

"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." (Philippians 3:8-11)

Something very powerful takes place when we share in the sufferings of Christ. The Apostle Paul experienced it as did the Apostles Peter and John and the new believers in Jerusalem. Christians throughout the ages have experienced it in places like Russia, China, Uganda, and Ethiopia. I have had the privilege of meeting many of them. Over the past ten years I have personally trained hundreds of church planters in the Horn of Africa. Many of them bear on their bodies the scars of the persecution they face on a daily basis. They've been threatened. Beaten. Shot. Stabbed. Imprisoned. Some of them have even died in the field. And still they go. When I ask them how I can pray over them, they never ask for personal safety but always for boldness to preach the gospel in the face of the opposition. It is deeply humbling and inspiring.

I think about these men and women when I read Acts 5. I love the boldness of those first believers. Peter and John are arrested, imprisoned, and tried for preaching about the resurrection of Jesus. They were not among the elite. They had no wealth. No power. No education. They were just ordinary men whom God used to proclaim an extraordinary message. The gospel stirred up the city - as it always does - and threatened those in power - as it always does. So Peter and John were threatened. They were roughed up. They were imprisoned. They were put on trial. But they return home praising God for the opportunity to share in the sufferings of Christ. They praised God for the persecution. Praised God for His sovereign will and plan. Praised God for the opportunity to proclaim the gospel. "Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus." (Acts 5:41-42)

What do you pray for when you come against opposition? What do you pray for when you experience suffering and hardship? What do you pray for when you are in pain? For most of us, I imagine we pray for relief. Healing. Safety. Comfort. These are not necessarily bad things to pray but they certainly are not the most important things. The Apostle Paul experienced all these things and more in his life. He was mistreated, abused, left for dead. He gave up his home. His family. His livelihood. He sacrificed everything for the sake of knowing and serving Christ. And what did he gain in return? Christ. Peter and John and the early believers made similar sacrifices. They considered everything "rubbish" when compared to knowing and serving Christ. And what did they gain in return? Christ. What if - instead of safety and security - you prayed for boldness to proclaim the gospel? What if - instead of comfort and peace - you prayed for courage to share your faith? What if - instead of provision and protection - you prayed for God to use all that you are and all that you have - even your sufferings and pain - to grow His Kingdom in this world?

Readings for tomorrow: None

June 28, 2021

Theodicy

Readings for today: Esther 7-10, Job 1-2, Acts 6:1-7:22

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

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

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

What we will learn throughout this book is that what Job treasures most - even amidst his anguish and pain and suffering and anger and questions and doubts and fears - is God Himself. More than his possessions. More than his children. More than his marriage. More than his health. Job treasures God. Job worships God. As John Piper writes, in the suffering of Job, "the superior worth of God becomes evident to all." What God cares most about is His own glory and our primary role as human beings - creatures made in God's own image - is to bring Him glory and declare His praises in this world and the

next. And lest we think we are simply caught up in some divine ego trip, let's remember God is not like us. His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts. He is infinite and we are finite and He sees things from His perspective that we simply cannot know or ever understand.

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Job 3-6, Acts 7:23-34

June 29, 2021

Vulnerable before God

Readings for today: Job 3-6, Acts 7:23-34

The true test of any relationship is vulnerability. How vulnerable can you be before that other person? How much can you share? Can you reveal your doubts and fears to them without being judged or condemned? You know, for years I struggled to be vulnerable before God. I was afraid to raise my doubts. I was afraid to talk to Him about how I was really feeling. I was afraid He would punish me or judge me or condemn me. This impacted my prayer life deeply. I found myself praying prayers that were not truly honest. I found myself speaking words that were not my own. It felt like I was often going through the motions which is probably why my prayer life was so dull and lifeless. I would read passages where Jesus would say things to His disciples like, "O you of little faith!" and it made me wonder if I could be real with God about my fears and failures. I would see so be condemned in the Bible because they doubted God's power or His purpose or they questioned His nature and character. Then I read the Book of Job.

Job is raw. It is real. It is honest. It's why it has such a hold on our imaginations. We love Job because he is us in many ways. Job is me when I lost my first child and railed at God in my grief. Job is me when the church plant I was leading imploded, leaving me broken and wounded and questioning my call. Job is me when my wife came to me during that season to tell me she was feeling so disconnected from me due to my neglect and something needed to change immediately. I remember shaking my fist at God night after night as I paced the living room of our home. I couldn't sleep. I could barely eat. I was so angry. So full of fear and anxiety. So broken over what had happened. And I blamed God for it all. Job is me when I come face to face with extreme suffering in places like Yabelo, Ethiopia or Kitgum, Uganda. Overwhelmed by the needs, I cry out to God. I wonder why He allows such pain. Job is me when I listen to stories of those who've been abused or terrorized or oppressed and I rage at God at the injustice. Why doesn't He step in and do something about all the evil in the world. In my darkest moments, I have even prayed like Job for the Lord to simply take me home. Take me from this world of pain and heartache and suffering to His world where I can be truly free and truly healed.

Job gives us permission - dare I say even encouragement - to be real before God. Vulnerable before the One who loves us more than we can ever imagine. The Book of Job stands as an invitation for us to enter into God's presence as we are. Not as we should be. Not as we ought to be. Not as we so often pretend to be. But as the broken and messed up people we truly are. As much as it hurts to read, I love Job's honesty…"Finally, Job cursed the day of his birth by saying to God: Blot out the day of my birth and the night when my parents created a son. Forget about that day, cover it with darkness, and send thick, gloomy shadows to fill it with dread. Erase that night from the calendar and conceal it with darkness…Why didn't I die at birth? Why was I accepted and allowed to nurse at my mother's breast? Now I would be at peace in the silent world below…I wish I had been born dead and then buried, never to see the light of day. In the world of the dead, the wicked and the weary rest without a worry….Why does God let me live when life is miserable and so bitter? I keep longing for death more than I would seek a valuable treasure. Nothing could make me happier than to be in the grave." (Job 3:1-6, 11-13, 16-17, 20-22) Job reminds us that faith is a gritty enterprise. It requires us to hold on with a white-knuckle grip when everything around us seems to be falling apart. Sometimes things get to the point where we are barely holding on by our fingernails and yet even that is still faith. This, of course, is what Job's friends fail to understand. Sadly, it's also what the church often fails to understand. Depression doesn't signal a lack of faith. Suffering doesn't mean we've necessarily done something wrong.

Anger doesn’t offend or scare God. On the contrary, being gut-wrenchingly honest before God about how we feel is the greatest act of faith one can possibly muster.

In the darkest moments of my life - what the ancients called the “dark night of the soul” - I have found God waiting for me. When I’ve shaken my fist in anger at Him and raged against how things have turned out in my life, I have found God holding me until I finally collapse in His arms in exhaustion. When I’ve suffered and been broken and wounded by the tragic events of my life, God has knelt down with me in the ashes and spoken words of comfort and peace over me. Friends, you are safe with God. You are secure with God. He longs to gather you like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. As the wonderful song says, “When I feel my faith will fail, He will hold me fast.”

Readings for tomorrow: Job 7-9, Acts 7:35-8:3

June 30, 2021

Fundamental Reality of Grace

Readings for today: Job 7-9, Acts 7:35-8:3

These words from Job served as a helpful if not sobering reminder to me today. I am a blessed man. I live a blessed life. I live in a country where I am given incredible freedoms and opportunity. I live in a community where health and well-being are high values. I serve a church that loves the Lord and loves others well. I work alongside some of my best friends. I am married to one of my spiritual heroes. I have four children that I adore. I could not have charted a better course for my life. At the same time, it is so easy for me to fall into the entitlement trap. It is so easy for me to fall prey to the temptation that I have accomplished these things on my own. It is so easy to assume I must be righteous because of all these blessings. That's where these words from Job come in…

"But how can a man be in the right before God? If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times…How then can I answer him, choosing my words with him? Though I am in the right, I cannot answer him; I must appeal for mercy to my accuser…If it is a contest of strength, behold, he is mighty! If it is a matter of justice, who can summon him?…Though I am in the right, my own mouth would condemn me; though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse. For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together. There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on us both. Let him take his rod away from me, and let not dread of him terrify me. Then I would speak without fear of him, for I am not so in myself." (Job 9:2-3, 14-15, 19-20, 32-35)

Job brings me face to face with the fundamental reality that undergirds my life. I am never righteous before God. I cannot contend with God. I have no ground to stand on before God. I have no evidence to plead my case. No justification for my sinful ways. I am not in the right. I can only appeal to God's mercy. I am not strong. I can only appeal to God's grace. I am not just. I can only appeal to God's clemency. I have no appeal. I have no hope. Except for Jesus. The one who pleads my cause. The one who takes up my case. The one who stands as mediator between me and the Father. The one who bled for me. The one who died for me. The one who took my place. He covers me. He atones for my sin. He blots out my transgressions. He cleanses me and makes me white as snow. When I stand before the Father, all I have is Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else. Everything I might bring – my wealth, my position, my power, my achievements – all these things fall to dust before God. They are worthless. Only Christ is worthy.

Some might call such an outlook depressing. I call it beautiful. For life, at it's most fundamental level, is all grace. It's all a gift. Every moment. Every hour. Every day. Everything I've been given. Everything I've experienced. The joy. The pain. All of it is a gift from God's own hand. Something He uses to make me more like Christ if I will be let Him do His work. And if it is all grace, then I do not need to hold onto it. I do not need to grasp after it or cling to it. I can simply walk with open hands before the Lord, trusting Him to guide and direct my steps.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 10-12, Acts 8:4-25

July 1, 2021

Comfort in Suffering

Readings for today: Job 10-12, Acts 8:4-25

One of the things I've learned over my twenty-plus years of pastoring is how to meet people in their suffering. How to best come alongside them, providing comfort and relief and a safe space to grieve. Most of the time when someone asks, "Why?" what they are really asking is "Where?" They may say things like, "Why did God allow this to happen to me? Why did God let this happen to the person I love? Why does God allow such things to happen in the world around us?" But if you try and give them the biblical or theological answer, it will fall on deaf ears. Because they don't really want to know "why" so much as "where." "Where was God when this happened to me? Where was God when this happened to the person I love? Where is God when such terrible and tragic things happen in the world around me?" Is He there? Is He present? Is He amidst the suffering? Does He suffer to?

Job's friends are perfect examples of what happens when we fail to listen with our hearts. They keep listening to Job's words and trying to answer his questions but that's not what Job needs or wants in this moment. Job is wise. He already knows the answers to the questions he's posing. "But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know such things as these?" (Job 12:3) So the last thing he needs is a refresher on his theology. What he needs is his friends to simply sit with him in the ashes of his life. Weep with him over all he has lost. Listen to him as he rages at God for all that has happened. Let him get it all out. But his questions make them uncomfortable. His pain makes them uneasy. They are not courageous enough to manage their own anxiety as they listen to their dear friend grieve. So they start to respond. They start to push back. They start to correct and challenge. Rather than comfort Job, they are now trying to comfort themselves.

"Should a multitude of words go unanswered, and a man full of talk be judged right? Should your babble silence men, and when you mock, shall no one shame you? For you say, 'My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in God's eyes.' But oh, that God would speak and open his lips to you, and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For he is manifold in understanding. Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves." (Job 11:2-6) Zophar cannot help himself. Job's complaints are too painful. Too raw. Too real. He feels they demand an answer. And while he gets his theology right, he could not be more wrong. He is responding to Job without love which is why his words come off sounding like a noisy gong or clashing cymbal.

Love is essential when responding to suffering. Agape love. Selfless love. Love that is patient and tender and kind. Love that never insists on its own way or draws attention to itself. This sort of love can bear the suffering of another. This sort of love can believe God is present even in those moments when life is at its most heartbreaking. This sort of love provides hope in the face of tragedy. This sort of love endures when all seems lost. This is the love Job needed from his friends. He didn't need answers to his questions. He didn't need a response to his rage. He simply needed friends who would listen and love him in the midst of his terrible condition.

God shows us this love. He met us in the utter tragedy of our sinful condition and became one of us. One with us. One for us. He was not afraid to sit with us in the ashes of our existence. He didn't feel the need to correct us, judge us, or condemn us. Instead, He offers us unconditional love. While we were still sinners. Still at war with God. Still trapped in our rebellion. Still enslaved to our corrupt desires. Christ comes to us. Christ suffers for us. Christ dies for us. This is how God defines love. It's never about Him. It's always about us and His desire to rescue us out of our brokenness and pain. In

this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and gave Himself up for us. This, friends, is how we show love to others. This is how we meet them in the midst of their suffering and pain. We comfort them with the same comfort Christ showed to us.

Readings for tomorrow: Jon 13-15, Acts 8:26-40

July 2, 2021

Living Hope

Readings for today: Job 13-15, Acts 8:26-40

I love these words from 1 Peter - "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." (1 Peter 1:3-5) They inspire me. They encourage me. They serve as a constant reminder to me that my hope is not of this world. My hope is not in the things of this world. All my achievements. All my accomplishments. Everything I might be tempted to place my trust in will eventually turn to dust.

Life in this world is hard. It is harsh and brutal. It is full of pain and suffering. The fact that I can escape most of it or mitigate it due to my wealth and position and privilege and the nation where I live doesn't erase this fact. I have been around the world. I have seen how most people live. They wake up each morning and walk miles to work. They bear heavy burdens all day long. They drink water that is not clean. They eat food that is scarce and unhealthy. They are vulnerable to disease and violence and natural disasters like drought and famine. They get no days off. No weekends free. No vacations. They rarely travel beyond the bounds of their village or region. Death comes almost as a welcome relief from all the hardship, toil, and pain. Death comes for me as well. Death comes for us all. He is undefeated. He can only be held back for so long. Only be pushed away for a time. Eventually he will have his way with us. And his ways are often painful and terrifying. Perhaps that's why I resonate so much with what Job says this morning…"But the mountain falls and crumbles away, and the rock is removed from its place; the waters wear away the stones; the torrents wash away the soil of the earth; so you destroy the hope of man." (Job 14:18-19)

Nothing lasts forever. Nothing lives forever. Only God is eternal. This world is broken. Things move from order to chaos. Even the mountains eventually crumble and fall. The waters wear away the stone. The waves crash over the earth. Nothing we build will endure. Nothing we do will outlast us. No one will remember our names. No one will remember our deeds. The point of all this is to drive us to our knees in holy despair. To teach us to never place any trust in ourselves. To never hold onto any hope in this life. God sets out to destroy the hope of man not to punish but to root out the deepest sin of our souls. We are not like God. Let me say that again…we are not like God. It's the oldest temptation, of course. The one that got Adam and Eve kicked out of the garden. The one that continues to afflict us even to this day. We believe we are like God. We believe we chart our own destinies. We believe we are the masters of our own fates. We believe we are righteous on some level before Him. But none of this is true. Not for Job. Not for Job's friends. Not for us.

Once we have been driven to our knees. Once we've had everything stripped away. Once all our accomplishments have turned to dust. Once we lose all hope in ourselves and our abilities and our wisdom and our strength and our honor and our righteousness then we finally can turn to God. Our eyes will rise above the things of this world and we will discover the living hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. We will find ourselves looking forward to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. We will trust God alone to guard our lives through faith in a salvation that one day will be revealed in all its glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 16-18, Acts 9:1-22

July 3, 2021

Redemptive Suffering

Readings for today: Job 16-18, Acts 9:1-22

Painting of the Parable of the Good Samaritan by Balthasar van Cortbemde (1647)

Yesterday, I found myself wearing down in a long conversation as I advocated for the truth of the gospel. After hours of talking, I went to bed tired and frustrated by the whole affair. It isn't easy to take up the plight of the poor. To fight for the oppressed. To defend the marginalized. And then I began to think about all the dear friends and loved ones I have here at home and around the world who live this reality. Day in and day out, they suffer. They experience pain and heartache. They endure injustice. There is no end to it all. And they aren't the only ones who struggle. I think about the impoverished. Those who live day to day, searching for food and water. I think about the aged. Those who are losing their minds and whose bodies are failing. I think about those who are battling mental health issues. I think about their mental anguish. The daily fight to get out of bed. The pain of this world is simply overwhelming.

I think about my own struggles over the years. I think about what it was like to lose our first child. The numbness followed by the deep grief. The tears I shed. The pain I felt when the doctor walked us through all the problems he had. No ribs. No lungs. No limbs. Fluid buildup. Heart failure. It was like one blow after another. A relentless onslaught. How did Job put it? "He breaks me with breach upon breach; he runs upon me like a warrior." (Job 16:14) I think about our time in Wisconsin. Reaching the point of deep brokenness in our marriage. Coming face to face with my deepest insecurities and fears. Feeling overwhelmed on a daily basis. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. I blamed You, God. I fought with You, God. For months I paced the floor, crying out to You all night long. I barely got any sleep and when I did it was anxious and restless. You stripped my life down to the studs. You took everything from me that I could possibly hold onto. There were nights I prayed for it all to end. I said with Job, "My spirit is broken; my days are extinct; the graveyard is ready for me." (Job 17:1)

But then, in the middle of the deep darkness, I discovered a profound truth. When I hit rock bottom and had nothing left, I found You. You were there waiting for me. And You showed Yourself sufficient for all my needs. You comforted me. You nursed me back to health. You gave me hope. You renewed your promise. I think of Job's statement of faith at the end of chapter 16, "There must be Someone in heaven who knows the truth about me, in highest heaven, some Attorney who can clear my name— My Champion, my Friend, while I'm weeping my eyes out before God. I appeal to the One who represents mortals before God as a neighbor stands up for a neighbor. (Job 16:19-21 MSG) At the end of all things, I found Jesus. The Alpha and the Omega. The first and the last. He was there all along. He heard my cries. He endured my rage. He wiped my tears. He heard my heart. He met me in my suffering. He came to me when all hope seemed lost. My faith was renewed. My life never the same. It was like a second conversion. A confirmation of the Psalmist's promise that even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death we do not need to fear for God is with us.

I look back on that time and, while I would not wish it on my worst enemy, I wouldn't trade it for the world. To come to the end of oneself, one must truly come to the end of oneself. To deny oneself and pick up a cross, one has to endure incredible suffering and pain. To discover the depths of the sufficiency of God and His grace, one must be stripped of all things they might be tempted to seek solace in instead. It's not easy to tear down the idols of one's life or to have them torn down for you by God Himself. It's not easy to let God truly have His way. To let Him break you of the lust of the flesh, the

lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. When He cuts, He cuts deep. To the heart. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God. His Word is like a double-edged sword “piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12) So today I am thankful for God’s severe mercies. Thankful for His steadfast love and faithfulness. Thankful for the ways He has broken me and the ways He has bound me back up. My life is in His hands.

Readings for tomorrow: None

July 5, 2021

Courage to Care

Readings for today: Job 19-23, Acts 9:23-10:8

There is nothing worse than feeling abandoned. Nothing worse than feeling all alone. Nothing worse than feeling like those closest to you have pulled away. Those closest to you have walked away. This is especially true when you are in pain. When you are struggling with a physical or mental illness or addiction. I think of the heartbreak of this past year. Hundreds of thousands of people dying from COVID. Their pain compounded by the fact that many of them died alone. The draconian restrictions preventing so many from being at the bedside of those they loved as they passed from this life to the next. I think of the many people I know who need community to successful fight their addiction. Their isolation led to relapse. Their loneliness led to despair. Rates of substance abuse and suicide due to overdose rose dramatically.

The Bible is clear. It is not good for us to be alone. We were not meant to do this life on our own. Especially when we are suffering. Job's words are especially heartbreaking this morning. "He has put my brothers far from me, and those who knew me are wholly estranged from me. My relatives have failed me, my close friends have forgotten me. The guests in my house and my maidservants count me as a stranger; I have become a foreigner in their eyes. I call to my servant, but he gives me no answer; I must plead with him with my mouth for mercy. My breath is strange to my wife, and I am a stench to the children of my own mother. Even young children despise me; when I rise they talk against me. All my intimate friends abhor me, and those whom I loved have turned against me. My bones stick to my skin and to my flesh, and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth. Have mercy on me, have mercy on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me! Why do you, like God, pursue me? Why are you not satisfied with my flesh?" (Job 19:13-22)

Can you imagine how it must have felt for Job to be abandoned in his hour of greatest need? Here was a man who had dedicated his life to comforting others. Dedicated his life to caring for others. He had built a reputation for godliness in his community. He was engaged. He was connected. He was faithful. But when push came to shove and the roles were reversed, he was all alone. His community failed him. His family failed him. His servants failed him. His friends failed him. Even his wife left him. He had no one. No one to comfort him. No one to help him. No one to bathe his wounds. No one to take him in. There simply is nothing worse than feeling abandoned in your hour of greatest need.

This is what makes Job's declaration of faith even more astounding. Out of the depths of his despair, he cries, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another." (Job 19:25-27) He holds onto God for dear life. At the end of it all. When everything has been taken away. When all his loved ones have walked away. When he his life is full of nothing but pain and suffering. He refuses to let go of God. He refuses to relinquish his faith. No matter what happens, he will go to the grave trusting he will see God.

This raises two important questions for me this morning. First, do I have the faith of Job? If everything were taken from me, would I still believe? Would I still hold onto God? Or do I love God because of the blessings He has poured into my life? Second, do I walk away from those who are suffering? Do I pull back from those in pain? Or do I lean in? Do I remain engaged? Do I courageously and tenaciously hold onto them even if/when they try to push me away? Do I seek to comfort with the same comfort I've been comforted with by God? Can you imagine what would happen if the church of Jesus Christ

simply made it their aim to courageously comfort those in need rather than judge or belittle or argue or abandon them? Can you imagine what would happen if we would have the courage to listen to those who are struggling, those who are in pain, rather than be so quick to speak or offer empty platitudes or unwanted advice? How often do we play the role of Job's friends?

Readings for tomorrow: Job 24-25, Acts 10:9-48

July 6, 2021

Miraculous Gifts

Readings for today: Job 24-25, Acts 10:9-48

Greg Daniels posted a great set of questions that arise from today's reading. "In the early days of the Church, what we now call the miraculous gifts of apostleship, prophecy, tongues, healing, and miracles were common. A big question for the Church today is, have these gifts ceased to be (cessationism), or are they continuing (continuationism)? What do you think, do healings still occur? Do people still speak in tongues? Is there still new revelation by prophecy?"

For those who may be unfamiliar with the debate, there are those in the church today who argue the miraculous gifts of the Spirit have "ceased" (cessationism) because we have the Scriptures. Though the early church did have access to the Old Testament, they didn't have access to the gospels or the epistles from Paul, Peter, James, John, etc. as they were still being written. Therefore - as the argument goes - the Holy Spirit provided miraculous signs that "authenticated" the message being preached but once the Bible came into its full and complete form, the need for such signs was no longer necessary since Scripture provides all the authentication the gospel needs. On the flip side are those who believe the miraculous gifts still exist today. They point to the fact that the Bible itself never says the signs will cease and in fact includes the miraculous sign gifts right alongside the other, more ordinary spiritual gifts when it lists them out. So unless we are going to suggest the gifts of teaching or preaching or evangelism have ceased as well, we should remain exegetically consistent. Furthermore, "continuists" point to the prevalence of miraculous signs especially in areas around the world where the gospel is being introduced for the first time. There are many reports of miraculous healings, tongues, prophecies, etc.

To put my cards on the table, I am a continuationist. I believe all the signs are still in operation and I believe God grants such signs for the building up of the Body of Christ, to further the gospel, and to bring glory to Himself. We see all these dynamics on display in the story we read from Acts 10. Peter receives a vision from the Lord in response to a prayer from an unbelieving Gentile centurion. It's a new revelation regarding Gentile inclusion in the Kingdom of God. Peter goes to Cornelius and Cornelius welcomes him with open arms, asking him to preach. Peter preaches the gospel and hears what happens next…

"While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain." (Acts 10:44-48)

Note the Gentile believers were speaking in tongues, amazing the Jewish believers. Further, they understood that these new believers were "extolling God" meaning there was either an interpretation being given simultaneously so everyone could understand and celebrate what God had done or these new believers were actually speaking in known languages like what had happened on Pentecost. Peter then proceeds to baptize them all thus fulfilling the prophetic word he had received from the Lord.

It's a powerful passage that holds great relevance for us today. The eminent church historian, Philip Jenkins, has provocatively suggested that the church of the 21st century will be traditional in its ethics,

orthodox in its doctrine, supernatural in its power, and centered in the Global South. Africa will have over 1 billion Christians by 2050. Latin America over 650 million. Asia over 600 million. The growth of Christianity in North America will continue to slow to a crawl and will face steep decline in Europe. As the faces of Christianity continue to change, one will expect the influence of theologians and pastors and ministry leaders from these areas of the world to begin to dominate the landscape. No longer will the theological tone be set by the Reformation of the 16th century in Western Europe but by the Reformation taking place in Ethiopia, Uganda, China, Nigeria, Brazil and Mexico. This new movement is decidedly Pentecostal. It is boldly Charismatic. The preaching of the gospel in these countries is often accompanied by signs and wonders and miracles. It all sounds very "New Testament" to me and I've experienced it's impact firsthand.

I have seen miraculous healings. I have witnessed a resurrection. I personally received the gift of tongues a few years ago during a time of prayer in Ethiopia. I have also witnessed abuses. Faith healers claiming to heal when they did not. False prophets claiming new revelation from the Lord that never comes true. People speaking publicly in worship in all sorts of tongues with no interpretation. This is where we have to test everything according to Scripture. God will not contradict Himself. He will not say one thing in His Word and another to a pastor or prophet. Again, the Bible is clear. The spiritual gifts are given to build up the Body of Christ. They are given to further the mission of the gospel. They are given to bring God all the glory. Any attempt to use the gifts to make our name great, to exploit the members of the Body of Christ, or to further our own kingdom on earth must be rejected forcefully. This is especially true when it comes to prosperity preaching or false prophecy which is so prevalent in our culture today.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 26-27, Acts 11

July 7, 2021

The Blessing of Being Powerless

Readings for today: Job 26-27, Acts 11

"Sheol is naked before God, and Abaddon has no covering. He stretches out the north over the void and hangs the earth on nothing. He binds up the waters in his thick clouds, and the cloud is not split open under them. He covers the face of the full moon and spreads over it his cloud. He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters at the boundary between light and darkness. The pillars of heaven tremble and are astounded at his rebuke. By his power he stilled the sea; by his understanding he shattered Rahab. By his wind the heavens were made fair; his hand pierced the fleeing serpent. Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?" (Job 26:6-14)

Job is starting to come to the end of himself here. His rage is spent. His anger is losing steam. His frustrations and protests are starting to lack conviction as he remembers who it is he is contending with. God is all-powerful. Job is powerless. God is all-knowing. Job is ignorant. God is immense. Job is small. There is nothing hidden from God. Everything is hidden from Job in his ruined estate. As crazy as it sounds, I actually believe these verses represent a hinge point in the narrative. Job has reached the null point of his pain and suffering and still acknowledges the sovereignty of God. Yes, there will still be protests from Job but those are the final skirmishes in this battle he's been fighting for so many chapters. Job has come to a place of complete helplessness. Complete hopelessness. Complete despair. He has hit rock bottom which is where he will finally get his wish. He will meet God face to face.

I think about my own life. I think about how easy it is for me to rely on my own strength. My own resources. My own abilities. I am a blessed man. I have a wife of 25 years with whom I am falling more deeply in love. I have four wonderful children with whom I have a great relationship. I live among my extended family who I get to see on a regular basis. I have a job I absolutely love and a church family I am honored to serve. I get to work not only with gifted colleagues but dear friends. I've been invited into and given leadership positions in a variety of areas of passion both personally and professionally. I live in a beautiful state. A beautiful community. A beautiful home. My wife and I make plenty of money. My body is relatively strong. My mind is relatively sharp. My needs are few. But if I am honest, I must confess all these blessings make me forget about God.

Don't get me wrong, I think about God all the time but do I think about God rightly? Am I giving Him His due? Am I truly aware of His greatness and glory? Job's words here are deeply convicting. They remind me of the error of my ways. I too often take God for granted. I too often forget the great chasm that exists between us. Blissfully ignorant and enjoying the good things in life, I fail to recognize God's sovereign power. I fail to give Him the honor and thank Him for the blessings He has bestowed upon me. I too easily fall into the trap of assuming these things have come from my own work. My own labor. My own striving and success. I forget my utter powerlessness and helplessness and foolishness and smallness before the Lord.

As I think back over the course of my life, I have met God most profoundly in the most broken places. The places where I have no control. The places where I am most utterly hopeless and alone. God has made Himself known to me there and opened me up to all sorts of new possibilities. He has ministered to me in a special way and given me a deep experience of His faithful, abiding, steadfast love. It is when I am weak that I experience God's strength. It is when I am poor that I experience God's richest provision. It is when I am foolish that I seek God's wisdom. It is when I am anxious that I experience

the peace that passes my understanding. This is a paradox to be sure and yet it is essential to grasp if one is to follow Jesus. We must walk as He walked. We must live as He lived. We must embrace a life of utter dependence on our Heavenly Father, trusting Him to guide us and protect us and provide for us and, at the end of our lives, welcome us to our true home.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 28-30, Acts 12

July 9, 2021

Self-Examination

Readings for today: Job 31-32, Acts 13:1-25

Yesterday, I did something profoundly stupid. We planned a trip to hike a 14er in the area and I googled the shortest route from our condo to the trailhead. What I didn't take into account is the quality of the road. After all, I've driven on 4WD roads before to get to 14ers. However, this one was new. I had never been in this area before. All of it was an unknown. And did I mention it was dark? I am not a person who is easily rattled but driving to the top of Cinnamon pass in a Suburu Outback in the dark with my family just about shot my nerves. When we finally arrived at the trailhead - after having stopped near the top of the pass to let the sun rise - another hiker called what I'd done, "badass", but the look on his face told me he thought I was insane. He was right. There was nothing cool or courageous about it. It was not something to be celebrated. It was the act of a fool.

So why did I make the choices I made yesterday? What instincts drove me to continue on rather than wait? What impulses within pushed me to keep driving when the wise thing to do would have been to stop and turn around? As I've taken these thoughts before the Lord, He has shown me the depths of my pride. I was on a mission. The mission was to climb a 14er. I didn't want to turn back because I knew we wouldn't be able to find another route into the trailhead. I put the goal before the safety of my own family. My own need to succeed before the greater need to keep those I love safe. Now thankfully, we made it. Thankfully, we did summit Handies Peak. Thankfully, we found another route home that took us several more hours and thankfully, we received the unexpected blessing of seeing more of our beautiful state. One might say, "All's well that ends well" but I want to make sure I learn the lesson God is teaching me. You see, the whole point of this life is to draw so close to Jesus that I actually become like him. Not just in word or deed but in thought and attitude and even unconscious reaction. I want to get to a place where my natural reflex is to love like Jesus. To protect like Jesus. To put the needs of others before me like Jesus. Yesterday only shows me how far I still have to go.

In today's reading, Job lists several things that illustrate his godly character. He makes a covenant with his eyes not to undress another woman. He refuses to walk with falsehood or have any relationship with deceit. He treats his servants well because he sees in them the image of God. He takes care of the poor, the widow, and the orphan. He does not judge them for their disadvantaged state. He does not place his trust in his great wealth nor does he allow any potential idol in his heart to stand. He will not rejoice when his enemies fall. He will not take any pleasure in the demise of those who've attacked him. He has not exploited the land for his own personal gain. Job is such a godly man that the actions he lists come quite naturally to him. They are godly reflexes he's developed over time. How does that happen?

It begins with a simple, yet profound acknowledgement. God sees everything. He sees what we do. He hears what we say. He knows what we think. He sees our conscious as well as our unconscious. The id, the ego, and the superego are not mysteries to Him. He knows our reflexes and our natural responses before we know them. He knows why we react the way we do. He knows what happens in the back of our brains as well as the front. He sees the unformed places of our hearts. He knows our secret thoughts and desires. He knows the fears and insecurities that drive us. He sees all. He knows all. And Job understands this great truth.

Job also understands God's great love. Though never really mentioned in the book, only a person fully secure in his/her relationship with God could say the things Job says. Only a person fully convinced of their friendship with God would ever believe they deserved an answer from Him. Job believes God is

bound to him on some level just as he is bound to God. Job believes God owes him an answer on some level because Job has lived his entire life in humble worship and service to Him. And the great news of this book is that God answers Job's call. Job is not ignored. He is not dismissed. He is not abandoned. God speaks. God answers. God ultimately affirms His relationship with His "servant Job" and reaffirms His opinion of him, "that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil." (Job 1:8)

When one understands the depths of God's omniscience and His unfailing love, one is set free from ever trying to hide from Him. One is set free to bring all of oneself before the Lord and engage in the process of self-examination in the security of an eternal relationship with Him. You see, the closer I come to Jesus, the more my sin is revealed. The closer I come to His purity, the more my impurities show up. The closer I come to His holiness, the more aware of my unholiness I become. Without a relationship with God, I would be driven to depression and despair. But because I know God loves me with an everlasting love. Because I have confidence that nothing can separate me from God's love. I am free to bring even the darkest places of my heart before Him. I am free to lay down all of my shame. Through the Holy Spirit, I can courageously confront my fears and insecurities. I can expose the utter depths of my sin to the light of His grace and be healed. Transformed. Made more into the image of Christ.

The process of self-examination is an essential part of the Christian journey. The more we know ourselves, the more we know God. The more we know God, the more we know ourselves. Let the Spirit guide you. Trust the Spirit's work within you. Stop running. Stop hiding. Stop trying to pretend you are something you are not before the Lord. Trust His love for you. Trust His compassion towards you. Trust the sufficiency of His mercy and grace. You are safe in His arms. Safe to be who you are, warts and all. God loves you for who you are and He loves you too much to leave you there. He will do His transformative work within you if you will but let Him. If you ever have any doubts, just ask Job.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 33-34, Acts 13:26-53

July 10, 2021

The First Missionaries

Readings for today: Job 33-34, Acts 13:26-53

It is amazing to read about Paul's first missionary journey. Coming on the heels of persecution in Jerusalem which cost James his life and put Peter in prison, the church in Antioch responds to the call of the Spirit to send out missionaries to proclaim the good news of the gospel. Barnabus and Paul are chosen after a lengthy time of prayer and fasting and worship. They travel from Antioch to Cyprus to Perga which is a gateway city to the region of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). From there, they hit the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. All told, they travel around 1500 miles in about two years before returning to report the great news that many Gentiles are turning to faith in Jesus Christ!

Three things to note that will become paradigmatic for future missionary endeavors, including those in our own day and age. First, the bold proclamation of the gospel. Paul was utterly convinced God had raised Jesus from the dead and that this was the fulfillment of all the promises given to Israel. Many have argued that Paul's conversion represented a radical break with his prior Pharisaism. On the contrary! Paul himself argues that the resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of all he believed. "And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus..." (Acts 13:32-33) Everything changed for Paul that day he met the Risen Christ outside of Damascus. He was confronted with the truth that everything he believed about Israel had now come true in Jesus Christ. Yahweh had indeed raised His Son from the dead in vindication of everything Jesus had taught. Far from being an enemy of the Jewish faith, Jesus was the fulfillment! And Paul's zealous passion for the faith of his fathers now would make him the greatest evangelist the world has ever known.

Second, the proclamation of the gospel was confirmed by signs and wonders. Wherever Barnabus and Paul went, the sick were healed. Demons were cast out. People were set free from oppression. As we read yesterday, Paul showed no fear in confronting powerful witch-doctors like Bar-Jesus. He called down God's judgment on the man and struck him blind. This was not an act of self-promotion. In fact, as we'll read next week, when the people of Lystra attempt to worship Paul and Barnabus because of the miracle they performed in making a lame man walk, they tore their garments. They refused to let it happen. They assured the people they were not gods but simply ordinary men serving the One True God, the maker of heaven and earth. No, the point of all the miracles and signs and wonders was to bring people to saving faith. To confirm the truth of the gospel they preached.

Finally, persecution. No matter where Paul and Barnabus went, they faced opposition. From the pagans in power like Bar-Jesus to the Jews who refused to receive their message. They were beaten. They were stoned. They were attacked and left for dead. The Word of God is a double-edged sword and it stirred the hearts of those who listened. Some received the good news with glad hearts and came to faith. Others perceived it as a threat and lashed out. There is no such thing as being neutral when it comes to Jesus!

Friends, this same dynamic is being played out the world over even today. My friends in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Djibouti all share similar testimonies. They boldly proclaim the gospel in villages, towns, and cities where it has never been heard. Their preaching is often accompanied by many signs and wonders and miracles. The sick are healed. The demon-oppressed set free. The dead are raised to new life. But these men and women face extreme persecution as well. Beaten. Stabbed.

Shot. Imprisoned. Left for dead. Their families are attacked. Their livelihoods threatened. Some of them even lose their lives for the sake of the Kingdom. And yet, they are “filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 13:52)

God is not done! Despite what you may hear, He is still very much on the move! He will not rest or relent until the whole world hears the good news of the gospel! This is His will! This is His plan! And to this great end, He calls His church! This is the reason we exist! Not for ourselves but for the sake of the world! May we understand and embrace our calling to be missionaries in our communities and to the very ends of the earth!

Readings for tomorrow: None

July 12, 2021

Feeling Small

Readings for today: Job 35-40, Acts 14

A few days ago, I summitted Mt. Sneffels. It's one of 54 "fourteeners" (peaks rising above 14,000') in Colorado and is known as the "Queen of the San Juans" because of the amazing views of the surrounding peaks and valleys. Those who know me well know how much I love hiking and climbing. Sneffels was peak number 15 for me and I've climbed several others multiple times. None of them are easy. In order to summit a 14er, one has to hit the trail very early. Sometimes before the sun comes up. You typically ascend thousands of feet so your legs take a beating. Sometimes there's a nice trail, sometimes not. Depending the route, you can be dangerously exposed both to the weather or a potential fall. Many of them are over 10 miles round trip. You race the clock to beat the afternoon storms before they roll in. But the payoff is definitely worth it. Standing on the summit makes you feel like you're on top of the world.

It's also makes you feel so very small. I thought about these words from Job when I got to the top of Sneffels. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4-7) It was a picture-perfect day. Not a cloud in the sky. I could see for miles and still my view was so limited. I could not see the foundations of the mountain on which I stood. I could not see to the end of the green valleys that stretched out before me. I could never determine the measurements of peaks that ranged all around me. Only God knows these things. He laid the foundations of the earth. He stretched out His line and determined the height of each of the 54 14,000' peaks as well as the 637 13,000' peaks and the more than 1,500 12,000' peaks. God laid the cornerstone for each and every one. He sunk the base of Mt. Sneffels deep into the earth so it would never tremble or fall. Reflecting on His omnipotence as I stood surveying the vastness of His creation took my breath away.

And then God showed me something even greater. "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it…Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?" (Job 40:2, 8) As humbled as I was by the creative power of God, I was even more humbled by His righteousness. His holiness. His purity. The chasm that exists between the Triune God in all His splendor and majesty and glory and a weak and ruined sinner like me dwarfs any mountain I could ever climb. No matter how hard I try, I can never ascend to God. No matter how far I walk, I can never draw close to God. No matter how early I rise, there simply isn't enough time for me to work out my own salvation. Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Shall a sinner like me question God Himself? Am I that foolish that I would put God in the wrong so that I might be right? If I am honest, the answer is yes. I am that foolish. In fact, my foolishness knows no bounds. I contend against God daily in thought, word, and deed. I often act as if I know best. I believe down deep that I am the master of my own fate, the captain of my own destiny. And when things go sideways in my life, my first instinct is often to complain to God. To act as I've been wronged or put out or somehow unfairly treated. Frankly, I am more than willing to condemn God in order to justify myself.

Thankfully, God isn't done with me and He wasn't done with me that morning on Sneffels either. He still had yet more to share. Yes, His power is breaktakingly immense. Yes, His righteousness makes me fall on my face before Him. Like Job, "I am of small account; what shall I answer? I lay my hand on my mouth." (Job 40:4) Like the great prophet Isaiah, "I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I

dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips…" (Isaiah 6:5) And yet, God loves me still. Tears came to my eyes as I thought about the vastness of God's love. It is wider than the valleys that lay before me. It is higher than the mountain peaks that surrounded me. It is truly measureless, boundless, infinite in scope. Despite my own limitations, I know there is an end to the earth. Given the right instruments and training, I know I could find the foundations of the mountains. I could stretch out a line across the valleys. I could even weigh the planet on a scale. Not so with God's love. I cannot fathom it's reach. I cannot grasp it's heights or depths, it's length or it's breadth. It's logic escapes me. It's faithfulness astounds me. There simply is nothing like it in all creation. And that, friends, is the wonder of the gospel. God hikes the heavens to come to us! God climbs every mountain and crosses every valley to get to us! God bridges every gulf and every chasm in order to save us! You are not small in His eyes! You are not insignificant to Him! He loves you with an everlasting love and He will allow nothing in all creation to separate you from Him!

Readings for tomorrow: Job 41-42, Psalm 1, Acts 15

July 13, 2021

Repentance

Readings for today: Job 41-42, Psalm 1, Acts 15

Job's words hit me hard today. "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:2-6)

"I know you can do all things and no purpose of yours can be thwarted." While I acknowledge this truth intellectually, I too often live as if everything depended on me. One of the weaknesses God has been exposing in me lately is my lack of dependence on Him. The sin of self-sufficiency. I get so wrapped up in what I am doing. So confident in my own wisdom and strength and ability. And then things go sideways. Expectations are not met. Boundaries are crossed. Plans get waylaid. Disappointment and discouragement sets in. I start to believe the lie that somehow God's plan has failed. Somehow God has let me down. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?" Too often it is me. I utter what I do not understand. I speak of things too wonderful for me which I do not know. God says, "Listen, and I will speak. I will question you and you will answer." But I don't listen enough. I don't wait enough. I don't sit in silence enough. Instead, I rush on ahead. Overconfident in my course. Assuming I have the blessing of God on my life. I am impatient. I am headstrong. I am full of pride. If I am totally honest, I am also a little afraid. I don't want to slow down. Slowing down and sitting in God's presence means having to answer some uncomfortable questions. Slowing down and reflecting means coming to grips with some uncomfortable truths. About myself. About my attitudes. My thoughts. My actions. I don't want to slow down because I am afraid of God's questions. I am afraid to have to give an answer for why I spend my time the way I do. Why I spend my money the way I do. Why I love the things I love and serve the things I serve.

You see, I am too much like Job's friends in this way. I've been professionally trained in theology by some of the most brilliant theologians at one of the top seminaries in the world. But too often I neglect the weightier matters of acting justly, walking humbly, and loving mercy. Too often I refuse to let the Spirit re-order the loves and desires of my heart. I like to hold God at a distance. I want Him close but not too close if you know what I mean. For so many years, I settled for knowing about God. I heard His Word preached. I heard those around me talk about Him. They described Him as if He were real but I wasn't sure I believed it. Then I met God face to face and everything changed. There simply is no substitute for God's presence. It is a consuming fire that burns even as it purifies. To this day, when I stop long enough to truly contemplate God's beauty and glory and splendor and majesty, I fall on my face in worship. I despise myself. All my trophies. All my achievements. All my successes. Everything I might hold onto for self-esteem, affirmation, and identity turns to dust and ash before the Lord as He strips me bare. My only response is repentance. Godly sorrow over my ruined state. Deep joy and thankfulness for what Christ has done for me.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 2-3, Acts 16:1-15

July 14, 2021

Vision

Readings for today: Psalms 2-3, Acts 16:1-15

I will be leading an elder retreat in about a month for our church family. The focus will be seeking God's vision for the next season in our life together. This past year, we witnessed the successful completion of a vision God gave us several years ago of a licensed Christian counseling center focused on serving the suburban poor and those on Medicaid. It's been a beautiful journey. One I am so thankful to be part of! God moved powerfully on the hearts of His people as they caught His vision for what could be if we eliminated our church debt. Now we stand on the cusp of yet another journey and to be honest, I am not sure where it will take us. What will our church look like post-COVID? How will we continue to fulfill the Great Commission and live out the Great Commandment? What does life together look like when it is mediated in both a physical as well as virtual environment? These are the questions I am taking to the Lord right now.

I imagine the Apostle Paul faced similar questions along the way. Yes, his context was radically different. Yes, his "journey" involved walking miles and miles as he went from city to city preaching the gospel and planting churches. But in many ways his challenge was the same. He clearly sought God's vision for his ministry. He sought God's direction for his life. He fundamentally understood that unless the Lord built the house, all his labor would be in vain. Following the will of the Spirit is never a straight line. At least not in my experience. He zigs and He zags. He sometimes takes you two steps forward and one step back. There are these amazing twists to the journey that only make sense upon reflection.

Consider what happens in our reading today. "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily. And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them." (Acts 16:5-10) Paul, Silas, and Timothy carry the gospel to cities in the regions of Syria and Cilicia. They experience great success in places like Derbe and Lystra. The churches there are strengthened in their faith. They grow in numbers. It must have been so exciting for them! But then a door is shut in Asia. Another door closes in Bithynia. We don't know the details but it must have been disappointing to Paul and his team on some level. Perhaps the people didn't respond well to the message? Perhaps the persecution was particularly intense? Perhaps Paul and his team simply felt a strong check in their spirit? After all, Luke (the author of the Book of Acts) is pretty specific that it was the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Jesus that prevented them from going where they originally had planned. I can imagine them pulling into Troas feeling frustrated by the delays. Disheartened by the doors that closed in their faces. Perhaps some doubt began to creep in regarding the future of their trip. Little do they know this was all part of God's grand design!

My wife is fond of saying, "Sometimes you have to go from point A to point B so that you can see point C. You cannot necessarily see point C from point A though this may be where God wants you to end up. You have to trust Him for every step of the journey." I think Paul would agree! He had to face those disappointments in Asia and Bithynia in order to prepare him to receive the vision of the man

from Macedonia. Imagine how different the world would be if Paul had not brought the gospel to Europe? You and I may not be saved today!

So here's the question…are you seeking God's vision for your life? And are you willing to let Him both open and close doors? Are you willing to let Him lead and guide your steps even if they don't always lead in a straight line? Do you trust Him for provision and protection, strength and wisdom along the way? Do you take your successes and failures, your victories and defeats, your joys and disappointments and lay them at His feet? Most importantly, do you rest in His deep, steadfast, loyal, abiding love?

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 4-6, Acts 16:16-40

July 15, 2021

Being before Doing

Readings for today: Psalms 4-6, Acts 16:16-40

I love the words from the Psalms this morning. They are good for my soul. They slow me down. They re-orient my thoughts. They re-frame my attitudes. They re-order the priorities of my day. You see, I too often fall into the trap of "doing" before "being." I too often try to walk in God's way without first abiding in His love. If I am not careful and intentional, I can quickly turn into a Pharisee. God's will becomes just another thing to strive after on my checklist. I start chasing self-righteousness rather than simply open my heart to receive the righteousness God offers me in Jesus Christ.

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

"But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you. Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me. But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may exult in you. For you bless the righteous, O Lord; you cover him with favor as with a shield." (Psalm 5:7-8, 11-12)

"Turn, O Lord, deliver my life; save me for the sake of your steadfast love." (Psalm 6:4)

God alone makes me dwell in safety. My life is not my own. My security is not mine to maintain. My safety is not my chief concern. My future is not in my hands. God alone holds me in the palm of His hands and He alone provides the rest and peace and comfort I need. God alone is the answer to all my anxieties and fears. It is only through His abundant, steadfast, loyal, faithful love that I have access into His house. His home. His presence. God's love - nothing else - provides the invitation. So I enter His temple with holy reverence and awe and fear and wonder at the miracle of His great love for me. As I bow down in surrender to receive His love, He leads me in righteousness. As a dear friend and fellow elder in the Lord once shared with me, "Doug, you cannot walk in God's will unless you first walk in His love." To put it another way, my "doing" for Jesus must flow from my "being" with Jesus. Life with God cannot be reverse-engineered. In God's presence, there is fullness of joy. In God's presence, there is peace that passes all understanding. In God's presence, there is excitement and energy and exultation. These are the blessings God has reserved for the righteous, those He covers with His favor. These are the blessings I long for in my own life, in the lives of those I love, and in the lives of those who call the church I serve home.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 7-9, Acts 17:1-15

July 16, 2021

Imago Dei

Readings for today: Psalms 7-9, Acts 17:1-15

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.” (Psalm 8:3-8)

Have you ever wondered what it means to be a person? A human being? What is it that sets us apart? What is it that makes us unique? Psalm 8 reminds us of one of the greatest, most fundamental truths in all of Scripture. We are made in the image of God. We are given a position in creation just below the angelic host. We are crowned with glory and honor. And we are given charge over all God has made. Just sit with that thought for a moment. Let it sink in. You are a glorious creature. Worthy of honor because of the image you bear. Irreducibly complex. Unique in every way. Fearfully and wonderfully made by God’s own hands. To get an idea of just how deep this goes, listen to how noted sociologist, Christian Smith, defines personhood, “By person I mean a conscious, reflexive, embodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable identity, moral commitment, and social communication who-as the efficient cause of his or her own responsible actions and interactions-exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity in order to develop and sustain his or her own incommunicable self in loving relationships with other personal selves and with the nonpersonal world.” If that sounds confusing - and I certainly had to read it several times myself - check out how Smith attempts to visualize what he has just said…

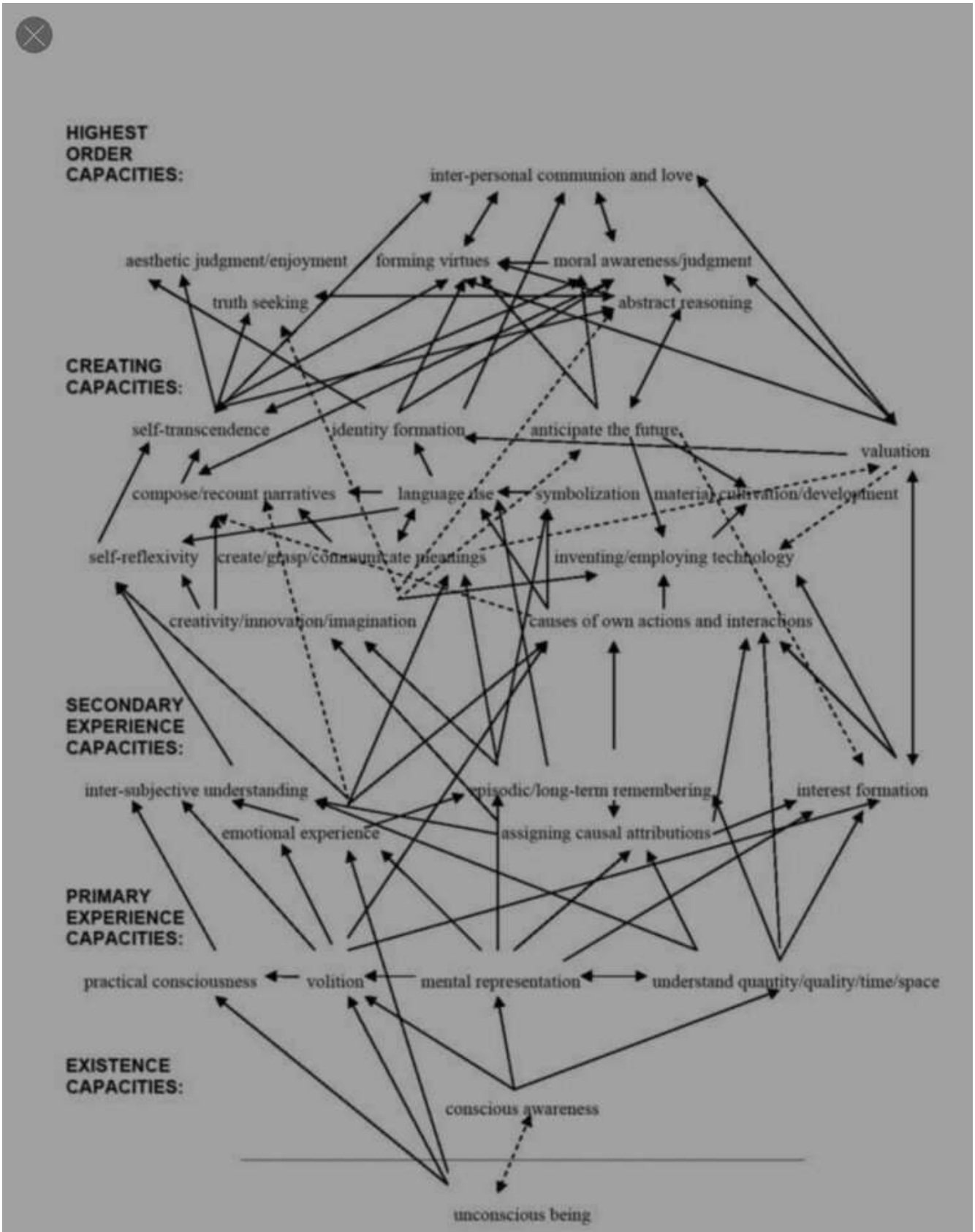


FIGURE 2. Upwardly emergent and downwardly dependent human capacities.

Crazy, right?! And yet it illustrates the incredible depth and beauty and complexity of the human creature. It also gives us a window into why human life can be so confusing at times. After all, who can discern the heart of such a creature? Not even the individual themselves can plumb the depths of their own personhood much less the personhood of others. So what do we do? We settle. We shrink our horizons. We "flatten out" our own personhood or the personhood of those around us. We treat people far too simplistically, even two-dimensionally, and we fail to see them as God created them. This is the tragedy of sin and it results in alienation. Sin alienates us from ourselves. Sin alienates us from one another. Sin alienates us from all God has made. Most especially, sin alienates us from God Himself. In our alienated state, we become confused. We lose sight of the One who made us. Our view of His image becomes warped, corrupted, obscured. The Bible says it is as if we are looking at a cloudy mirror. All we can see is a dim reflection. It's like squinting in a fog or peering through a mist as one translator put it. Left to our own imaginations, we try to create our own image of ourselves. But it never quite works out. It never quite satisfies. Selfishness takes over. We become enslaved to our appetites, desires, passions. We seek to use others for our own gain. Creation itself becomes a resource to exploit for our own ends. And the creature who was made a little lower than the angels exchanges their glorious birthright for more demonic ends. Seeds of distrust are sown. Divisions harden. Hatred rises. Anger takes over. Violence breaks out. We are lost among the ruins of our existence. Doomed to wander in the shadowlands of a world undone by human sin and strife. This is humanity's heartbreaking story. One that gets passed down to every generation.

But what if the Bible is true? What if what it says about humanity is true? What would happen if we could recover our sight? See ourselves and one another for who we truly are? Miraculous image-bearers of God Himself? Handcrafted masterpieces made after His likeness? Icons of God's glory and honor in the world? When we look out at the universe God has made, we see the stars in the nighttime sky. We see incredible vistas spreading before us from the top of mountains. We hear the rushing of the rivers. The crash of ocean waves on the shore. We watch in wonder the coming of the rain and the refreshing of the earth. The rising and the setting of the sun. When we stop and consider all God has made, it is indeed marvelous to consider that we are the crown of such a creation! The image-bearer designed to reign and rule in God's Name and for God's glory in the world. Furthermore, we are God's stewards given charge to care for His creation. God has given all things into our hands. He has entrusted all He has made into our care. What a glorious, yet sobering thought! And God has given us all the capacity we need and the resources we need and the gifts we need to serve Him well in that role.

So how do we bring an end to our alienation? We embrace the love God offers us in Jesus Christ. Through Christ's death and resurrection, God has torn down every dividing wall of hostility that exists and reconciled all things to Himself. In Christ, we have peace with God. Peace with ourselves. Peace with those around us. Peace with our world. In Christ, the image of God is restored. The fog lifts. The mist fades. The dim reflection comes into full view.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 10-12, Acts 17:16-34

July 17, 2021

Holding onto Hope

Readings for today: Psalms 10-12, Acts 17:16-34

"The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord's throne is in heaven; his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man. The Lord tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence. Let him rain coals on the wicked; fire and sulfur and a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup. For the Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face." (Psalm 11:4-7)

I confess there are times when I lose heart. Times when I look at the world around me and feel overwhelmed by all the injustice. All the pain. All the suffering. All the heartbreak. All the fear. All the evil. The cumulative weight of human sin breaks the scales. It is simply incalculable. It is immeasurable. Too vast for me to even imagine. I've looked into the eyes of those who've suffered terrible abuse or violence or disease or life-threatening poverty. I've looked into the eyes of mothers holding out their babies to me, begging me to take them with me. I've looked into the vacant eyes of fathers, lying on a roadside wasted by drugs. I've spent time with the homeless and listened to their heartbreaking stories. I've felt the anger of friends of color who've been victimized by persistent racism or classism. I've seen the injustice of a broken justice system firsthand as a chaplain in a maximum security prison. Truly, humanity's inhumanity is more than I can bear.

I confess there are times when I lose heart. Times when I look at those I love and live among and feel overwhelmed by the burdens they carry. So much anxiety. So much fear. So much chasing after the wind. We are a brittle people. Fragile and easily hurt. There is so much that divides us. So much that tears at the fabric of our life together. So many powerful forces threaten to drive us apart and in many cases they've succeeded. I grieve when I listen to some of my friends. I grieve when I see the hatred they post online. I grieve at the words that are said that cannot be taken back. I grieve when relationships are cut off, people are ghosted, and love is lost in a sea of disappointment and anger and frustration. Truly, the inhumanity with which we often treat one another is more than I can bear.

I confess there are times when I lose heart. Times I look in the mirror and see the depths of my own sin. So much pride. So much selfish ambition and vain conceit. So much entitlement. So much self-righteousness. So much fear and doubt and anxiety and pain. I too chase after the wind. I too am a brittle person. I too am fragile and weak and easily hurt. I've taken shots I did not earn. I've been the subject of rumors and gossip that was both untrue and unfair. These things hurt. They wound. But I am not just a victim. I am a perpetrator as well. I've said things I deeply regret. I've acted in ways that cause me deep shame. I've betrayed. I've wounded. I've hated or despised my brother or sister. I've participated in systems of injustice.I am as much a contributor to the brokenness of this world as anyone. The weight of my sin is incalculable. And my ability to sin seems only surpassed by my ability to rationalize away my sin. Truly, my own inhumanity is more than I can bear.

If I am not careful, I can easily be driven to despair. If I do not stay close to Christ, I will be crushed under the weight of it all. Thankfully, the words of the Psalmist give me hope this morning. They are there to encourage me to look beyond myself. Beyond my own unrighteousness. Beyond the unrighteousness of those around me. Beyond the unrighteousness of this world. To the only One who is truly righteous. The Lord. The One who is even now in His temple. The One who is even now sitting on His throne. The One who reigns and rules from heaven. The One who sees all and knows all. The One who rewards the righteous and calls the wicked to account. The One who will not let sin persist forever. The

One who binds the evil one from enacting his calamities on the earth. The One who controls time and space. God is on His throne. He reigns! He rules! This is our only hope in this life or the next. God is even now working to bring about His will on earth as it is in heaven. He is bringing about His will in my life, in the lives of those I love, and in the community in which I live for His Name's sake and His own glory.

So my prayer this morning is simply this…Father, help me remember. Help me keep my eyes fixed on Christ. Help me to trust that no matter what I may experience, You have never left Your holy temple. You will never abdicate Your throne. You remain sovereign over all. Your eyes see. You are even now testing humanity. The righteous along with the unrighteous. Your righteous judgment is coming. And if I cling to Christ, I will see You face to face. Amen.

Readings for tomorrow: None

July 19, 2021

Godly Contentment

Readings for today: Psalms 13-18, Acts 18

Recently, a friend asked me for the secret to godly contentment. This is a person who struggles to find peace. They are anxious and afraid much of the time. They catastrophize, frequently spinning out only the worst case scenarios. They are pretty negative, often waiting for the other shoe to drop. They assume the worst rather than the best of themselves and others. They are at war with those closest to them. In fact, it was because of a recent blow-up that they found themselves in my office.

I walked them through Psalm 16 and asked them to reflect on a series of questions.

"Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you." Do you believe God is safe? Do you believe His door is always open to you? Do you believe you can run to Him when you are in trouble or when you are anxious and afraid? Do you believe God wants only your good?

"As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight. The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips." Look at the people around you. Look at the people you have surrounded yourself with. Are they godly or ungodly? Are they content or are they anxious? Are they selfless or selfish? Does being with them bring your soul delight or sorrow? Does being with them make you feel closer to God or further away?

"The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance." Is God enough? Is He sufficient? Does He satisfy? When you consider what's most important in your life, is God at the top of the list? Is spending time with Him your greatest joy? Is worshipping Him your greatest desire? When you look at your life, do you see evidence of His blessing? Do you live from a place of gratitude for all He has done for you? All that you've been given? All that He has entrusted into your hands?

"I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken." Do you seek the Lord's wisdom when you make decisions? Do you spend time in prayer when you are anxious and afraid? Do you commit yourself to follow God's ways no matter how crazy it may sound or foolish it may appear in the eyes of the world? Do you follow Christ no matter what the cost?

"Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." (Psalm 16:1-11) Gladness comes when we embrace the promises of God for our life. Security comes when we commit to walking in God's ways. Abundant life flows when we listen to Him. Fullness of joy becomes ours when we dwell in His presence. It is ONLY at God's right hand that we find the eternal pleasure our hearts long for.

How would you answer these questions? As St. Augustine once said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." Our hearts are never content. Never at peace. Never at rest until they find their rest in Christ. Abiding with Him. Intentionally placing ourselves at His right hand. Dwelling His presence. Walking in His ways. Seeking His face. Obeying His will. This is the only way to satisfy the deepest cravings of hearts.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 19-22, Acts 19

July 20, 2021

Following the Way

Readings for today: Psalms 19-22, Acts 19

Have you ever found yourself longing for revival? Not just an emotional high or spiritual mountaintop but something much deeper? Something on a soul-level? Have you ever found yourself longing for wisdom? Not just intellectual knowledge but the deep wisdom that flows from knowing yourself as God knows you? Have you ever found yourself longing for joy? Not just temporary happiness or pleasure but a deep, transcendent level of joy that is in no way dependent on life's circumstances? Have you ever found yourself longing for purity? Longing to be set free from destructive patterns? Longing to be set free from the power of sin? Longing to see rather than stumble blindly through life?

What if I told you I had found the way? What if I told you the way was open to anyone who would seek it? What if I told you there were no pre-conditions you had to meet? No prerequisites you had to take? No hoops you had to jump through in order to join? What if I told you those who followed the way had found something more precious than gold? Sweeter than honey? And those who kept to the way, those who persevered to the end, were given a great reward? Would you consider it? Would you follow it?

What would you be willing to sacrifice for such a life? What would you be willing to give up for such a gift? Would you give up your pride? Give up control? Would you surrender yourself wholly and completely to it? Would you commit yourself - body and soul - to following it? Listen to these words from Psalm 19 again…

"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward." (Psalm 19:7-11)

All the promises of God are available to those who would seek Him. All the gifts of God are given to those who seek to follow Him with their whole hearts. Yes, the way requires surrender. Yes, the way requires relinquishment. Yes, the way requires sacrificing all that we are so that we might gain all God has for us. But the reward is worth it! The riches God has stored up for us in Christ are beyond comprehension! As Jim Elliott - a missionary martyred for his faith - once said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 23-24, Acts 20:1-16

July 21, 2021

Psalm 23

Readings for today: Psalms 23-24, Acts 20:1-16

I love Psalm 23. It's always been one of my favorite passages of Scriptures. It was one of the first I memorized and I find myself coming back to it over and over again when I am anxious or afraid. The words are deeply comforting. This is true not just for me. I cannot tell you the number of people who turn to these verses when they are hurting or in pain or grieving the loss of a loved ones. There's a reason it's a favorite at funerals even for those who have only a casual relationship with the church. There's just something about it that speaks to the deepest places of our souls.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of spending time with the widow of one of my mentors. A man by the name of Bud Sparling. Bud and Carol were some of the most amazing people I have ever met. Their love for Jesus and for each other was legendary. They dedicated their lives to serving the Lord and His people. They traveled the world bringing encouragement and hope to missionaries. They served the church I currently pastor with great faithfulness and devotion. One day I got a call from Carol. She had a terminal illness and asked me to come by to discuss her funeral arrangements. I was happy to go and spend such precious, sacred time with her. As we talked, she told me about a recent dream God had given her. In her dream, she saw her husband Bud lying, eyes closed, smile on his face, in a lush, green meadow. Beside him ran a small river filled with the clearest water you could ever see. The sky was a deep, divine blue. As she walked towards him, Bud opened his eyes and said, "Honey, it's better than we ever imagined." Then he patted the grass next to him and said, "There's plenty of room for the both of us." Tears come to my eyes even now as I think about Carol sharing this dream with me. It was a precious gift.

This is the picture I have in my mind when I think of heaven. Lush mountain meadows. Clear mountain streams. Not a cloud in the sky. Plenty of room for all those who follow the Good Shepherd. Plenty of room for all those who hear and know His voice. But life this side of heaven is lived in the valley of the shadow. Here we are constantly haunted by the specter of death. Fear and anxiety threaten us on every side. The only hope we have is that the Good Shepherd never leaves our side. He walks with us in the valley of the shadow of death just as he once walked with us in the cool of the day in the Garden of Eden. He is always with us. His rod and staff are there to comfort us and protect us. He prepares a feast for us in the presence of our enemies. A feast of victory. A feast of celebration for death and evil and sin have been overcome! It's a feast honoring the Good Shepherd who lays His life down for His sheep.

Friends, the key to walking this road is to keep our eyes on the Good Shepherd. Don't lose sight of Him! Don't let the noise of this world drown out His voice! Don't give His enemy a foothold! If you take your eyes off the Good Shepherd, you will find yourself jumping at every shadow. You'll find yourself trembling at every strange sound. You'll look for enemies around every corner. The devil under every rock. Don't let fear, anxiety, doubts, insecurities, or a sense of scarcity rob you of the hope and confidence you have in Christ! These things are real to be sure but don't give them more power than they deserve! It is Christ who has won the victory! It is Christ who secures your place in His eternal Kingdom! It is Christ who prepares a place for you even now in His eternal home! It is Christ who offers you goodness and mercy all the days of your life! Christ does all these things and more for those He calls His own. Place your trust in Him today!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 25-27, Acts 20:17-38

July 22, 2021

The Path of Righteousness

Readings for today: Psalms 25-27, Acts 20:17-38

Many years ago, my wife and I had the opportunity to take a trek through the jungles in northern Rwanda to see the mountain gorillas in their natural habitat. Early in the morning, the runners go out to find the more than twenty pods of gorillas in the forest. They radio back to the guides who then take small groups of people into the forest to spend about an hour with the gorillas. There are no trails. The path has to be hacked out of the wildness by machete. Armed guards come with you to make sure you stay safe in case you run across elephants or Cape buffalo. After about two hours, it became clear to us that our guides were a bit lost. The gorillas were not where they were supposed to be. The section of the forest we found ourselves in was not familiar to them. So they wisely stopped, reconnected with the runners from the morning, and then began hacking out a new path in a new direction that eventually put us right in the middle of a gorilla pod where we got to spend the next two hours watching them eat and play. It was a once in a lifetime experience.

I thought about that trip when I read these words from Psalm 25:10 this morning…"All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies." (Psalm 25:10) All God's ways are marked by steadfast love and faithfulness. All God's ways are marked by grace and peace. A great test of whether I am on the righteous path or not is to evaluate where I stand in relation to these things. Are my "paths" marked by anxiety or fear? Are my paths marked by anger or outrage? Are my paths marked by scorn or ridicule or disdain? Are my paths marked by hatred and violence? Or are my paths marked by unresolved hurt or pain? Are my paths marked by unforgiveness and toxicity? Are my paths marked by foolishness or pride? You see, if I am not careful I can easily stray off the path. I am prone to wander off the trail Christ has marked out for me. And when I do, I invite all kinds of heartache and heartburn into my life. But if I keep my eyes on Jesus. If I commit to walking in His footsteps. Doing life His way. Loving those He loves. Serving those He serves. Then my days will be marked by grace and peace. Steadfast love and faithfulness. For this is where ALL the paths of the Lord lead.

Friends, God walks in steadfast love. God's love is kind and patient. It does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude. God's love keeps no record of wrongs. It does not grow irritable or resentful. It never rejoices in wrongdoing or falsehood or deceit but always rejoices with the truth. God's love believes all things. Hopes all things. Endures all things. God's love never fails. And those who commit to walk in God's ways should expect to experience such love themselves as well as have a desire to extend such love to others.

God walks in faithfulness. He never leaves or abandons or betrays or walks away from us. He is never unavailable, never closed off, never dismissive of our concerns. He is faithful to the faithless. A father to the fatherless. A savior for sinners. And those who commit to walk in God's ways will also lead lives marked by such faithfulness. They will trod these same paths. They will find themselves taking the hard, narrow way of continual self-denial that leads to glory rather than the easy, wide way of self-gratification that leads to destruction. In short, as we read yesterday, they will find themselves being led on paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Sadly, the reality is I am prone to wander. I too easily lose sight of where I am going. I too quickly abandon the paths of righteousness in order to blaze a trail on my own. When I do, I end up crashing through the bamboo. Bushwhacking through the wilderness. Getting lost in uncharted territory. I too

easily place my trust in blind guides. I too often listen to foolish voices. I too often follow faithless leaders. This includes myself for I am just as blind and foolish and faithless as the next person! Thankfully, the good news of the gospel is that when I confess my sin, God is faithful and just to forgive me, take me by the hand, and lead me back on His paths.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 28-30, Acts 21:1-16

July 23, 2021

Gratitude

Readings for today: Psalms 28-30, Acts 21:1-16

What has the Lord done for you? Can you count His blessings? Can you see the miraculous ways in which He has provided? Can you measure the lavish riches of His grace? Yesterday, I ran across a quote from a brilliant theologian named J.I. Packer about knowing God. He writes, “We are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it .The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfold, as it were , with no sense of direction, and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.” I found myself thinking a lot about that quote as I read through the Psalms assigned for today. It is because the Psalmist knows God that he can call on God. It’s because the Psalmist has confidence in God’s steadfast love and faithfulness that he can cry out to God. It’s because the Psalmist truly trusts God that he can present his needs before Him. Perhaps most importantly, it’s because the Psalmist sees how much God has done for him that he lives his life with a deep sense of gratitude.

I cannot begin to tell you all the things God has done for me. He chose the place I was born and the family I was born into. He gave me intellectual and emotional and physical gifts that have carried me far in life. I was able to learn in good schools with teachers who cared deeply for me. I was able to grow up in relative safety and comfort. I had parents who loved me and instilled strong values in me. I have two brothers who are among my closest friends. Throughout my life, I’ve benefited from educational and professional opportunities. God brought a godly woman into my life who is my best friend. I have four children that I am embarrassingly proud of and love with all my heart. All of these are amazing blessings that come from the hands of God.

At the same time, I’ve seen my fair share of tragedy and hardship as well. Growing up wasn’t easy. My family faced financial hardships at times. My parents lost their business in the 1980’s and we almost ended up homeless as a result. I can remember days when all we had in our refrigerator was one cup of yogurt and there were five us to feed. I’ve had to overcome addictions in my life to alcohol and pornography. These behaviors cost me friendships and I grieve them to this day. My wife and I lost our first child as a result of major birth defects. Caleb would be 23 years old today. I suffered a professional failure in Wisconsin that almost put me out of ministry altogether. It also brought me face to face with the end of my faith. I’ve seen life-threatening poverty among those I love in developing countries around the world. I’ve tasted fear and anxiety and allowed my insecurities to cripple me at times. But through it all, there was one constant…God. He was always present and faithful to make Himself known to me as I remained committed to come before Him with my needs each and every day.

Perhaps that’s why these words from today ring so true for me…

“For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” (Psalm 30:5)

”You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever!” (Psalm 30:11-12)

When we choose to focus on all the good things God has done, our hearts are filled with gratitude. An infectious joy fills our lives. A peace that passes all understanding descends upon us. Our mourning turns to dancing. Our weeping tarries only for a night, giving way to joy in the morning. Yes, we will suffer in this “strange, mad, painful place.” Yes, life will be “disappointing and unpleasant” at times. Yes, there will be moments when you will feel like you are “stumbling and blundering through life blindfolded, as it were , with no sense of direction, and no understanding of what surrounds you.” Things may get so bad you may feel like you are “wasting your life and losing your soul.” But even there God is with you. God is waiting for you. God is near you. God will make Himself known to you. Simply keep walking through the open door into His presence. Keep approaching His throne of grace with confidence. Keep trusting God is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 31-33, Acts 21:17-36

July 24, 2021

People of the Truth

Readings for today: Psalms 31-33, Acts 21:17-36

"For God's Word is solid to the core; everything he makes is sound inside and out. He loves it when everything fits, when his world is in plumb-line true. Earth is drenched in God's affectionate satisfaction." (Psalm 33:4-5)

"Because the LORD's word is right, his every act is done in good faith. He loves righteousness and justice; the LORD's faithful love fills the whole earth." (Psalms 33:4-5)

"For the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord." (Psalm 33:4-5)

One of the things I love doing is reading the same verses in different versions. It helps me grasp the depth and breadth of what God is trying to reveal to me. In today's reading, we ran across these words speaking to the sufficiency of God's Word. They highlight the truth of God's Word. The trustworthiness of God's Word. And what happens when human beings commit to following God's Word. If we truly aligned our will with God's will, the earth would be filled with righteousness and justice or as Eugene Peterson translated it, "Earth is drenched in God's affectionate satisfaction." I don't know about you but I would love to live in such a world! I would love to live in a place flooded with God's steadfast love and faithfulness. I would love to live a culture that reflects biblical values and the heart of the gospel. I would love to see all injustice end and all evil stopped and all sin cease. I would love to see everything "fit" according to God's perfect plan.

Sadly, we don't live in such a world. Even more tragically, we don't live in such a church. The church is supposed to be the one place where God's Word reigns supreme. It is the one community where God's Word should hold ultimate authority. After all, we spend hours preaching God's Word and teaching God's Word and challenging people to follow God's Word. But the influence of the world is powerful. Almost too hard to resist. Social media. Cable news. Talk radio. There is a cacophony of voices clamoring for our attention on a daily basis. It is chaotic. Noisy. Confusing. It's easy to be drawn this way and that or tossed about like a ship on the waves of the sea. Across the country, churches are being torn apart by political divisions, ethnic divisions, social divisions, cultural divisions, and so much more. Add a dangerous pandemic to that mix and you have an incredibly toxic brew.

That's why it's so important to stay grounded in God's Word. God's people must remain tethered to God's Truth. His Word is our lifeline in a world rapidly spinning out of control. His Word is our lifesaver in a sea of chaos. His Word is the bedrock which keeps us stable in the midst of all the storms.

Bonus: If you want a great example of what I'm talking about, check out these two sermons by Dr. Tony Evans. He is addressing the issue of Critical Race Theory (CRT) from a biblical perspective or what he calls Kingdom Race Theology (KRT). It's a great illustration on how to bring biblical truth to bear on one of the most pressing cultural issues of our day.

Sermon #1

Sermon #2

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 34-38, Acts 21:37-23:11

July 26, 2021

Fixing our Eyes on Jesus

Readings for today: Psalms 34-38, Acts 21:37-23:11

One of my favorite verses is Hebrews 12:2 - "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." I believe it is the key to the Christian life. It is the pathway to all of God's promises. Imagine a life filled with unspeakable joy, peace that passes all understanding, amazing grace, and unconditional love. All of that is accessed in Christ and through Christ. It is the glorious inheritance of the people of God. These are the riches God pours out on those who place their trust in His Beloved Son.

So why do so many Christians struggle? Why do so many Christians live with anxiety, doubt, suffering, pain, heartache, disappointment, discouragement, and fear? My experience as a pastor tells me that - at least in part - it's because we take our eyes off of Jesus or we don't know how to fix our eyes on Him in the first place. Too many of us want it both ways. We want to love the things of this world and love Jesus. We want to secure both an earthly and eternal inheritance. We want to be great in the eyes of our peers and in the eyes of God. We want to make a name for ourselves and a name for God. We want the position or platform and the power that comes with it without suffering the passion of Jesus. The Bible calls this double-mindedness. We're trying to live in two worlds. Our loyalties are divided between two radically different kingdoms. Our allegiances are split. Our minds and hearts confused. Our thinking warped. And it's why so many of us live "lives of quiet desperation" or we are full of "sound and fury signifying nothing."

So what does it mean to fix our eyes on Jesus? What does that actually look like in practice? Think of Peter walking on water. He took steps of faith outside of the boat. Outside his comfort zone. Outside his normative experience. Peter was a fisherman. He knew boats inside and out. He knew the Sea of Galilee inside and out. He knew the laws of physics. He knew people didn't walk on water. But when he fixed his eyes on Jesus, something that was impossible became possible. Something he would never have imagined suddenly became reality. He actually stepped out on the waves and only began to sink when he started to look around and allowed doubt to creep in. Think of Paul. Paul was the Jew of Jews. He was born into the tribe of Benjamin. Circumcised according to the Law on the eighth day. Studied under one of the greatest rabbi's of his day. Advanced beyond his age and his peers. He was a brilliant Pharisee. According to the Law of God, he was blameless. His devotion to the Law of God made him the greatest heresy hunter of his time. But when he fixed his eyes on Jesus outside the city of Damascus, everything changed. All the accomplishments of his former life turned to dust. He counted everything now as loss for the sake of knowing Christ.

I thought about these two men when I read through the Psalms assigned for today. The language is poetic. The images are striking. The words make our hearts sing when we read them. I believe that's because they are conveying the same deep truth that the author of the Book of Hebrews is pointing us to. Simply put, the Psalmist wants us to see Jesus. Wants us to fix our eyes on Him. Wants the treasures of this earth to grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. Listen again. Take your time. Slow down. Savor each verse and the promise it contains. Let the Spirit stir your heart use these words to change your life…

"My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad." (Psalm 34:2)

“I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.” (Psalm 34:4)

“Those who look to the Lord are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed.” (Psalm 34:5)

“Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!” (Psalm 34:8)

“The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry. The face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth. When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.” (Psalm 34:15-19)

“Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” (Psalm 37:4)

“Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday.” (Psalm 37:5-6)

“Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!” (Psalm 37:7)

“The Lord knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will remain forever…”(Psalm 37:18)

“Wait for the Lord and keep his way, and he will exalt you to inherit the land; you will look on when the wicked are cut off.” (Psalm 37:34)

“The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; he is their stronghold in the time of trouble. The Lord helps them and delivers them; he delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in him.” (Psalm 37:39-40)

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 39-41, Acts 23:12-35

July 27, 2021

Life is Fleeting

Readings for today: Psalms 39-41, Acts 23:12-35

Life is fleeting. It comes and goes. It is here today and gone tomorrow. It's full of ups and downs. We have moments when we feel like we are on top of the world. We have moments when we feel we are living in the depths of despair. Circumstances conspire to steal our joy. Situations are thrust upon us over which we have no control. Sacred moments rush in filling our souls with peace. We experience special moments of feeling deeply loved and accepted. But it's messy. It's a jumble. Life is not always up and to the right.

The Bible acknowledges all these things, of course. One of the things I love most about God's Word is that it never shies away from real life. It embraces all that is good and bad and ugly about our experience in this world. It reminds us never to place our trust or hope in the things of this world. Instead, the Bible encourages us to store up our treasures in heaven. To look beyond the horizons of this earth to the world to come. The reality is we are eternal creatures. We are creatures made to live forever. Death is not the end for us but merely a doorway to another dimension of life. That dimension could be heaven. That dimension could be hell. Either way, we will find ourselves still very much alive. Conscious. Aware. And that should create a sense of perspective for us. It should right-size our expectations of life in this world.

I love how the Psalmist puts it in today's reading…"O Lord, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Surely a man goes about as a shadow! Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!" (Psalm 39:4-6) It's also good to read in the Message version…"Tell me, what's going on, God? How long do I have to live? Give me the bad news! You've kept me on pretty short rations; my life is a string too short to be saved. Oh! we're all puffs of air. Oh! we're all shadows in a campfire. Oh! we're just spit in the wind. We make our pile, and then we leave it."(Psalm 39:4-6)

It sounds pretty hopeless, doesn't it? Sounds like the Psalmist is struggling to come to grips with meaning and purpose in the face of death. As he feels his own life potentially ebbing away, he wonders what the point of it all might be? Our days are indeed few. We spend quite a few of them in turmoil. Our lives are strings too short to be saved. We are but puffs of air on the wind. We are shadows in a campfire. Naked we came from the womb and naked we shall return to the dust. We can take nothing with us. All this is true and still the Psalmist declares, "My hope is in You." (Psalms 39:7) Despite how he's feeling. Despite what his lived experience is teaching him. Against all natural human instinct, he clings to hope as he clings to God. It's a powerful testimony and one we all need to hear especially in this cultural moment.

There is so much about life right now that causes us to despair. People we love are getting sick or suffering or even dying. Friendships we once enjoyed are fracturing. Whatever work/life balance we had before the pandemic has been completely upended. Routines have been scrapped. Rhythms disrupted. Schedules shot. Layer onto that the increasing polarization of our country, our workplaces, our neighborhoods, our schools, our churches, even our families, and it probably feels like nowhere is truly safe. The Psalmist knows how we feel. "I was mute and silent; I held my peace to no avail, and my distress grew worse. My heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned…" (Psalm 39:2-3) So what did he do? Did he lash out? Did he burn everything to the ground? Did he let his despair get the best of

him? No. He turned to the Lord. He cried out to God. He took a step back and tried to see things from God's perspective. This is what gave him hope. Not that everything would turn out okay in the end or that he would live happily ever after but that God would hear his prayer. God would see his tears. God would meet him in his sojourning and cause him to smile again.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 42-43, Acts 24

July 28, 2021

Mental Health

Readings for today: Psalms 42-43, Acts 24

Recently, our awareness of the importance of mental health has been elevated by some of the top athletes in the world. It began with Naomi Osaka, the number one female tennis player in the world, skipping the French Open press conferences to take care of herself. It was highlighted again during the Olympics by arguably the greatest gymnast of all time, Simone Biles, withdrawing from both team and individual competitions. It reminded us of Michael Phelps and his struggles once he left the Olympic stage. This has sparked a conversation that is spreading rapidly as more and more athletes open up about their personal struggles to deal with the pressure that comes with competing at an elite level. This is not new, of course, but the openness to actually talking about it is new. The vulnerability displayed by these athletes is both courageous and inspiring and hopefully will lead to some necessary changes moving forward. Elite athletes are human beings just like all of us. They are subject to the same fears and anxieties that we all suffer from. Rather than dismiss their concerns or critique their decisions, we should thank them for casting a spotlight on what is rapidly - according to mental health professionals across the country - another, albeit more hidden, pandemic. Depression rates have tripled over the last year. Substance abuse rates have skyrocketed. More and more adults are reporting struggles with anxiety disorders. And we have yet to see the crest of the tide. Many of us are just beginning to come to grips with the losses we've suffered over the past year. Many of us are in the early stages of grief and are trying to find ways to cope even as coronavirus cases begin to rise and the specter of re-instated mandates loom. Many of us are teetering on the edge of burnout and feel like we cannot open up to those around us. As the tidal wave builds, I expect it to cost people jobs, churches, friendships, marriages, and families. In short, all we hold dear. So where do go for help?

As always, we turn to the Lord. I love how the Psalmist describes his own struggle with anxiety and fear in today's reading…

"As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." We are living through a spiritual drought of historic proportions. We continue to turn to cracked cisterns of our own making rather than to the well of Living Water. The thirst we are feeling arises from the very depths of our being and can only be quenched by God Himself.

"When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, "Where is your God?" How many of us are tossing and turning at night? How many of us are struggling to sleep? Struggling to rest? Struggling to find peace? How many of us are wrestling with demons that threaten to overwhelm? How many of us are turning to alcohol or opioids or marijuana to calm our fears?

"These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival." Perhaps we can all look back and remember a more joyful time? A time when we seemed happy? Things seemed good? Maybe life was going great pre-pandemic and COVID has utterly wrecked whatever dreams you may have had? Maybe it's been a long time since you felt safe and secure and like you could come into the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise?

The Psalmist gives us a prescription for our pain. Medicine for our mental health. Listen closely to what he says…

“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me. By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God, my rock: “Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?” As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?” Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.”

The Psalmist teaches us to do three things when we feel anxious and afraid. First, we remember. We remember the good things God has done. We remember what God has done for His people throughout history. How God met them in places like Jordan and Hermon. Second, we remember God’s character. He is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness. He walks beside us by day. He stands guard over us by night. He will never leave us nor forsake us. Third and finally, we engage in the act of praise. We praise God in both good times and bad. We praise God when the skies are clear or in the midst of the storm. We praise God when we feel great and we praise God when we feel weak. We praise God when we feel deeply connected to Him and we praise God when we feel like He’s distant or has forgotten us. The act of praise literally lifts our hearts. The act of praise re-orients our thoughts. The act of praise releases dopamine in the brain which provides a strong antidote to the anxiety we may be feeling.

Friends, it’s okay to not be okay. It’s okay to feel weak, fragile, and vulnerable. It’s okay to not have it altogether. It’s okay to admit you need help. God is with you. He will never leave you. He will never forsake you. He loves you with an everlasting love. And He has surrounded you with people and resources for help when you find yourself in need. Come to the well of Living Water and let Christ quench your thirsty soul.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 44-46, Acts 25

July 30, 2021

God's Politics

Readings for today: Psalms 47-49, Acts 26

We live in deeply divided political times. Not only here in America but around the world. The tribal impulse lying deep in the heart of every person is breaking out in violence across the globe. Democrats vs. Republicans. Progressives vs. conservatives. Left wing extremism vs. right-wing extremism. Fascism vs. communism. Authoritarian regimes vs. populist uprisings. The conflicts are often ethnic, religious, and socio-economic. Each class vying for power. Each tribe jockeying for control. Each party seeking to dominate the other. The rhetoric is heated and often hateful. Political opponents are often cast as traitors and enemies of the state. Violence is subtly or not so subtly encouraged. Fear has been weaponized. Anxiety has been conscripted. Shame has been employed to devastating effect in the cause of ideological purity.

What's a Christian to do? How should a Christ-follower respond? Well, I love how the Apostle Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." What is Paul talking about here? He's talking about using a gentle answer to turn away wrath. He's talking about confronting violence by turning the other cheek. He's talking about addressing hatred with love. He's talking about overcoming hurt and pain with forgiveness and grace. Now some might call Paul naive. Some might consider him a Pollyanna. Some might argue you have to fight fire with fire lest you be consumed. But Paul's no stranger to abuse. Paul's no stranger to injustice. Paul's no stranger to pain and suffering. Furthermore, even a cursory reading of the Book of Acts shows how politically savvy Paul could be whether it was arguing in front of the Sanhedrin or before the Areopagus in Athens or attempting to convince King Agrippa to place his faith in Christ or ultimately in his appeal to Rome. Paul used each and every trial to proclaim Jesus and he never resorted to underhanded or manipulative tactics to achieve his goals.

What shaped Paul's approach? What gave him the confidence to stand fast when the temptation would be to use whatever means necessary to preserve his own life or the lives of those he loved? It was his confidence in God. Paul was a Pharisee. He had the Old Testament memorized. From birth, he had been raised to believe and to trust in the sovereignty of God. I imagine when Paul found himself on trial before political or religious authorities, he may have even recited the words from Psalm 47 to himself…

"Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy! For the Lord, the Most High, is to be feared, a great king over all the earth. He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet. He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves. God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet. Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises! For God is the King of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm! God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne. The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted!"

What would happen if we truly believed God ruled the nations of the earth? What would happen if we truly lived as if God were seated on His throne? How would it change the way we live, the way we interact, the way we engage politically if we had complete and utter confidence that though earthly kingdoms rise and fall, the Kingdom of God endures forever? Friends, love of country is a good thing, it

simply cannot become an ultimate thing. Political engagement is a good thing, it simply cannot become cage match to the death. Standing up for what you believe is a good thing but not if you are standing on the backs of those who may disagree with you. Ideological purity leads idolatry when we forget that it is God who sits on the throne of the universe.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 50-52, Acts 27:1-26

July 31, 2021

Preparing for Worship

Readings for today: Psalms 50-52, Acts 27:1-26

It's important to prepare our hearts for worship. It's important to understand the magnitude of the act we participate in on a Saturday evening or Sunday morning. Worship is not entertainment. Worship is not an experience. Worship is an encounter. An encounter with the Living God. In worship we enter into His Presence. We come into His house. His throne room. We find ourselves in His space which is governed by His terms. His will. His ways. As such, our will no longer matters. Our desires no longer reign. Our thoughts and attitudes no longer hold any importance. God is God and we are not. If we are not overwhelmingly confronted with that thought when we worship then we must question whether we have truly worshipped at all.

God doesn't need us, friends. He doesn't need our worship. He doesn't need our gifts. He doesn't need our attention. He is fully complete and whole in Himself. He is fully satisfied in Himself. He is fully sufficient in Himself. Listen to how the Psalmist puts it…"Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?" (Psalm 50:8-13) God is not like us. He is wholly other. He exists outside time and space. He has no need of anything we might bring. And yet, He extends His hand to us. He invites us to be in relationship with Him. Out of the overflow of the love that exists between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are invited to participate in the life of God in worship. It is the greatest privilege of our lives. The greatest honor we could ever receive. This is why we "offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform our vows to the Most High, and call upon Him in the day of trouble…" (Psalm 50:14-15) trusting Him to deliver us.

Such a monumental event requires intentional preparation. We would never attend a function at the White House without first thinking through what we will wear, what we will say, or what we might do. We would never attend a special event held in someone's honor without preparing a gift. So how does one prepare oneself for worship? We pray the prayer King David prayed in Psalm 51. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit." (Psalm 51:10-12) We ask God to do what we cannot. We cannot wash ourselves clean. We cannot remove the stain of sin. We cannot maintain a righteous spirit. These are things God must do for us and the great news of the gospel is He already has! Out of the deepest gratitude for all God has done in Christ, we bring the only sacrifice that is acceptable. The only sacrifice God values. The only sacrifice we can possibly offer which is "a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, God will not despise." (Psalm 51:17)

When we humble ourselves before God in worship. Offering Him the broken pieces of our lives. Asking Him to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. God responds. God answers our prayers. God hears our cries. And He goes to work. We become like a green olive tree in His house. His steadfast love and faithfulness sustain us for all of life and all eternity. Our hearts overflow with gratitude and thanksgiving for all He has done. And we find ourselves longing more and more to join God's people in worship around His throne.

Readings for tomorrow: None

August 2, 2021

Defining Salvation

Readings for today: Psalms 53-58, Acts 27:27-28:10

What is salvation? Is it just fire insurance? A "Get out of Hell" free card? Getting our ticket punched to heaven? Is it raising a hand in a worship service? Is it walking the sawdust trail to pray the sinner's prayer? Is it being baptized? What does it mean to be saved? What are we saved from? What are we saved for?

The Bible defines salvation as a wholistic, transformative experience whereby we are delivered from death and delivered to new life. We are delivered from slavery and we are delivered into a life of freedom. We are delivered from the kingdom of darkness and delivered into a kingdom of light. It's literally a new birth. We are literally given a new heart. Our feet are literally set on a new path. Listen to how the Psalmist describes it from our reading today…"For you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life." (Psalm 56:13)

Salvation, according to Scripture, is far more than simply securing our eternal destiny. It is far more than raising our hand or praying a prayer. It is far more than any sacramental act we participate in. It is nothing short of God miraculously interceding in human history to claim yet another soul for His very own. It is nothing short of God graciously choosing to adopt a new son or daughter into His family. It is nothing short of God expanding His Kingdom, one subject at a time. There is no such thing as being "called" without become His child. There is no such thing as being "delivered" without becoming His disciple. There is no such thing as being "saved" without becoming His subject. Jesus is either BOTH Lord and Savior or He is neither of those things.

Sadly, too many people believe they can experience deliverance without obedience. They naively believe they can be saved from bondage into some kind of neutral territory where they don't have to be subject to God or the devil. They believe God will set them free but make no further claim on their lives. They want all the privileges that come with being a child of the King without any of the responsibilities. It's why so many self-identified Christians live lives that look no different from their unbelieving neighbors. And it's why the unbelieving world finds the Christian faith unbelievable.

The Psalmist teaches us a different way. Yes, God delivers our souls from death. Just as He did for Adam and Eve. Just as He did for Noah and his family. Just as He did for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Just as He did for Israel in Egypt. God is a God of deliverance. God is a God of salvation. God specializes in setting His people free from bondage to sin and death. But that's only half the salvation equation. God not only delivers us from death and keeps our feet from falling, He does these things so we might walk in newness of life. He saves us so that we might walk before Him in the light of new life. Not only that but God saves us so our lives might become a credible testimony to the transforming power of the gospel to those around us. God's great desire is that all should be saved. All should be delivered from death. All should have their feet kept from falling. All should walk before Him in newness of life. You and I are therefore called to live out our faith in very public ways so that those around us who do not yet believe might see and experience the difference salvation makes in a person's life.

Friends, God desires a relationship with us. A deep, intimate walk with us. Just like He had with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Just as He will one day again have when New Jerusalem descends to

earth. One of the many reasons why the gospel is “good news” is we don’t have to wait! We can begin this walk with God today. All we have to do is open the door of our hearts and let Him in.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 59-61, Acts 28:11-31

August 3, 2021

Poured Out

Readings for today: Psalms 59-61, Acts 28:11-31

The Apostle Paul is one of my heroes. From the time he met the Risen Christ outside of Damascus until his death in Rome many years later, he never stopped preaching Christ. Never stopped proclaiming the gospel. It didn't matter whether people agreed with him or not. Stones did not stop him. Riots didn't stop him. Death threats didn't stop him. Opponents from within the church didn't stop him. Imprisonment didn't stop him. Poverty, shipwreck, pain, suffering…none of it got in his way. He simply took each and every opportunity in each and every city he went to share Jesus with those who did not yet know him. Even at the end of his life here in Acts 28, we see him using his imprisonment and impending martyrdom to teach people about the Kingdom of God.

"He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance." (Acts 28:30-31)

It's a powerful testimony to the strength and resilience of Paul's faith. He never seemed to waver. Never seemed to doubt. Never seemed to question. Once he met the Risen Christ, it was like something clicked in Paul's Pharisee brain. The hope of Israel had come. By raising Jesus from the dead, God had placed His divine stamp of approval on His life and ministry and mission. The vindication that Paul himself expected to receive at the end of time through resurrection had broken into history in the Person of Jesus. It was mind-blowing and life-altering and Paul never looked back. He devoted the rest of his life to sharing this good news with the world. Jew and Gentile alike. Any who would come and listen.

Perhaps you wonder about Paul's state of mind here at the end of his life? Perhaps you wonder as death approached if he ever caved into fear or anxiety? Perhaps you wonder how he faced his death with such courage? Listen to the words he wrote to his young protege, Timothy, while he was imprisoned in Rome. "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing." (2 Timothy 4:6-8)

What was the source of Paul's "boldness" at the end of his life? It was Christ. Paul kept his eyes firmly fixed on Jesus. He looked beyond the horizons of this life to the life to come where he knew his reward awaited him. He understood that those who give their lives in service to Christ - whether preachers or teachers, worship leaders or artists, business owners or line employees, CEO's or sanitation workers, professional athletes or politicians - all will receive the crown of righteousness for the work they do in spreading the gospel. All will receive the reward they are due for the sacrifices they make to expand God's Kingdom.

Friends, we can pour our lives out for many things in this world. We can chase our dreams. We can achieve our goals. We can pursue all sorts of influence, power, success, and wealth. But at the end of the day, the only thing truly worth giving your life for is Jesus. The only vision truly worth pursuing is the vision He casts of His Kingdom. The only race worth running is the one that finds it's finish line in heaven.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 62-64, Romans 1

August 4, 2021

The Power of the Gospel

Readings for today: Psalms 62-64, Romans 1

You may have seen the news out of Europe about the Dutch man who tried to change his legal age. Biologically, he is in his sixties but he "feels" like he's in his forties and his life is diminished because of the discrimination that happens the older one gets. You may have caught the news out of England about the man who believes passionately in "ethical veganism" and wants it to become legally protected as a religion so he can potentially force his former employer to give him his job back as well as change their investment practices so as not to violate his religious beliefs. You may have seen the opinion piece in the New York Times from the transgender woman who argues the medical ethical guildeline of "Do no harm" no longer should apply because no doctor should ever have the authority to determine what actually "harms" another person. "I also believe that surgery's only prerequisite should be a simple demonstration of want. Beyond this, no amount of pain, anticipated or continuing, justifies its withholding." (Andrea Long Chu, NYT, 11/24/2018) These may seem like isolated cases to you. Outliers we should dismiss. I disagree.

I believe they are the prime examples of God giving us over to the "lusts of our hearts...dishonorable passions...debased minds." Now please hear me. I am not being mean. I am not being judgmental. I am simply pointing out the reality of what happens when we turn away from God. We dis-integrate. Body, mind, heart, and soul are set in opposition to one another, resulting in skyrocketing rates of depression and suicide ideation. Dysphoria, once considered a mental illness, is now being celebrated and embraced. The Apostle Paul knew the tragic consequences of such thinking. It was celebrated in his own context as well. Human beings, created and designed to bring God glory and honor, turned from their sacred vocation and pursued their own pleasure. They did what was right in their own eyes. They forged their own path only to find it leading them over a cliff. The most heartbreaking part of reading the New York Times story mentioned above was Andrea's willingness, even desire, to embrace depression and suicide. She admits taking hormones and having surgery will actually take her deeper into depression but she sees no alternative. She has no hope.

This is why Paul's stirring words in Romans 1:16 are so important! "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Make no mistake, Paul doesn't believe the gospel is simply a good idea. One philosophy among many. One path among many to get to God. No, he truly believes the gospel provides the ONLY answer to the problem of pain and suffering of this world. He truly believes the gospel provides the ONLY hope we can possibly have for a better, richer, more integrated life. He truly believes the gospel ALONE has the power to save humanity from itself.

Now I know this idea is very unpopular in our culture today. To suggest Christianity is somehow superior in any way to any other religious or philosophical idea is considered arrogant and condescending. Exclusive and intolerant. But let me put it another way. Imagine you develop a successful treatment for cancer. Imagine your success rate is 100% at curing the disease. Sure, there are a lot of other treatments out there. Some more successful than others but none of them provide the cure your treatment guarantees. Would it not be right to promote it as the better, more superior option? Paul believes the gospel is the power of God for salvation. He believes it actually delivers on what it promises. Is he not right then to promote it as the superior cure to what ails humanity? Namely, sin? Is he not right to promote it above Torah? Are we not right to promote it above Islam? Hinduism? Buddhism? If we truly believe Jesus is God then how can we NOT declare Him as superior in every

way to Mohammed, Krishna, Buddha, even Moses? Friends, this is exactly the truth that changed Paul's life on the road outside Damascus. When he realized Jesus had been raised from the dead, he knew He could be no ordinary prophet. Jesus must be God and therefore everything Jesus said or did must be true. And if everything Jesus said or did must be true then we must believe Him. And if we believe Him then we will surrender our lives to Him. And if we surrender our lives to Him then we will be submit all our thoughts, feelings, and actions to His Lordship. And if we submit to His Lordship, we will find ourselves a regenerated and re-integrated people living not for ourselves but for the honor and glory of God. This is the power of the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 65-67, Romans 2

August 5, 2021

God of our Salvation

Readings for today: Psalms 65-67, Romans 2

I love the deep faith of the Psalmist. Life in the ancient world was incredibly hard. It was a daily grind. A person lived under constant threat of famine or plague or some other natural disaster. Each spring the armies would go off to war with the fate of the nation hanging in the balance. Disease and death were constant companions. And yet in the midst of it all, he looks to God for salvation. He knows he can trust in God's character. He knows He can trust in God's power. He knows He can trust God's nature which is good and righteous and holy. This is what gives him hope. Not worldly success or comfort. Not earthly power or treasure. Not even his own physical well-being. God alone is the "hope of all the earth and of the farthest seas…" Listen to how he puts it…

"By awesome deeds you answer us with righteousness, O God of our salvation, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas; the one who by his strength established the mountains, being girded with might; who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples, so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth are in awe at your signs. You make the going out of the morning and the evening to shout for joy." (Psalm 65:5-8)

You and I live in much different times. Life in America in the 21st century could not be more different than life in ancient Israel and yet it doesn't necessarily make it any easier. Yes, we live in relative comfort and ease. Yes, many of us do not need to worry about famine or plague or some other natural disaster. We can go to King Soopers if we are hungry. We can go to the doctor if we are sick. We live in homes specifically designed to withstand whatever Mother Nature may decide to throw at us. Sure, there are very real geo-political threats but we do not fear annual invasions by a foreign power. But life is still very much a daily grind. How many of us struggle with mental health issues? How many of us struggle with persistent physical pain? How many of us have suffered emotionally through the grief and losses of the last year? Death still stalks us whether we acknowledge it or not. Fear and anxiety seem like constant companions. The constant strain and stress takes a toll on our closest relationships and the relentless pressure to produce drives us into the ground. So where do we find hope? Where do we look for salvation?

God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The same God who provided hope for the Psalmist of the ancient world is the same God who provides hope for us today. We simply need to look to Him. We need to believe His promises. We need to trust His character. Trust His power. Trust His nature which is good and righteous and holy. God is still at work doing awesome deeds! He is making Himself known in the farthest corners of the earth! By His strength He raises mountains and stills the raging seas. By His might He calms the oceans and brings peace to the nations of the earth. He performs these miracles so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth will see and believe and be in awe of His signs and wonders.

Friends, whatever you may be facing today, look to God for hope. Whatever battles you may be fighting today, look to God for salvation. Whatever struggles or suffering you may be going through, look to God for deliverance. He loves you. He is with you. He will be faithful to bring you through the dark valley into beautiful green pastures where you can be refreshed by still waters and restore your soul.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 68-69, Romans 3

August 6, 2021

Learned Helplessness

Readings for today: Psalms 68-69, Romans 3

All of us live under the Law of God. All of us are accountable for every thought, word, and deed. All of us will stand before the judgment seat of Christ where every part of our lives will be laid bare. Nothing will be hidden. Nothing held back. Nothing will escape God's notice. For He sees all and knows all and judges all with righteousness. "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God." (Romans 3:19)

Reflecting on the Law of God produces humility. It brings us to our knees. It stops every mouth. It ends every rationalizing and self-justifying thought. The purpose of the Law is to show us the depths of our sin. It holds a mirror up to our soul. It reflects back to us the reality that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. None are righteous. None understand. None truly seek God. All turn aside. All go their own way. All do what is right in their own eyes. Our thoughts are prone to deceit. Our lips prone to bitterness and curses. Our feet swift to shed blood, get revenge, take out our anger on those around us. Our paths are lined with the bodies of those we've hurt and wounded along the way. We do not fear God. We do not love God. We have no peace with God. This is the fundamental truth of our existence. We were conceived in sin. Born in iniquity. And there is no escape.

Many years ago, I took some classes in psychology. One of the experiments we studied had to do with learned helplessness. As I remember it, an animal was put in a box with the lid closed and given a shock. Because it could not escape, it eventually stopped trying. It simply endured. Even after the lid was removed, it would not jump out. It "learned helplessness." In many ways, that is the intended purpose of the Law of God. To teach us how utterly helpless and hopeless we are to save ourselves. We live in a closed system. A world corrupted by sin. There is no escape. The lid is too tight. We cannot get out. Our only hope is that the Master will come and save us from our broken condition.

This is what Paul is pointing us to this morning. "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:21-26) The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law? You mean I don't have to work so hard to justify myself? The righteousness of God is available through faith to all who believe in Jesus Christ? You mean all I need to do is open my heart to Him and receive the gift of His grace? Yes to all of this and more! The righteousness of God is a gift, friends! It cannot be earned. It cannot achieved. It cannot be purchased. It can only be received. God knows the broken condition of our world. He sees the helplessness of His creatures. He understands our hopeless state. So He sends His Son to atone for our sin and to show forth His righteousness that God might both be just and the justifier of the one who believes.

Friends, the good news of the gospel is that God has done what we could not! He has achieved what we never could! He has kept the Law! He has fulfilled the Law! He has satisfied the Law with its demands! And now He simply calls us to believe. To trust in what He has accomplished on our behalf! Trust Jesus, friends! For your life! For your future! For our nation and for our world!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 70-72, Romans 4

August 7, 2021

Saving Faith

Readings for today: Psalms 70-72, Romans 4

One of the things I love to do when I read through the Bible in a year is to read the passages from different versions. My preferred version is the ESV. But I read from the NIV and the RSV and when I am looking for a more contemporary version, I might go to the CEV. Today I read Romans 4 from the Message version that Eugene Peterson wrote and I found his words incredibly compelling. Especially when he gets to verses 13-25.

"That famous promise God gave Abraham—that he and his children would possess the earth—was not given because of something Abraham did or would do. It was based on God's decision to put everything together for him, which Abraham then entered when he believed. If those who get what God gives them only get it by doing everything they are told to do and filling out all the right forms properly signed, that eliminates personal trust completely and turns the promise into an ironclad contract! That's not a holy promise; that's a business deal. A contract drawn up by a hard-nosed lawyer and with plenty of fine print only makes sure that you will never be able to collect. But if there is no contract in the first place, simply a promise—and God's promise at that—you can't break it. This is why the fulfillment of God's promise depends entirely on trusting God and his way, and then simply embracing him and what he does. God's promise arrives as pure gift. That's the only way everyone can be sure to get in on it, those who keep the religious traditions and those who have never heard of them. For Abraham is father of us all. He is not our racial father—that's reading the story backward. He is our faith father. We call Abraham "father" not because he got God's attention by living like a saint, but because God made something out of Abraham when he was a nobody. Isn't that what we've always read in Scripture, God saying to Abraham, "I set you up as father of many peoples"? Abraham was first named "father" and then became a father because he dared to trust God to do what only God could do: raise the dead to life, with a word make something out of nothing. When everything was hopeless, Abraham believed anyway, deciding to live not on the basis of what he saw he couldn't do but on what God said he would do. And so he was made father of a multitude of peoples. God himself said to him, "You're going to have a big family, Abraham!" Abraham didn't focus on his own impotence and say, "It's hopeless. This hundred-year-old body could never father a child." Nor did he survey Sarah's decades of infertility and give up. He didn't tiptoe around God's promise asking cautiously skeptical questions. He plunged into the promise and came up strong, ready for God, sure that God would make good on what he had said. That's why it is said, "Abraham was declared fit before God by trusting God to set him right." But it's not just Abraham; it's also us! The same thing gets said about us when we embrace and believe the One who brought Jesus to life when the conditions were equally hopeless. The sacrificed Jesus made us fit for God, set us right with God."

You see, I struggle with faith. If I were Abraham, I am quite sure I would focused on my impotence or Sarah's age and infertility and simply given up. I would have had a very hard time believing God would deliver on what He promised. This is what I love about Scripture. As I read about Abraham plunging "into the promise and coming up strong, ready for God, sure that God would make good on what He had said", the Holy Spirit goes to work inside my own heart. The Word of God - which is living and active - begins to stir up faith deep in my soul. I find myself inspired to follow Abraham's example. I find myself remembering all the promises God has given me. Promises for my children. Promises for my church. Promises for my friends serving Christ around the world in some of the most dangerous places. The Holy Spirit keeps working, reminding me that faith is a gift and not something I muster up on my own. He keeps placing the gift in front of me, encouraging me simply to receive. To

embrace. To believe. And every time my fears or doubts begin to creep in, the Holy Spirit plays the ultimate trump card…the resurrection of Christ. He takes me back to the most hopeless moment in human history when evil seemed to have finally gained the upper hand once and for all and He shows me an empty tomb. Resurrection is the promise we plunge into when we believe. Christ dying. Christ rising. Christ coming again. This is the gospel and it is what sets us right with God.

Readings for tomorrow: None

August 9, 2021

Escaping Envy

Readings for today: Psalms 73-74, Romans 5

"Envy rots the bones." Ever heard that phrase? It comes right out of Scripture. Proverbs 14:30 if you want to look it up. It's a great image. For me, it brings to mind an old oak tree I once saw when we lived in Alabama. Huge. Majestic. Beautiful. Branches reaching to the sky. Sadly, it was rotten at the core so when a hurricane blew through, it fell over, leaving destruction in it's wake. This is what envy does to us and I have to confess I too often fall into its trap. I envy those who have more success than I do. I envy those who have more of a platform than I do. I envy those who have more wealth than I do. And I especially envy the wicked who seem to get ahead. I don't know why. I don't understand. I cannot fathom why God allows them to prosper.

As I've grown spiritually, I've learned to deal with my envy. At first, I tried to ignore the thoughts when they came. Refuse to entertain them in my head. Resist the urge to give them a foothold in my heart. But I failed. The thoughts were too persistent. The attacks too relentless. Ultimately my self-discipline failed and they would find a way in. Then I sought to do battle with them. I memorized Scripture. I prayed every time the envious feelings would enter my heart. I tried to take authority over them and cast them out in the name of Jesus. But again I failed. The thoughts were too strong for me to resist. Finally, I stumbled upon the prescription offered by the Psalmist in our reading for today.

"But when I thought how to understand (my envy of the wicked), it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms. When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works." (Psalm 73:16-28)

The root of envy is greed. Covetousness. My insatiable appetite for more. Why do I envy the wealthy? Because deep down, I want what they have. Why do I envy the successful? Because deep down, I believe I am better than them. Why do I envy the wicked who get ahead? Because deep down I believe I am more righteous and therefore deserve more of God's material blessings. You see my problem? When I give envy a foothold, my soul becomes embittered. When my soul becomes embittered, I become brutish and ignorant and like a beast enslaved to my sinful instincts and desires. How do I dislodge envy from my soul? I look to Christ. I find my deepest satisfaction in Him alone. "Whom have I in heaven but you? There is nothing on earth I desire besides You. My flesh and heart may fail - and in fact often do! - but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." When I make Christ my supreme treasure, everything I might be tempted to envy in this world fades into the background. It loses its hold on my life. The temptation is robbed of its power.

All of us fall into the trap of envy. All of us tend to play the comparison game. We look at our neighbors and we envy what they have. We look at our boss and we envy their position. We look at those who are getting ahead and we envy their success. We look at other people at church who seem to

have it altogether and we envy their lives. We look at social media and we envy the highlight reel our friends and family post. The only way to escape this trap is to look to Christ. To fix our eyes on Jesus. To find our only comfort, our only peace, our only hope in His life, death, and resurrection.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 75-76, Romans 6

August 10, 2021

Repentance

Readings for today: Psalms 75-76, Romans 6

Boil everything down. Reduce all the problems in our world and all the problems in our lives to their root and you will find sin. Human sin is the most pervasive, corrupting force in the universe. It tears at the fabric of our lives. It weakens the bonds we have with God, with each other, and with the world around us. It isolates and alienates and incites chaos at every turn. The Bible teaches there is only one prescription for human sin and that is repentance. It is the intentional turning away from sin and turning towards Christ. Listen to how the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans 6…

"Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." (Romans 6:12-14)

Repentance is more than feeling sorry for ourselves. It's more than feeling guilt or remorse over what we have done. It is a decision to make a 180 degree turn in life and go in a different direction. I love the phrase Paul uses here…"present yourself." Do not present yourselves to sin and allow it to use you as an instrument of unrighteousness. In other words, don't show up at sin's doorway looking for work. Don't clock in. Don't give sin your precious time or talent or treasure. Don't give sin a foothold in your life. Instead, present yourself every day to God. Show up in His throne room each morning and let Him give you your marching orders for the day. Intentionally place yourself at His disposal and give Him permission to use you for His purposes.

Far too often, we make the mistake of thinking repentance is simply about what we have to give up. We think of it solely in terms of what we have to sacrifice. But that's not the whole picture. Repentance is not just about what we have to give up but also what we do to fill up. I love the story Jesus tells in the gospels about the man who's been possessed by demons. He tells His disciples it's not enough to simply cast the demons out of the man's life. It's not enough for the man to even work hard to clean up his life. He has to fill himself up with something lest the demons return, find the "house" still empty, and take back over. True repentance involves both a "turning from" and a "turning to" if it is to be real and effective.

Repentance is one of the key marks of discipleship for a Christian. It's not something we ever grow beyond or graduate from so where do you need to repent in your life today? What attitudes, thoughts, feelings, or actions do you need to turn away from as you turn towards Christ? How are you intentionally yourself before God today and giving Him permission to use you as an instrument of righteousness in our world?

Readings for tomorrow: Psalm 77-79, Romans 7

August 11, 2021

The Wonders of God

Readings for today: Psalm 77-79, Romans 7

One of the things I love most about the Bible is how it never runs from the ugly reality of human sin. It never whitewashes human history. It never attempts the paint the people of God in any kind of overly positive light. It simply tells the honest story of our successes and failures and frames them all in light of the faithfulness of God.

Take Psalm 78 for example. I love how the Psalmist begins in verse 1-4…"Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done." If you're reading this for the first time, you might find yourself a little confused. The Psalmist is going to utter "dark sayings from of old", stories that his ancestors have passed down, tales that might otherwise be kept from children and yet these same stories will declare to the coming generation "the glorious deeds of the Lord?" This doesn't make much sense to our 21st century, American Christian ears.

Things get only more confusing as we read the rest of the Psalm. In brief, it recounts all the ways the people of God have failed. All the ways they've sinned and fallen short of God's glory. All the times they faced judgment for their disobedience.

"They did not keep God's covenant, but refused to walk according to his law. They forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them." (Psalm 78:10-11)

"Yet they sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert." (Psalm 78:17)

"They tested God again and again and provoked the Holy One of Israel." (Psalm 78:41)

"They provoked him to anger with their high places; they moved him to jealousy with their idols." (Psalm 78:58)

One would think they would suffer terrible judgment for their sin. One would think they would rightfully earn death for the ways they abandoned God and His Law. One would think God's justice would demand an account and they would be wiped from the face of the earth. Their destruction becoming a byword and warning to all who would hear. But that's not what happens. Amazingly enough, God meets their sin with grace. Meets their crimes with pardon. Meets their transgressions with mercy.

"In the sight of their fathers he performed wonders in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan. He divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a heap. In the daytime he led them with a cloud, and all the night with a fiery light. He split rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. He made streams come out of the rock and caused waters to flow down like rivers." (Psalm 78:12-16)

"He commanded the skies above and opened the doors of heaven, and he rained down on them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven. Man ate of the bread of the angels; he sent them food in

abundance. He caused the east wind to blow in the heavens, and by his power he led out the south wind; he rained meat on them like dust, winged birds like the sand of the seas; And they ate and were well filled, for he gave them what they craved." (Psalm 78:23-27, 29)

"He, being compassionate, atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them; he restrained his anger often and did not stir up all his wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and comes not again." (Psalm 78:38-39)

"He led out his people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock. He led them in safety, so that they were not afraid, but the sea overwhelmed their enemies. And he brought them to his holy land, to the mountain which his right hand had won. He drove out nations before them; he apportioned them for a possession and settled the tribes of Israel in their tents." (Psalm 78:52-55)

"He chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance. With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand." (Psalm 78:70-72)

It's an amazing read when we stop to think about it. It declares the goodness and graciousness of God's character. It reminds us that though God will by no means pardon the guilty, His steadfast love will endure for a thousand generations. Most of all, this Psalm foreshadows the cross. It points forward to that unique event in human history where the overwhelming weight of human sin was carried on the shoulders of the Son of God. As He hung there between heaven and earth making atonement for all we had done and yet will do, the depth of our evil and suffering and sin was met by the wonder and glory of something even deeper still…God's grace. Friends, the greatest miracle God has ever performed was our salvation.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 80-84, Romans 8

August 12, 2021

Redemptive Suffering

Readings for today: Psalms 80-84, Romans 8

“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs —heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” (Romans 8:16-17)

What if I told you suffering was an essential part of the Christian life? Would it make you think twice about following Jesus? Would it cause you to re-evaluate what you believe? One of the great heresies of our time is prosperity preaching. It’s the idea that if you are faithful enough. If you are obedient enough. You will be blessed. God will grant you your heart’s desire. You will be wealthy. You will be healthy and strong. You will be successful. The television airways are filled with these messages. Prosperity preachers putting on a show and making bargains on your behalf with God. Implicitly or explicitly, they tie suffering to sin. They believe pain is a result of disobedience. They argue poverty and sickness is a result of a lack of faith. Such nonsense!

Paul makes it clear that those who follow Christ will share in His sufferings. Not because we seek suffering out. Not because Jesus demands His followers live in constant pain or poverty. But simply because the lives we lead put us at odds with the world around us. Our faith makes us aliens and strangers in our culture. It sets us apart. Makes us a target. Why? Because we serve a heavenly King. We belong to a heavenly Kingdom. Our primary allegiance is not to any earthly king or country. Not to flag or nation. Not to tribe or family. But to God Himself. By faith, we are adopted as His sons and daughters. By faith, we become part of His family. By faith, our citizenship is transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

Jesus suffered. Jesus endured incredible pain. Jesus was tortured, falsely accused, and executed by the State because he posed a threat. His message subverted the kingdoms of this world. His preaching confronted the religious leaders of His day. He called them to repent. He called them to confess. He called them to lay down their wealth and power and position and authority for the sake of others. He called them to give their very lives away for the sake of the impure, unholy, rejected, and outcast. He upended social conventions. He tore down cultural taboos. Even the laws of nature obeyed Him! Disease disappeared. Demons were cast out. Death itself defeated. Watching Jesus work must have been awesome and frightening all at the same time.

Jesus followers - the people known as Christians - are called to the same way of life. Paul reminds us the suffering we endure for our faith is actually what makes us co-heirs with Christ! And we are not alone. All of creation suffers along with us under the curse of sin. Every single human being struggles under the weight of sin. The difference is that those who follow Christ have hope. We have the hope of an eternal life waiting for us when Christ returns to claim His own. On that great day, our adoption will be complete. Our sufferings will come to an end. Every tear will be wiped away. Every hurt healed. Every pain redressed. Every injustice set right. This is why our present sufferings aren’t worth comparing to the glory that will one day be revealed in us!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 85-87, Romans 9:1-10:4

August 13, 2021

The Challenge of Election

Readings for today: Psalms 85-87, Romans 9:1-10:4

Today's reading is a challenging one. Paul is asking deep questions about the promises and purposes of God. So much of which is shrouded in mystery. So much of which we will never know this side of heaven. Has the Word of God failed? Is God unjust? How can God fault those whom He has not chosen? These questions are important. It is vital to wrestle with them honestly and vulnerably. True faith welcomes such challenges and doesn't settle for easy answers.

To begin, we must check our assumptions at the door. There are no standards of justice outside of God. God is not answerable to any human legal code nor does He subject Himself to human notions of universal fairness. God is the Potter. We are the clay. This fundamental principle undergirds everything Paul will say in these few chapters. The baseline for this discussion begins with God being God and human beings being human beings. The Creator is not the same as His creation. The creation is not the same as its Creator. There is a massive, ontological distinction between the two that must be maintained if we are to find our way through this quandary.

Second, because God is God, He has every right to exercise His sovereign choice over all He has made. He chose Abraham and Sarah out of all the families on the face of the earth. He chose Jacob over Esau before they were born. He chose Israel over Egypt. Moses over Pharaoh. The full witness of Scripture makes it clear that God freely chooses some vessels for honor and some for dishonor. Scripture makes it clear that God endures with patience "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" so that He might "make known the riches of glory for His vessels of mercy." Over and over again, we see this played out in the Old Testament. There is simply no other way to honestly interpret it.

Third, what are we then to make of what's happening with Israel? God's elect? God's chosen? "To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all..." (Romans 9:4-5) Furthermore, what are we to make of the Gentiles? God's non-elect? The pagans who've rejected God all their lives? Though they have not pursued righteousness somehow they attained it by faith! Does this mean God's elect have been rejected? By no means! "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring..." (Romans 9:6-7) So ethnicity no longer serves as a determining factor when it comes to membership in God's covenant community. What matters is faith and God has maintained a remnant - of which the Apostle Paul is one - who have been saved by grace.

Fourth, what should we conclude from Paul's words? God isn't done! God's plan for Israel is not yet complete! The Gentiles who have been grafted into God's family should not become prideful or take God's grace for granted for as Paul will say in just a couple of chapters, "Remember it is not you who supports the root but the root that supports you." (Romans 11:18) Instead, the Gentiles should wait and pray for the day when the partial hardening on Israel is softened because the full number of Gentiles have finally come in and God saves all of Israel.

How will this happen? Paul has no idea. He simply knows God is faithful. He will never abandon His people. His love is steadfast, loyal, and true. So at the end of all this deep wrestling there can only be an exclamation of praise. God is God. We are not. Thanks be to God!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 88-89, Romans 10:5-21

August 14, 2021

Foundations of God's Throne

Readings for today: Psalms 88-89, Romans 10:5-21

"Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you." (Psalm 89:14)

It is tempting when we look at the growing chaos of the world around us to give into fear and anxiety. To get stuck in the mire of sadness and deep grief. If you are like me, your heart breaks for the brokenness and the broken people of this world. In recent days, the Taliban have almost retaken all the territory they lost in Afghanistan. I cannot imagine what it must feel like to be a woman or a Christian or even a moderate Muslim over there right now. The crisis at the southern border of the United States only deepens as thousands seek asylum from the violence and life-threatening poverty of their home countries in Latin and South America. Police officers are being targeted on a daily basis in some of our larger cities as violent crime increases. Ethnic and sexual minorities still feel the burden of discrimination in far too many places here at home and around the world. The Delta variant has rolled back much of the progress we made in dealing with the pandemic this past spring. Many of our children and teachers are facing the monumental challenge of making up for lost ground from the last year. It's overwhelming to think about and there are few hopeful signs on the horizon. Why do such things happen? Why does humanity's inhumanity seem set to play on an endless loop?

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: None

August 16, 2021

The Gift of the Psalms

Readings for today: Psalms 90-95, Romans 11

Every year as I make my way through the Psalms, I receive a great gift. The Psalmists lift my eyes above the hills. Above the horizons of my own life. Above my sinful tendency to "navel gaze" and focus on my own needs, wants, and desires. They direct me to God. They place Him in full view before me. They confront me with His character. They nourish me on His divine nature. They relentlessly remind me of His goodness and grace. They place words of praise in my mouth and in my heart and mind. They extol God's infinite virtues. Righteousness. Justice. Grace. Mercy. Peace. Power. Love. The list is endless. Consider just a few of the verses we read today…

"Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God."(Psalm 90:1-2)

"I will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." Because you have made the Lord your dwelling place— the Most High, who is my refuge— no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. "Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation." (Psalm 91:2, 9-11, 14-16)

"It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre. For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy." (Psalm 92:1-4)

"The Lord reigns; he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed; he has put on strength as his belt. Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved. Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting." (Psalm 93:1-2)

"O Lord, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve!" (Psalm 94:1-2)

"For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!" (Psalm 95:3-6)

Reflecting on these verses is deeply humbling which I believe is the Psalmist's point. As we come face to face with God. As we gaze on Him in the beauty of His Holiness. As we experience the wonder of His love and grace, we should be brought to our knees. The fathomless depth of our sinful condition is revealed. All our secrets laid bare. God is God. We are not. God is good. We are not. God is righteous. We are not. God is faithful. We are not. God is love. We are not. As we come to grips with the utter brokenness of our condition, we are driven to helplessness and despair. We experience godly sorrow over all the ways we fall short of the glory God desires to reveal in us. As we grieve, we are being prepared by God's Spirit for the transforming experience of His grace.

The reality is we have to come to the end of ourselves before we will turn to God. We have to be emptied of all our resources, all our strength, all our dependence on self if we are to be filled with God's Spirit. And this is the heart of the gospel. Those who humble themselves will be exalted. The last shall be first. Those who sow generously and sacrificially will reap a harvest of righteousness. Those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake will find them.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 96-98, Romans 12

August 17, 2021

Be Transformed

Readings for today: Psalms 96-98, Romans 12

I recently came across this quote from one of my favorite pastors, “I more and more find the precious part of each day to be the thirty or forty minutes I spend each morning before breakfast with the Bible. All the rest of the day I am bombarded with the stories that the world is telling about itself. I am more and more skeptical about these stories. As I take time to immerse myself in the story that the Bible tells, my vision is cleared and I see things in another way. I see the day that lies ahead in its place in God’s story.” (Lesslie Newbigin) It reminded me of what Paul says in Romans 12 about not being conformed to the patterns of this world but instead be transformed by the renewal of the mind through Spirit.

What does such transformation look like? It looks like the life Paul describes at the end of chapter 12. “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:9-21)

This is the difference Christ makes in a person’s life. He changes us from the inside out. He shifts our outlook and understanding of the world. He transforms our thoughts and our attitudes as we surrender more and more of our hearts to Him. Because we are so deeply satisfied in Christ. Because Christ meets our every need. Because Christ is the object of all our devotion and affection, we are set free. Set free to love. Set free to do good. Set free to honor one another. To put one another’s needs above our own. We are patient in affliction knowing it is but a season. We are constant in prayer because we know our Father hears our every word. We are set free to be generous because money has no hold on us. We can bless those who attack us or seek to do us harm because Christ Himself is our defense and our reputation is secure in heaven. Christ gives us the confidence to grieve with those who grieve and celebrate the success of others. Because we rest in the forgiveness and grace of Christ, we can extend it out to others which leads to unity and harmony. Humility rather than pride is our constant companion. And we can release the need to get even or get back because we trust in the justice of God.

I get asked all the time, “What makes a Christian different?” Friends, this is it! When Paul talks about not being conformed to the patterns of this world, he means rejecting the way of hate. The way of outrage. The way of selfishness and pride. He means rejecting the ways of sin and evil for the ends never justify the means. He means rejecting any compromise with godlessness and instead living a life of unconditional love and grace. He means laying aside our desire for control. Our desire for power. Our desire for wealth and privilege and position and instead humbling ourselves before God. Christians understand our lives our not our own. We have been bought with a price. We have been purchased by God. We are slaves to Christ. We have no will of our own. No desires of our own. We exist to serve Christ and to bring Him glory. This is our highest calling. Our life’s passion. Our greatest priority. And it is the world’s most desperate need. Salt and light, friends. This is what you are in Christ. Believe this! And live your life for Him!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 99-101, Romans 13

August 19, 2021

My Life is not My Own

Readings for today: Psalms 102-104, Romans 14

"For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living."(Romans 14:7-9)

"My life is not my own." This is one of the most fundamental truths in all of Scripture and yet it is perhaps the most difficult for me to accept. I was born and have been raised in a country founded on the principle of individual freedom. A nation whose founding documents proclaim that we hold certain "truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." I have been given incredible opportunities in my lifetime. I've had access to excellent education and healthcare. I have never faced discrimination because of my race, gender, or sexual orientation. I come from a stable family with parents who've been married for over fifty years who taught me the value of hard work, that nothing worth doing is ever easy. In short, everything in my experience reinforces the notion that life is what I make of it. Success or failure are entirely dependent on my hard work. Personal freedom is fundamental and my personal happiness is an inalienable right.

No wonder I struggle to accept the claim Christ places on my life. According to the Bible, I am never truly free. I am either a slave to sin or a slave to Christ. I am either a slave to sin or a slave to righteousness. I am either a slave to the prince of this world or a slave to the King of kings and Lord of lords. In either case, individual freedom is an illusion. It simply is not real. We are influenced far more than we like to admit. Family of origin issues shape how we see the world. Life experience can make us compassionate or cynical. Success or failure to can lift us up or beat us down. Physical limitations, brain chemistry, and the company we keep all make a significant impact on the choices we make on a daily basis. Access to healthcare or education create opportunity as does our economic or social status. And none of these things even begins to touch the basic spiritual reality that the Apostle Paul references here in Romans 14.

Remember Paul is talking to fellow Christians. People who have been bought with a price. Redeemed from this world. Saved from an eternity of judgment, hell, and death. As such, their wants, needs, and desires are submitted to Christ. His will is more important than their own. Following His way and seeking His righteousness becomes far more important than self-fulfillment. They no longer live for themselves. They no longer die for themselves. Through His death and resurrection, Christ has laid claim to their lives. He has purchased them with His own blood. He has ransomed them from slavery and they now owe Him their ultimate allegiance.

When this truth begins to lay hold of you, it changes everything. All of a sudden it hits you that nothing you have is truly yours to own. Not your time. Not your talent. Not your treasure. Not your opportunities. Not your achievements. All of these things are given to you to steward for Christ's glory. All of these things are given to you to put to use for His Kingdom purposes. And a crown of righteousness awaits the one who truly places their life in God's hands.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 105-106, Romans 15:1-21

August 20, 2021

Seeking the Good of Others

Readings for today: Psalms 105-106, Romans 15:1-21

"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." (Romans 15:1-3)

Another day. Another Word from the Lord that cuts against the grain. From the moment we wake up until we lay our head down at night, we are inundated with messages that foster a self-centered approach to life. Social media is literally built to reinforce self-absorption. Ads bombard us constantly with promises of self-fulfillment. Leaders from all walks of life - including the church - engage in self-promotion to increase their platform and spread their message far and wide. In fact, one can make a strong argument that our entire social system is built on a foundation of what famous Scottish moral philosopher, Adam Smith, termed "enlightened self-interest." In his seminal work, The Wealth of Nations, Smith argues it is our individual need to fulfill self-interest that produces societal benefit and this forms the basis of what we now call the free market economy.

Writing in 1776, Smith could not have foreseen the complete breakdown of the moral framework in which he operated. He assumed that everyone shared his Judeo-Christian values which acted as a restraint on self-interest. He knew that the pursuit of self-interest wouldn't produce societal benefit on its own. It required "enlightenment." For Smith, this meant the ability to make short-term sacrifice for long-term benefit. It meant operating on principles of thrift and hard work. It meant holding to roughly the same core moral values which we might now call the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Sadly, Smith was mistaken. Enlightened self-interest is not natural for the majority of people. Morality has been relativized. Long-term happiness has been dumped in favor of temporary pleasures. Christendom has broken down and been replaced by unrestrained hedonism.

That's why the words of the Apostle Paul strike so close to home. In many ways, we are fighting some of the same battles he fought. The Roman world was awash with sin. Might made right. Lust was glorified. Power, wealth, and personal pleasure were among the highest goals. Into this world, Paul brings a Word from the Lord. A Word that would have sounded like a clashing gong or crashing cymbal to those who listened. A Word that confronted culture and turned everything upside down. We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak? Are you serious, Paul? The weak have only themselves to blame. The weak don't deserve our help. The weak are a drag on society. Each of us should seek please our neighbor? Put his or her good above our own? Build them up? But if I spend my days doing that, who will take care of me? If I put my neighbors needs above my own, where is my guarantee that they will do the same for me? What happens to me if I pour myself out for those around me and don't get anything in return? Are you crazy?

Even after two thousand years, Paul still sounds a little nuts. You hear it all the time. We have a responsibility to care for the Afghans fleeing their country? We have a responsibility to care for the unvaccinated who contract COVID-19? We have a responsibility to provide social safety nets for the poor and marginalized among us? We need to reform systems and structures to create more opportunity for those who've been historically oppressed? I have to care for my spouse who struggles with addiction? I have to bear with my child who has disrespected me? On and on the list goes. And those are just some of the questions I've had to field in the last week!

Friends, Christ did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. Christ did not come to please Himself but to offer Himself as a sacrifice for our sins. Christ did not come promote Himself but instead emptied Himself of all His divine glory in order to die on a cross for us. It is only those who lose their lives for Christ's sake who will find them. Only those who give up their lives for Christ's sake who will gain them in the end. Let the Holy Spirit crucify any selfish ambition or vain conceit within you - no matter how enlightened - so that Christ may reign in your mortal body and you experience the abundant life He promises to those who believe.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 107-108, Romans 15:22-33

August 21, 2021

The Steadfast Love of the Lord

Readings for today: Psalms 107-108, Romans 15:22-33

"Whoever is wise, let him attend to these things; let them consider the steadfast love of the Lord." (Psalm 107:43)

Today's Word comes at a good time for me. I've had quite a week. The Delta variant of COVID-19 continues to spread through our community so our local public health department decided to issue a mask mandate for children ages 2-11 as they head back to school. This created quite a bit of anxiety for many families in our community and in our congregation as you can imagine. The following day our county commissioners decided to opt out of the mandate but the school district decided to stay in which added a layer of confusion to the situation. It's not been easy to navigate. At the same time, I am talking to many service men and women who are watching what is taking place in Afghanistan with horror. They cannot believe all their blood, sweat, and tears would be in vain. For some, it triggers incredible pain. For others, it's brought back the nightmares. For still others, it comes with a tremendous amount of grief as they think about the Afghan friends who will be left behind. The situation is compounded by the arrogance of our political leaders and the blame-shifting on both sides of the aisle. It's frustrating if not typical and real people continue to pay the price. In particular, I think of the Afghan pastors I am connected to through many missionary friends. They have let it be known that the Taliban are going door to door to hunt them down. Their lives are in danger. The lives of their families are in danger. The lives of those they serve in their congregations are in danger. And yet they remain faithful. It's humbling and it brings me to my knees in constant prayer.

So it's been a week. I've felt the pastoral burden of ministry keenly. I've had moments of frustration. Moments of doubt. Moments of anxiety. I've not slept real well. And that's why I needed the reminder this morning of the steadfast love of God. I needed to take a step back and remember His goodness and grace. I needed to be reminded that He will not allow evil to have its way. Despite what I may feel or what I may think, God remains sovereign. He is at work. He is even now gathering His redeemed from the north, south, east, and west. He promises to satisfy their longing souls and fill their hungry souls with good things. He promises to bring them out of darkness and the shadow of death and break the bonds of their oppression. He promises to heal them and deliver them from their self-destruction. He promises to calm the storm and make the raging sea like glass.

Furthermore, God is at work judging those who do evil. He will turn their rivers into deserts and their fruitful lands into salty wastes. He will pour contempt on princes make them wander in trackless wastes. He will not allow their foolishness to stand. He raises up and lays low even the most powerful in this world. Kingdoms come and go. Empires rise and fall at His command. He shuts the mouths of the wicked. He exposes their lies. He makes them reel and stagger like drunken men. He brings them to the end of their strength. The end of their wisdom. The end of their resources. All so they will cry out to Him.

Friends, this is why the Psalmist declares whoever is wise, let him attend to the Word of God. Let her consider the steadfast love of God. Let him think on God's goodness and God's faithfulness throughout the generations. Let her count the blessings of God and offer thanksgiving and praise. You may have had a week like me. Perhaps you too are feeling the burdens of anxiety and fear and frustration and failure. Maybe you find yourself depressed or despairing over the circumstances of your life or the condition of our world. Turn to Christ! Place your trust in Him! He is strong enough to hold all things together when everything feels like it's falling apart.

Readings for tomorrow: None

August 23, 2021

Kingdom Work Requires Teamwork

Readings for today: Psalms 109-112, Romans 16, 1 Corinthians 1

No person is an island. No godly leader every goes it alone. As one celebrity Christian leader falls after another, it is good for us to reflect on Paul's words from Romans 16. Paul is surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. The burden of Paul's work is shared by many. The names are listed for all to see. Phoebe. Pricilla and Aquila. Epenetus. Mary. Andronicus and Junia. Ampliatus. Urbanus and Stachys. These are just a few of the leaders Paul surrounded himself with as he carried the gospel to the Mediterranean world. We also know he journeyed with Barnabus, Luke, John Mark, and several others. The early church was wise to set apart teams of missionaries rather than commission them to go out on their own.

We would do well to follow their example. We live in a culture that celebrates the myth of the self-made woman or man. The woman who does it all. She has a fast-track career. Perfect kids. Volunteers on the local school board and teaches Bible study at church. The man who does it all. He climbs the corporate ladder. Prays with his kids every night. Serves his wife sacrificially. And is a leader in the community. We celebrate these women and men. We place them on pedestals. We follow them on social media. We read their books and take their advice. We seek to emulate them in all we do. Then they fail. They fall. They have an affair. They embezzle money. Their marriages and families fall apart. Their carefully curated public persona comes crashing down. And we are shattered. So disappointed. So discouraged. So let down.

Why do these things happen? The pattern is clear. Somewhere along the way, these men and women start to isolate themselves. They separate from their team. They believe their own hype. They put themselves beyond any kind of real accountability. The results are disastrous.

Friends, Kingdom-work is teamwork. Not even the Son of God could do it by himself! Throughout the Scriptures, we see great leaders of the Bible sharing authority. Moses raises up elders to serve alongside he and Joshua. David has an abundance of counselors to share the load. Jesus calls 12 disciples and the Apostle Paul thanks numerous people at the end of his letters for their support and encouragement and labor in the work of the gospel.

Who's on your team? With whom do you share the burdens of your life? Are you and your spouse a team in your home? Do you give your children as much authority and responsibility as they can handle as they grow up? Do you share leadership at work? Do you give people around you the freedom to fail and learn from their failures? Do you empower your team to make real decisions and then hold them accountable? Are you intentionally raising up leaders to take your place? Do you submit yourself to accountability? These things are critical if you are going to do God's work over the long haul.

For my part, I am deeply grateful for a group of elders who hold me accountable. They ask about my marriage. They pray for my family. They are not afraid to tell me "no." I am deeply grateful for a wife who is a true partner in life and ministry. She gets in my face. Doesn't believe the hype. Brings me back to earth when I need it. I am thankful for my children and the honest relationships we are cultivating with each other. I am thankful for colleagues who ask great, probing, personal questions that make me reflect deeply on life. I am thankful for a mentor of almost thirty years who constantly reminds me to maintain my first love. I am thankful for an accountability partner of almost 20 years who knows everything about me and who challenges me to live more faithfully for Christ. Without these people in my life, I would not be the man I am today. I would not be the husband I am today. I would not be the father I am today. I would not be the pastor I am today. Who's on your team?

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 113-115, 1 Corinthians 2

August 24, 2021

Seeking the Mind of Christ

Readings for today: Psalms 113-115, 1 Corinthians 2

This weekend we are having our elder retreat. It's an annual affair where the leaders of our church family go away for a few days to seek the mind of Christ. This year feels different however. The pressures of the past 18 months have taken their toll on all of us personally as well as our church family corporately. While we've navigated the crisis quite well thanks to the grace of God, it is still a crisis. People are still struggling to find a new normal. There is a growing realization that things will never return to the way they once were. Life from this point forward will be a blend of in-person and virtual activity. And yet the call remains to live out the Great Commandment and fulfill the Great Commission. So we are going away for a few days to seek the mind of Christ. To ask God for His wisdom in helping us meet and overcome the challenges we face in our world today. Thankfully, we know God is building His church. We know the gates of hell cannot stand against it. So we approach our time together with confidence that God is more than able to show us the way.

Seeking the mind of Christ is not just something pastors and elders do. It's the primary responsibility of every Christian as we seek to navigate the challenges of this world. It is a higher priority that our own happiness. A higher priority than our own comfort. A higher priority than our own success. It is more important than our pride. More important than our public reputation. More important than our political allegiances. We know we have discerned the mind of Christ when there is spiritual unity and godly humility and mutual submission. We see the mind of Christ in action when there is forgiveness and grace and reconciliation. We recognize it in those who are willing to be last so that others might be first. Those who are willing to decrease so that others may increase. Those who are self-effacing and who practice the art of self-forgetfulness.

Seeking the mind of Christ has never been easy. The early Christians in Corinth struggled mightily with the concept and to embrace the practice. They were divided. They followed charismatic human leaders rather than Christ Jesus Himself. They sought the wisdom of this world. They wanted to be esteemed by the top philosophical thinkers of their day. They boasted in their own ability. The depth of their spiritual maturity. They stood in judgment over those who seemed "less spiritual." They wanted all the credit for the ministry they were building. They refused to share the glory with another. They wanted to be known. They wanted to be influencers. They wanted to be taken seriously and treated with respect by the culturally elite of their day. But the gospel calls us to a different way.

How do we seek and find the mind of Christ? There is only one way path. The path of humility. Relinquishment. Surrender. Listen to how Paul describes it for his Corinthians friends…

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18)

"For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles...For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." (1 Corinthians 1:21-23, 25)

“But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:27-29)

“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 2:2-5)

These are some of the most powerful passages in the New Testament. They resonate deep within us for we recognize the Spirit who inspired them. God’s ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts. God is not bound by human wisdom. God cannot be reduced to human categories. He is completely and utterly free from any constraints in this world. He makes foolish the wise. He makes weak the strong. So if we are to seek the mind of Christ, we must lay aside our natural inclinations. We must lay aside our pride and ego and desire to be in control. We must lay aside our anxieties and fears. Instead, we must trust Him to reveal Himself in His time and in His way. We must seek to know nothing except Christ. We must seek to follow Christ in His footsteps. We must align our hearts with Christ. As we do, we will find ourselves being built up together as God’s Temple. He will come to dwell in our midst. He will come to fill us and sanctify us.

Friends, resist the temptation to believe your own hype. Resist the temptation to believe you are “something” in this world. Resist any notions of power and privilege. Let go and let God have all the glory! The reality is we are simply servants of Christ. We are simply stewards of the mysteries of the gospel. We do not own the gospel. It is not ours to command or control. We do not own Christ. He is not ours to direct nor is He under our authority. God is God and we are not. Christ is Christ and we are not. We serve at His pleasure. We bow before His throne. We live and move and have our being under His sovereign authority. And this sets us free from all the strivings and struggles of this world. Seek the mind of Christ! Let your heart be filled with the love of Christ! Let all you do be motivated by a desire to honor Christ! This is His will for our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 116-119:48, 1 Corinthians 3

August 27, 2021

The Meaning of Wisdom

Readings for today: Psalms 119:105-176, 1 Corinthians 5

A few years ago I read a book that helped me parse the difference between wisdom and foolishness. Wisdom, according to the author, is when we see the truth and adjust our lives accordingly. Foolishness, on the other hand, is when we demand the truth adjust to our reality. To put it another way, wise people will meet the demands of life while foolish people will demand that life meet their demands. Wise people receive feedback when given, own their own performance, mistakes, and issues and take responsibility without externalizing blame or giving excuses. Foolish people become defensive very quickly when confronted, refuse to own their own shortcomings, and often externalize by blaming those around them. Wise people listen. Fools dismiss or ignore.

Are you a wise person or a fool? How do you know? Well, how do you feel as you read the words from Psalm 119? What happens internally when you consider the demands of God's Law? Are you the kind of person who embraces God's commandments, however imperfectly? Are they your delight? Do you find yourself seeking to bend your life in submission to what God has revealed in His Word? Or are you the kind of person who resists God's laws? Dismisses them? Ignores them? Rationalizes away your sin? When you read or engage God's Word, do you seek to bend it to your will? Your life? Your desires? Are you a wise person or a fool?

The Psalmist is clearly wise...

"I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life..."

"Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day..."

"How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"

"Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way."

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

"Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart."

"The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever."

(Psalms 119:93, 97, 103-105, 111, 160)

The Psalmist loves God's Word. Loves God's Law. Loves God's commands. The Psalmist seeks to do all he can to adjust his life to God's Will. To live his life under God's sovereign rule and authority. He makes no excuses for his sin. He doesn't hide his shortcomings. He faces his failures honestly and transparently. And he seeks God's face.

Sadly, so many in our culture today are fools. Even more tragically, they sit in our pews and attend our worship services. As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 10:2, they have a "zeal for God but not according to knowledge." They love God but not in the way He deserves or demands. Instead, they "do what is right in their own eyes." They bend God's Truth to their reality. They seek to make God's Word

null and void either through outright rejection or simple ignorance. They refuse to submit their lives to His will or certain areas of their lives to His will and as a result, they live lives of quiet desperation. They are not evil people. They do not have bad intentions. They simply are misguided. They bow to the pressure and anxiety and take the more expedient path rather than wait on God. I love the way Paul puts it in Romans 1, “Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools...” (Romans 1:21-22)

Let me be the first to say this is me! On some level. At certain seasons. When facing great stress or anxiety or fear. In particular circumstances throughout the course of my life, I have tried to bend God’s will to my own. I have tried to rationalize away my sin. I have tried to make twist and turn God’s Law to make it fit my life. To no avail. I have thrown myself against the will of God so many times until I finally broke. Finally surrendered. And with that surrender has come wisdom. Not perfection. Wisdom. Self-knowledge. Self-understanding. Seeing myself for who I truly am, warts and all. And learning to trust God’s ways above my ways. God’s thoughts more than my thoughts. God’s will more than my feelings. This is what it means to be wise, friends. The fear of the Lord truly is the beginning of wisdom!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 120-123, 1 Corinthians 6

August 28, 2021

Songs of Ascent

Readings for today: Psalms 120-123, 1 Corinthians 6

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

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

These psalms are favorites among believers. Especially in times of trouble. In times of plague and pandemic. In times of national or personal crisis. In such times, we cling to the language of God protecting us. God guiding us. God providing for us. God helping us. "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (Psalms 121:1-2) "I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!" (Psalm 122:1) "To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens! Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us." (Psalms 123:1-2) There is something special that happens when we gather to sing these praises. Something deeply transformative. Something life-changing. We are encouraged. We are strengthened. We are blessed by the experience of being in God's presence together and given the strength to endure.

The last year to 18 months have challenged Christians all over the world to think about the priority of corporate, gathered worship. What once may have seemed optional or discretionary or perhaps even disposable has taken on a new importance. You never know what you've lost until it's gone, right? We've weathered "shelter in place" orders and restrictions on mass gatherings. We've endured fear and grief and loss and loneliness. Many of us know loved ones who got sick or perhaps even died. And the new Delta variant raises new fears of potential lockdowns. Our collective suffering creates a deep longing in our hearts. A longing for connection. A longing for physical touch. A longing for the presence of other people. Friends, God put these longings in our hearts. God hardwired these longings deep within our souls. It is never good for human beings to be alone and we are all struggling with the effects of this lonely, difficult season.

Thankfully, we can still gather. Some of us will choose to gather physically. Some will choose to gather virtually. While the latter is not an adequate replacement for the former, it is a blessing for those who may be sick or homebound or traveling or distant from those they love. As we gather, we sing. We sing the songs of ascent. We sing the praises of God. This is what Christians have done for thousands of

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

Friends, I know this continues to be a challenging time. I know this continues to be a difficult season. I know many of us are tired and weary and ready to get back to "normal"…whatever that may be. My encouragement to you is to use this time to make corporate worship a priority. Plant your flag in the ground. Take a stand for your faith. Don't let the devil gain a foothold in your life. Make sure God gets the time He deserves and the worship He demands. Don't fall into the trap of giving up your Sunday mornings with God's people! Don't let anything come between you and your first love!

Readings for tomorrow: None

August 31, 2021

The Key to Unity

Readings for today: Psalms 130-133, 1 Corinthians 8

Unity seems so elusive these days. Our families are divided. Our churches divided. Our communities divided. Our nation divided. Certainly, our world is divided. We divide along political lines. We divide along economic lines. We divide along social and cultural lines. We divide along ethnic lines. We divide along theological lines. We divide along generational lines. The issues are legion. Masking or no masking. Vaccinations or no vaccinations. Republican or Democrat. Progressive or conservative. Black or white or brown. African or Asian or Latino or European. Rich or poor. Old or young. Gay, Queer or straight.

As a pastor, I see it all the time. In fact, I have a front row seat to the pain. I also know the root cause. Idolatry. Human hearts are idol factories and it seems like the assembly lines of our souls are running 24/7 these days. Idols are anything - good or bad - that becomes an ultimate thing in our life. Anything that causes us to draw a line in the sand and separate from those we love. I think of the dear friends I know who no longer speak to their parents or their children because they have allowed a particular issue to trump the love they once shared. I think of dear friends I know who have jettisoned relationships of ten, twenty, thirty years simply because of how the other person voted. Most tragically, I think of brothers and sisters in Christ who have left churches - including the one I serve - or who have separated themselves from the fellowship of the saints because they have bought the lie the enemy is selling that those who think differently then them are going to hell or deserved judgment or scorn or are not worth their time.

Idolatry. It's the besetting sin of the human heart. It is the source of all division. The root of so much relational pain. It is the greatest and most effective weapon in the enemy's arsenal as he seeks to kill, steal, and destroy all God has made. Friends, listen again to God's truth. Listen again to God's Word as He casts His vision for His people…

"Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore." (Psalm 133:1-3)

Unity. Not unanimity. Not conformity. Not sameness. But a unity that transcends all earthly differences. A spiritual unity that binds our hearts together. A unity Christ prayed for, fought for, and ultimately won for us on the cross. At the foot of the cross, the ground is level. All have sinned. All stand in need of His grace. Not one of us better than another. Not one of us more worthy than another. At the cross, humanity is brought to its knees before her Lord. All idolatrous identities are cast down. All that we hold dear and think important, we throw at His nail-scarred feet. Oh, that we could keep our eyes fixed exclusively on Jesus! At the cross, God commands His blessing which is life forevermore!

So what does this life of blessing look like in real time? What does it look like when the person I live with watches a cable news channel 24/7 that I can't stand? What does it look like when the person I work with takes a different position on masks or vaccines? What does it look like when the person I love goes down the rabbit hole of conspiracy theory? What does it look like when my child comes out to me? What does it look like when our national leaders fail? Or church leaders fall? Listen to the Apostle Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 8, using the example of food being sacrificed to idols…

“Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God…For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “Lords”— yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.” (1 Corinthians 8:1-3, 5-13)

Paul clearly gives up his “rights” in order to remain in relationship with those around him who do not share his understanding on idolatry. He refuses to put a stumbling block before them. He doesn’t want to be the one who gets in the way of them potentially coming to a deeper understanding of Christ. Instead, he walks with them. He willingly sacrifices on their behalf. He loves his neighbor by placing their needs before his own. He knows the limits of human knowledge. He knows at best it puffs up while love builds up. He knows it is useless to argue or cite statistics or share articles on Facebook. Instead, he seeks to walk alongside the “weaker” brother or sister. Love them where they are. Meet them where they are. Enter their life so that he might win them to Christ. How is he able to do this? He has complete confidence that “there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” Everything else is an illusion. Every other god an idol. Every other line in the sand simply not worth defending. Every other hill not worth dying on.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 134-137, 1 Corinthians 9

September 1, 2021

Meeting People Where They Are

Readings for today: Psalms 134-137, 1 Corinthians 9

Human beings are deeply complex creatures. They are an inscrutable mix of desires, passions, thoughts, life experiences, and core beliefs. They cannot be flattened into two-dimensional caricatures. They resist broad categorization. They refuse to conform to general stereotypes. Each person is unique. Each person fearfully and wonderfully made. I love how Christian Smith puts it in his book, What is a Person?…

"By person I mean a conscious, reflexive, embodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable identity, moral commitment, and social communication who - as the efficient cause of his or her own responsible actions and interactions - exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity in order to develop and sustain his or her own incommunicable self in loving relationships with other personal selves and with the non-personal world."

If you are like me, you had to read and re-read that statement several times to really understand it and that makes perfect sense. After all, we are made in the image of God. We are finite creatures created to reflect the infinite. We are temporal creatures created to reflect the eternal. We are mortal creatures created to reflect the immortal. As such, we should expect complexity. We should expect intricacy. We should expect enigma and inscrutability. This is normal when one speaks of the human creature. It's also why we have to meet each person where they're at. We can't make assumptions. We have to lay aside any expectations. We have to approach each person individually with a heart to listen and learn.

This is the genius of Paul. He finds a way to meet each person right where they are. He treats each person as a unique creature worthy of God's unconditional love. He believes with all his heart that no one is beyond the reach of God's amazing grace. Listen to how he describes it from our reading today, "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings." (1 Corinthians 9:19-23) If Paul were using today's categories, he might say, "To the Republicans, I joined their convention in order to win Republicans. To the Democrats, I joined their administration in order to win Democrats. I invited both conservatives and progressives into my life, listened and loved them well, in order to win them with the gospel. I spent time with those who were masked and unmasked, vaccinated and unvaccinated, refusing to use shame or fear to coerce behavior, instead choosing the way of grace in order to win them to Christ. I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some." This is the way of the Kingdom. This is the way of Jesus.

Over the last year to eighteen months, my heart has been broken by the number of divisions that have fractured the Body of Christ in America. Rather than cling to Jesus and walk in the way of grace, we cling to Self and walk in the way of the devil. We judge our brothers and sisters. We exclude and divide. We isolate and separate. We justify our sinful attitudes and actions by claiming "healthy boundaries" or by cutting those we consider "toxic" out of our lives. We rarely, if ever, acknowledge our own "toxicity", of course. We shift blame. We externalize responsibility. Our problems or the

world’s problems are always someone else’s fault. Even more tragically, those who differ from us are not just wrong, they are evil. They are beyond the reach of God’s forgiveness and grace. They are not worth our time or attention. They don’t deserve the gospel and they certainly shouldn’t be allowed in church. Sadly, I’ve heard and read these comments from people in my own church family and it breaks the heart of God. It is not the way of Jesus.

Friends, Jesus met us where we’re at. He came to us while we were still sinners. While we were still dead in our trespasses. While we were still at war with Him. He became our peace by tearing down every wall that separated us from Him. How can we - who call ourselves Christ-followers - not do the same for others?

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 138-141, 1 Corinthians 10:1-22

September 2, 2021

God is Pro-Life

Readings for today: Psalms 138-141, 1 Corinthians 10:1-22

Recently, the Supreme Court decided not to act on a law passed in Texas banning abortion after the detection of a fetal heartbeat which is usually around six weeks. It is the latest in a series of legal challenges seeking to overturn the landmark decision of Roe vs. Wade in 1973. I imagine there will be a flurry of lawsuits filed in the weeks ahead. The rhetoric will heat up and debates will rage over the lack of exceptions for rape and incest, a woman's right to govern her own body, the lack of quality post-natal care in many cases, the quality of life for children born into poverty or with severe special needs, etc. And many of those debates are absolutely worth having. However, what is often lost in all the noise is the fundamental truth that every child conceived is an absolute miracle from God. Every child conceived is precious in His sight. Known and knit together by God's own hands.

Human beings are sacred creatures. Made in God's image. Fashioned after His likeness. Created to enjoy a unique and special relationship with their Creator. Listen again to how the Psalmist describes it in Psalm 139:1-18, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it." Why on earth do we deserve such divine attention? What have we done to catch the attention of God? God loves us so much He pursues us. He seeks after us. He will not rest until we rest in Him. He wants to know us and He wants us to know Him. He sees our every move. He knows every thought. He is acquainted with all our ways. There is not a moment when His eye is not upon us.

"Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you." God is ever-present. He is always with us. Not because we have earned it. Not because we deserve it. But simply because He has decreed it. He is with the good and the evil alike. He is with both victims and perpetrators. He is with the Pope in His cathedral and the worst despots the world has to offer. That may surprise you. It may even upset you. But you have to remember God is a God of both comfort and conviction. He is a God of mercy as well as judgment. He is a God of grace as well as justice. To the godly, His presence is a joy. To the ungodly, His presence is a terror. His goal in abiding with humanity is to draw all of us to Himself. There is no place we can run from Him. No place we can hide from Him. Before God, all our secrets are laid bare.

"For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them." God initiates a relationship with us even as we're being formed in the womb. Even as He forms our inward parts, He is calling out to us. Singing over us. Looking forward to the day when we will embrace Him as Father. Even as our heart begins to beat, God looks forward to the day when it beats for Him. Even as our hands and feet begin to take

shape, God looks forward to the day when we will reach out to Him. Run to Him. Even as our minds and hearts come into being, God is already planting in us a deep longing for Himself. This is true for every single child who has ever been conceived or who ever will be conceived.

“How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.” (Psalm 139:1-18) When our eyes are opened to the wonders of God, we are overwhelmed. Overwhelmed by His goodness. Overwhelmed by His greatness. Overwhelmed by His grace to us. God is unabashedly pro-life. Pro my life. Pro your life. Pro every life. From the womb to the tomb, God is on our side. He is with us. As believers, our place is to stand on the side of life. Always. Forever. In every area of life. We stand with the unborn whose lives are so fragile and vulnerable. We stand with the criminals whose lives could be cut short by the death penalty. We stand with the immigrants who have risked their lives for a chance at a new and better life. We stand with the refugees who had to flee for their lives from places like Afghanistan. We stand with the impoverished whose lives are a struggle every single day. We stand with the victims who have suffered in their lives from abuse or injustice or brutality at the hands of someone in power over them. We stand for life because God stands for life.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 142-144, 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

September 3, 2021

People Pleasing

Readings for today: Psalms 142-144, 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

"I'm a people-pleaser." I cannot tell you how many times I've heard that phrase. Mostly in a negative context. It usually signals a person struggles with healthy boundaries. They exhaust themselves trying to make those around them happy. They take too much responsibility for the emotional heath and well-being of their loved ones or peers. They lose any sense of their own identity as they wrestle with staying self-differentiated. As a pastor, I've helped many people re-assert themselves in relationships. Reclaim a sense of their own God-given selfhood as they seek to relate to others. Recover a healthy sense of value and self-worth as a human being made in the image of God.

The temptation in these conversations, of course, is to simply flip to the other side of the coin. It's to let the pendulum swing too far the other way. The people-pleaser becomes the people-offender. Their boundaries become hard and strong and unyielding. They become inflexible and distrustful and resentful. They become self-absorbed and self-centered. They refuse to serve others. Sacrifice is a word that no longer fits their vocabulary. They live in constant fear of going back. They are constantly on guard against anything that might suggest a return to their former ways of doing things.

Neither of these approaches leads to life. Neither of these approaches will lead to the kind of intimacy God desires for us as human beings. Both are based in manipulation, power, and a desire to control those around us. God shows us a different way. Listen to how the Apostle Paul describes it, "All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor…Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." (1 Corinthians 10:23-24, 32-11:1)

At first blush, it looks like Paul himself has fallen into them trap of unhealthy people-pleasing. Let no one seek their own good? Give no offense to anyone? Try to please everyone in everything? I can almost hear the people-pleasers reading this beginning to hyperventilate a bit! ;-) Take a deep breath. Look at the very last verse. Christ, as always, holds the key. So confident was Jesus in the will of His Father, He could relinquish all things - including His very own spirit - into His Father's divine hands. Jesus knew His Father was faithful. Jesus knew His Father was just. Jesus knew His Father would fulfill His promise to fill Him even as He poured Himself out. Jesus knew His Father would fulfill His promise to exalt Him even as He humbled Himself by becoming the Suffering Servant for all humanity. Jesus knew His Father would fulfill His promise to raise Him even as sacrificed His own life. What the Father did for Jesus, Jesus will do for us. Remember, Christ died for us. Christ gave up everything for us. Christ willingly sacrificed Himself for us. He did this not out of any sense of guilt or obligation but because He loved us. And the Apostle Paul knew this love. He abided in this love. He lived his life empowered by this love.

If you are confident in Christ's love for you then you are set free to serve. Set free to place the needs of others before your own. Set free to sacrifice your rights willingly, even gladly, in order to please others. You no longer need to seek your own advantage. You no longer need to seek your own good. You no longer need to seek your own happiness or well-being. You are able to focus on what's most helpful to those around you. Build them up rather than tear them down. Encourage rather than criticize. Bless rather than curse. Why do we do all this? Once again, Paul gives us the answer. Just as Jesus gave His

life to save a lost world, so we must give our lives to save lost people. We must be willing to lay aside anything and everything in order to draw those we love - and even those we don't love!!! - to Christ. This is why the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. It's why the church exists. It's why you and I were put here on this earth. Make it your aim to imitate Paul as he seeks to imitate Christ. Look for ways to please those around you so that you might win them for Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 145-147, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

September 4, 2021

Cultural Blind Spots

Readings for today: Psalms 145-147, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Today's New Testament reading is a weird one. Why in the world does the Apostle Paul care so much about hair style? Of all the issues he could have spent time on, why head coverings? Is that really the most pressing issue for the church at Corinth? Were the Christians there that caught up in how they looked? This is what makes Bible reading such a challenge. We can't just read the words on the page and accept them at face value. We have to dive deeper to understand the cultural currents of the day and how these words fit if we want to understand. Furthermore, we have to acknowledge the cultural assumptions we ourselves bring to the text. We are not objective observers. We too have biases and perspectives that are shaped by current cultural movements like #MeToo, feminism, and, at a more fundamental level, the US Bill of Rights that will shape how we respond to the text. It's hard to lay these things aside and hear what God is trying to say to His people.

One of the foundational principles we must understand as we approach the Bible is that God never speaks to His people in a culture or a language they cannot understand. He meets them where they are. Consider Genesis 1 as an example. It is written to a people who held to an Ancient Near East cosmology. As such, they believed creation was less about how all the "stuff" of this world came into being and more about how they functioned. Creation was about bringing order to chaos rather than creating everything out of nothing. They would care less about how many actual 24 days God used to create and would have focused more on how God's creation functioned for their benefit. Day One would be less about light and darkness and more about the creation of time. Day Two was less about the creation of heaven and more about the creation of weather systems. Day Three was less about the creation of earth and plants and vegetables and more about the creation of food. (For those interested in this topic, I would suggest reading John Walton's excellent book titled, The Lost World of Genesis One.)

Fast forward a few thousand years. The Apostle Paul is speaking to a largely gentile audience in the Greco-Roman world about Christian worship. He speaks to them through the cultural norms of their day. It was a patriarchal society. Men most of the power. Women had some rights but only if they were freeborn Roman citizens. Culturally speaking, married women wore a veil over their heads as a sign of their virtue and honor. If a woman walked about unveiled, she was potentially signifying her availability. (This was not always the case. There is some evidence from ancient sources that married women did occasionally go out in public with their heads uncovered.) Furthermore, they only cut their hair during periods of mourning or if they dishonored their families. Men, on the other hand, rarely covered their heads. About the only time they did was when they entered a pagan temple to offer sacrifices. At such points, they would throw a bit of their toga over their heads to symbolize humility and submission. What's the point? Well, entire theological systems have been built on passages like these despite the fact that they addressed to particular Christians in a particular culture at a particular time. Paul himself even prefaces his advice by saying, "Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you." (1 Corinthians 11:2) This is not a "Thus saith the Lord" situation but one in which Paul acknowledges he's passing on a human tradition. Contrast his words with what comes later in verse 23 where he says, "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you…" Obviously, Paul makes a distinction between when he's speaking for Jesus and when he's speaking for himself or his culture.

So what can we draw from this passage? After all, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the people of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17) First and foremost, it’s important to note that both men and women were involved in leading public worship. They both are expected to pray and prophesy within the context of the gathered worshipping community. Second, both men and women were expected to exercise humility. They were not to draw attention to themselves by the way they dressed or the way they styled their hair or any other thing having to do with their appearance. Third, and perhaps most strikingly, men and women enjoy equal standing before the Lord. “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.” (1 Corinthians 11:11-12) Men are not greater than women. Women are not greater than men. They both have an equal share in the Kingdom of God.

One of the most important questions we must ask as we read Scripture is not so much “what does this mean for me?” but “what did this mean to the people who first heard it?” What was the author’s original intent? Why did they address the issues they did? What was going on in the culture of the day? How did the people back then understand their world? If we fail to ask these questions, the Bible can often seem anachronistic and old-fashioned and irrelevant to the issues we face in our own day.

Readings for tomorrow: None

September 6, 2021

The Beginning of Wisdom

Readings for today: Psalms 148-150, Proverbs 1, 1 Corinthians 11:17-12:11

The world suffers because it lacks wisdom. It lacks understanding. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes. No one takes responsibility. There is always someone else to blame. We live in a world where it is hard for people to accept instruction. Hard for people to humble themselves and receive correction. We resort to yelling and screaming and pouting far too easily. We are a fragile and foolish people.

The world is full of challenges. Monumental tasks that cannot be solved by human effort or ingenuity or intellect. The reality is we are not rational creatures. We are far more driven by desire than we like to admit. Far more inclined to selfishness and greed and hatred than we are inclined to acknowledge. Far more susceptible to temptation than we'll accept. The reality is we are our own worst enemies. Every time we stare in the mirror, we are looking at one of the greatest barriers to progress in our world. We are broken creatures with an innate propensity for self-destruction. Our corrupt nature so often derails any chance we may have at making the world a better place.

What this world needs is wisdom. Godly wisdom. And Solomon tells us if we want such wisdom, there's only one place to go. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise His wisdom and instruction." (Proverbs 1:7) God is the fount of all wisdom and understanding. It is God who sees the deep things of this world. God who makes sense of the universe and all that is in it. God who creates order out of our chaos. God who guides us through the maze that is human life. God who is our light in the midst of our darkness. God who is truth in the midst of all the lies. The reality is we live in a world awash with information. Google has given us access to the vast wealth of human knowledge but we don't know what to do with it. Heck, we can't even decide what is true or false, good or evil, right or wrong much less integrate that knowledge in any useful way. So if we truly want to make this world a better place. If we truly want to experience the abundant life Jesus promises those who would follow Him, we have to turn to God. We have to trust Him. We have to seek His wisdom above our own.

How often do you pray over the decisions you make? How often do you ask God for wisdom when faced with a difficult situation? How often do you go to God's Word and rely on His Truth even it conflicts with how you think or feel? If this never happens, then I submit you are trying to live your life apart from God. You are trying to survive based on your own wisdom and strength. And I am here to tell you, it will eventually fail. God promises to grant wisdom to all who follow Him. All who will submit to Him. All who will surrender to Him. The fear of the Lord is truly the beginning of wisdom.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 2-4, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

September 7, 2021

Belonging

Readings for today: Proverbs 2-4, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Irenaus. Origen. Cyprian. Cyril of Jerusalem. Ambrose. Augustine. All of them believed in the doctrine of Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus - "There is no salvation outside the church." This idea, of course, doesn't sit well with us. We are highly individualistic. Suspicious of outside authority. Resistant to authentic community. Distrusting of institutions. We prefer to be more gnostic when it comes to our relationship to the church. We much prefer to describe our relationship to the church in generalities and abstractions. We say things like, "I don't need to be part of a local church." "I'm a member of the universal church and that's enough." "I can worship and serve God just fine on my own." For a lot of us, these are not flippant comments. They are rooted in very real hurt. Very real pain. Very real betrayal that we've experienced at the hands of a local church. Perhaps it was a priest or pastor who abused us. The legalistic and pharisaical environment we grew up in. Maybe the church failed us in our hour of greatest need. Or maybe our protests truly are simply culturally conditioned. We reject the church for her hypocrisy. Reject the church for her bigotry. Reject the church for her outdated morality. Whatever our issues, too many of us keep the local church at arm's length.

Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus. There is no salvation outside the church. Would it surprise you to know the Apostle Paul believed this? Listen to what he says in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

There are several key ideas to ponder and pray over from this passage...

The Spirit of God makes us all one in Christ Jesus. Unity is not homogeneity. Unity is not unanimity. Unity is not about the erasure of our social, racial/ethnic, or economic distinctions. It is the submission of those things to the greater identity we share in Christ.

The local church is like a body. It has hands and feet. Eyes and ears. Head. Heart. Muscles. Organs. Bones. Each member of a local church is created and equipped by God to play a particular role. No role more or less important than the other. But not all roles are the same. A body is not made up of all feet. Nor is a body all hands. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of smell? God has ordained that all the members of the local church - working together - make up the one body of Christ.

The local church has many parts. We are not a church of one! We cannot be the church on our own. We cannot say to our brothers and sisters, “I have no need of you.” That would be like cutting off your hand or tearing out your eye. There are parts of the body that are weaker. Parts of the body that are stronger. Parts of the body that are younger. Parts of the body that are older. Parts of the body that are richer. Parts that are poorer. Parts that are white. Parts black. Parts brown. Parts more educated. Parts less educated. Not all parts are the same. Not all are gifted in the same way. But all are necessary. All are equally important. All have value in God’s sight.

We are a part of the body of Christ and individually members of it. There is no salvation outside the church because there is no identity outside the church. Our love for God gets expressed in our love for one another. Our unity together reflects the unity of the Godhead itself. To keep the church at arm’s length. To never commit oneself to a local body of believers. To try and do the Christian life on our own is oxymoronic. It doesn’t make any sense and it certainly isn’t biblical.

I know we live in a time where we feel pulled in a lot of different directions. We have a lot of things competing for our time, attention, and resources. Furthermore, we tend to take a consumeristic approach to the local church and judge her by her ability to entertain us or hold our attention. As soon as life in the local church gets hard, we tend to bail. As soon as we feel let down or disappointed, we leave. Such immature behavior only stunts our spiritual growth and prevents us from experiencing the fullness of God’s grace and love. The next time you think to yourself - “I don’t need to go to church” or “Maybe it’s time for me to find a new church” or “I’m done with church” - take a moment and read through 1 Corinthians 12. You cannot love Jesus without loving His bride, friends. And love is defined, not as a feeling, but a conscious decision to bear all things, believe all things, endure all things just as Christ did for us.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 5-6, 1 Corinthians 13

September 8, 2021

True Love

Readings for today: Proverbs 5-6, 1 Corinthians 13

"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (1 Corinthians 13:7)

Our world is so confused when it comes to love. Too many people have fallen for the lie that love is a feeling. Something you can fall in and out of. Something disposable. Something that comes and goes. We see it all the time when celebrities break up. When cultural influencers announce their separations on social media. They still "love" each other but their love is not strong enough to overcome their differences. Their love is not strong enough to overcome their infidelities. Their love is not strong enough to hold them together.

To many people have fallen for the lie that they must "love" themselves first. To do anything else is to subject oneself to abuse or dysfunction. The idea of sacrificing oneself daily for another human being. Putting that person's needs above one's own is anathema in our culture. Love must be "self-serving." Love must lead to "self-actualization." Love must demand that others love us the way we love ourselves.

Too many people have fallen for the lie that "love" is the same as sexual attraction. Everything is hyper-sexualized in our culture and to deny our animal attractions is now considered harmful. We are warned it might lead to depression and suicide. If we fail to affirm the sexual attractions of other people - no matter how disordered - we are hateful and bigoted and phobic.

Love has become a false god in our culture. A brutal tyrant with an insatiable appetite. He demands complete obedience and blind loyalty. His corrupting influence is now being felt in our schools and communities. In our courts of law and state houses. Even many churches are bowing at his altar. The results are devastating.

The Bible is clear…God is love, love is not God. It's a critical distinction. God is love. God demonstrates His great love in the sending of His Son. God shows us what love is by sacrificing Himself in our place. God's love is completely selfless. It puts our needs above His own. It is solely focused on the good of the "other." It is not self-serving. It is not possessive. It is not resentful. It is not prideful. It keeps no record of wrongs. It patiently endures all for the sake of all.

God's love bears all things. Even you. Even me. All of us are sinners. We are enslaved to our desires. We do the things we don't want to do and we don't do the things we do want to do. We can't help ourselves.

God's love believes all things. I have people in my life that I dearly love. They tell me they no longer believe in God. My response is always the same. "God believes in you." God's love can do no different. He sees each one of us as we ought to be. As He created us to be. As He redeemed us to be. And He longs for us to turn and embrace Him.

God's love hopes all things. God will never give up on you. God will never stop pursuing you. God is relentless in the chase. His love drives Him. His great desires is that all should be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth.

God’s love endures all things. All of us are at war with God on some level. We rebel against His will. We reject His way. Our hearts are corrupt and deceitful and full of pride. They are always pulling us to go our own way. Do our own thing. Take our destiny into our own hands. God’s love endures our fits and starts. Our fears and failures. Our mistakes and missteps.

God’s love never fails. It will never fail you. It will never fail me. It will never fail the world. God’s love is enough. It died on a cross to satisfy the demands of justice. It willingly and joyfully took our place. Endured the punishment we deserved. Paid the price for our sin. God’s love would not stop until the work was finished. Until every last sin was wiped away. This is the love of God, friends!

Do you know you are loved by the God of the universe? Do you walk in His love? Rest in His love? Are you confident in His love? We aren’t talking about a feeling here. We are talking about an objective reality that is true whether we know it or not. Believe it or not. Understand it or not. Feel it or not. God’s love is the deepest, most profound truth undergirding the entire universe. His love is the foundation of all creation. His love provides meaning and purpose to human life. It is the telos or goal of our existence. Embracing this love is what gives us peace. Peace with God. Peace with others. Peace with ourselves.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 7-8, 1 Corinthians 14

September 9, 2021

Listening to Jesus

Readings for today: Proverbs 7-8, 1 Corinthians 14

“Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors.” (Proverbs 8:34)

Listening. Watching. Waiting. Three essential ingredients to a deep and vibrant relationship with God. But they do not come naturally. I am much more apt to speak rather than listen. Much more apt to take action rather than sit back and watch. Much more apt to jump in and get involved rather than wait for the right time. I am an impatient man. I do not like waiting in lines. Waiting in traffic. Waiting for much of anything.

Listening, watching, and waiting on God has always been a challenge for me. My prayers tend to be monologues. My time with Him can turn into a spiritual “to-do” list. Read your Bible. Journal. Pray. Wash. Rinse. Repeat. Historically, I’ve spent so little time in silence before the Lord. So little time waiting for Him to speak. I am always in a rush. Always in a hurry. Always on to the next thing.

I think this is why we are so quick to create idols. We want a god we can control. We want a god who meets our demands. A god who operates according to our schedule. Remember the people of Israel? Remember when they made the golden calf? A careful reading of the story reveals their impatience. Moses had been gone a long time. For all they knew, he could have perished on Mt. Sinai. They grew impatient. They grew restless. They wanted to get on with it. Lay hold of all God had promised. They wanted to worship. To celebrate their deliverance. Their motives were not all bad. They simply wanted it to happen on their timeline rather than God’s. So they turned to Aaron and asked him to get a move on. Aaron was anxious as well. So rather than lead, he followed. He gave into the people’s demands, making an idol for them to worship. A tangible God they could see and feel.

It is easy to criticize the Israelites. How foolish of them to worship a golden calf! As if we are any better. Sure, our idols are not made of gold or silver but they are no less real. We worship all sorts of things. A cursory glance at our checkbook or schedule reveals all we need to know about our true priorities. Our struggle to simply sit in God’s presence each day to listen, watch, and wait shows us the depths of our impatience. We want God to fit into our lives. We’ll give Him the gaps in our schedules. We’ll give Him the leftovers of our resources. We’ll throw Him a bone every now and then just to cover our bases.

There are consequences when we fail to listen and watch and wait for God. How many times has our impatience cost us? How many times have we gone off half-cocked? Or rushed into a situation we did not understand? How many times have we made a decision we later regretted because we didn’t take the time to get all the information we needed? Blessed indeed is the one who patiently listens to God’s voice. Watches at God’s gate. Waits beside His doors. How different would the Exodus story have been if the people of God had simply waited for Moses to come down before taking action? How different would your life or my life be if we simply waited for God to speak before taking action?

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 9-10, 1 Corinthians 15:1-34

September 10, 2021

The Beating Heart of the Gospel

Readings for today: Proverbs 9-10, 1 Corinthians 15:1-34

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

Boil the Christian faith down and what do you get? A man hanging on a cross, buried in a tomb, rising from the grave three days later. This is the heart of our faith. Without it, we preach in vain. We pray in vain. We live in vain. Without the death and resurrection of Christ, we are fools. We would be better off to eat and drink and party and make the most out of life because death wins. Literally everything rests on this fundamental truth...Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

This is what sets Christianity apart from all other religions on the face of the earth. It’s what makes us unique. It’s what makes us different. It’s what makes Christianity true. We preach a crucified Lord and a Risen Savior. No other faith tradition makes anywhere close to the same claim. Sure, we might share the same moral code. Their gods might have some of the same attributes as our God. Their worship might look strikingly similar in terms of music and prayer. They might be good people with great families who live wholesome lives. They might make positive contributions to our society. But if they do not believe in the literal, historical, bodily death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; then their preaching is in vain. Their faith is in vain. They are still enslaved to their sins. Their dead are eternally lost. All because they are found to be misrepresenting God by denying the glory of His one and only Son.

Paul is very clear. The physical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the THE essential cog in our faith. It is the key to unlocking saving faith. It is the lens through which we now see all of life. It is the cipher that cracks the code of the Bible. Christ has been raised as the firstfruits of the resurrection. He is the foretaste. The forerunner. The first to be raised so that He can go before us and prepare the way. His physical body was laid into the ground perishable, dishonored, and weak. It was raised imperishable, glorious, and in power! He is the first to be changed. The first to be transformed. The first to be raised. By His resurrection, we know death has lost! Sin has been defeated! The works of the evil one destroyed! The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is nothing short of the total and complete victory of God!

And it is God’s victory that makes us immovable. Steadfast. Always abounding in His work. It is God’s victory that makes us watchful. Firm and strong in the faith. Persistent in love. It is his complete confidence in God’s victory that gives Paul courage to face the stones at Lystra. The beatings and imprisonments. The shipwrecks and torments. Paul considers all of it loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ! What about you, my friend? Do you share this same confidence in the death and resurrection of Jesus? Do you place your trust in a Risen Lord and Savior? Has He become the filter for your life? The lens through which you now see the world?

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 11-12, 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

September 11, 2021

Inherit the Wind

Readings for today: Proverbs 11-12, 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

I will never forget where I was on September 11th, 2001. I was sitting in my car at the intersection of Canal Pointe Blvd and Alexander Road, heading into class at Princeton Theological Seminary. I had the radio on like normal when the news came out that the first tower had been hit. At first, I couldn't believe it. Once I got to school, I rushed into the library to find a computer. I hit the "refresh" button over and over again but the news websites were crashing with all the traffic. Then the second tower was hit. Then the Pentagon. Then Flight 93 goes down in Pennsylvania. I tried to get ahold of my wife. (This was before we had cell phones.) She worked for the local school district and was frantically trying to locate the parents of all the children in her program, many of whom worked in New York City. In the wake of that day, I watched a nation come together. First responders laid down their lives heroically. Construction crews worked tirelessly on the site to rescue those buried under the rubble or identify the remains of those who had been killed. Sanctuaries were filled with people seeking solace and a safe place to process their grief in the aftermath. We cared for each other. We comforted each other. We came alongside each other.

Sadly, that spirit of unity didn't last. Instead, we turned on each other. The demonic forces lurking inside all of us have broken the cordon around our hearts, overtaking the "better angels of our nature" that President Abraham Lincoln once put so much trust in. Once again, we are seeing the self-destruction of a nation. Once again, our passions strain the bonds of our common affection to the point of breaking. Our faith in human progress has been terribly misplaced. Our trust in an achievable social utopia has been betrayed. Evil is extending rather than reducing its limits. Humankind cannot help itself. Humanity cannot save herself. Everything we touch seemingly turns to lead. We are slowly but surely discovering the truth of Solomon's words, "Whoever troubles his own household will inherit the wind…" (Proverbs 11:29)

Thankfully, God is not done. He pursues us relentlessly. He presses in on us from every side. He rattles the shutters we work so hard to close. He knocks on the door we try so hard to bar. He shows up at every window. Slips through every crack. He will not let us go. Human beings can only ultimately be understood within the frame of reference that is God. Our life simply shows too many symptoms of another Life impinging upon it. As the late Paul Scherer once wrote, "we are impossible conundrums without God, answerless riddles." And yet, things always seem darkest before the dawn. Things always seem to get worse before they get better. We have to be driven to our knees before we will relinquish our natural pride and arrogance and let go. The Bible declares God's mercies to be new every morning. What that means is that each day is yet another opportunity for God! Perhaps, as Scherer himself put so well, we are being driven from our ruined Edens into a new era where humanity will once again - humbly under God - rise to reclaim her rightful heritage. Not by might. Not by power. But by Christ's Spirit! Her brave and stubborn hopes shaped by a Will that is braver and more stubborn still. Her deep and dark condition matched only by the One who holds in His scarred and steady hands the swinging movement of the years!

This is ultimately where the Apostle Paul lands. Did you catch his final words to us today? "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:57-58) If we seek to serve Christ. If we dedicate our lives to Him. If we humbly offer our lives as a living sacrifice, we will not inherit the wind but the full weight of glory God has prepared for us in His Kingdom!

September 14, 2021

The Power of Forgiveness

Readings for today: Proverbs 17-18, 2 Corinthians 2

"Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs." (2 Corinthians 2:10-11)

Do you want to outwit Satan? Do you want to thwart his designs on your life? Do you want to avoid the traps he has set? Do you want to be protected against his evil intentions to kill, steal, and destroy all that is good and godly in your life? Practice forgiveness. Forgive freely. Forgive generously. Forgive unconditionally. Forgive completely.

Forgiveness is a radical act in our day and age. We live in such a divided world. We are divided along social lines. Political lines. Racial/ethnic lines. Sexual lines. Economic lines. Educational lines. All of it taking on a religious fervor as each person seeks to defend their position over and against their perceived enemies. Differences of opinion devolve into personal animosity. Policy differences become litmus tests for morality. Ideological purity must be maintained at all costs lest one fall down the slippery slope to compromise. Social media throws gasoline on this dumpster fire on a daily basis. Cable "news" organizations fill their programming slots with partisan opinion shows designed to reinforce confirmation bias. It even filters down to the personal level in our day to day relationships. I cannot begin to count the number of times I've had someone tell me about a situation where their feelings were hurt. Rather than follow the gospel-call to forgive, they began attacking the other person's character. Impugning motives. Words like "betrayal" and "wounded" and "abuse" get thrown around far too casually. All in an attempt to justify cutting that other person out of their lives.

The Apostle Paul lived in a similar world. A world of great pluralism and diversity. A world full of political, social, sexual, and religious intrigue. A world where different groups literally came to blows, often in violent and brutal ways. Into this world, Paul believes God has sent His church. His people. And the only way they will survive. The only way they will ever serve as salt and light to those around them is to practice forgiveness.

What is forgiveness according to Paul? It starts with God. God forgiving us. God extending grace to us. God lavishing His unconditional love on us. No matter how many times we hurt Him. No matter how many times we betray Him. No matter how many times we walk away from Him. He never walks away from us. His arms are always open. He always turns the other cheek. He forgives as many times as is necessary. As far as the east is from the west, that's how far God separates our sin from us. As someone once told me many years ago, it's like God takes all our sin, drops in the deepest part of the ocean, and then posts a "No Fishing" sign. Now if this is how God forgives us, is this not how we should forgive others? Having been forgiven much, should we not forgive much? Forgiveness requires us to relinquish our need for vengeance. It requires us to not count a person's trespasses against them. It requires a conscious decision not to keep a record of the other person's wrongs. Most of all, it requires us to love others as Christ loves us. Unconditionally. This doesn't mean we make them become like us. No, we love them as they are. We love them where they are. We love them for who they are. Image-bearers of God. Born with a dignity that, while broken utterly by sin, can never fully be lost.

I can already hear the protests in your heart. What about an abuser? What about the man who murdered my child? Raped my daughter? Stole my life savings in a Ponzi scheme? What about the corporate

criminals at places like Enron or dictators who use chemical weapons on their own people? Evil is legion in our world and you are suggesting we meet such evil with forgiveness and love? How weak! How stupid! Only a privileged white male would ever say such a thing! And perhaps that's partly true. I am fully aware of my cultural location. Fully aware I have never had to battle systematic oppression. Fully aware I have never suffered abuse. Fully aware I have never been the victim of a violent crime. But I have sat with many who have. I have listened to their stories. Perpetrators and victims alike. I worked for two years in a maximum security prison. I know many murderers personally. I have seen their hate up close and personal. I have spent the last twenty years in ministry. Spent countless hours counseling with victims of abuse. I have seen their pain up close and personal. I have been overseas many times. Met survivors of genocide. Survivors of civil wars. Survivors of holocausts no one has ever heard of. I have seen life-threatening poverty up close and personal. I have stood at the mass graves. I have listened to the stories of trauma and tragedy. It is heartbreaking on a level I am at a loss to comprehend.

But I have also seen the power of forgiveness. I have seen it in the Gacaca courts of Rwanda where perpetrators of genocide confess their crimes, are confronted by their victims, and the local community is able to move towards healing and restoration. I have seen it in the church plants of Ethiopia where former tribal enemies become brothers and sisters through the saving work of Jesus Christ. I have seen it in the New Jersey State Prison where murderers received parole because the family of their victim was willing to forgive and reconcile. I saw it in a local church I served whose history included no record of African-American members though they were located in a neighborhood that was racially diverse. The courage of one young African-American man changed the hearts and minds of so many who had grown up with segregation. His Christ-like love overwhelmed their natural prejudice and they were set free. I have seen it in my counseling office as husbands and wives lay aside their "record of wrongs" and marriages are renewed. I have seen it in my own life as my heart is shaped and formed by the influence of godly mentors from all walks of life. An African refugee pastor who has forgiven those who persecuted and imprisoned him. A female Old Testament professor who has successfully battled misogyny with forgiveness and grace. A gay man who faithfully serves the LGBTQ community though they consider him a traitor for choosing the path of celibacy out of obedience to Christ. These are just a few of my heroes. Just a few of the men and women who are taking God's message of forgiveness to the world. I pray for the courage to do the same.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 19-20, 2 Corinthians 3

September 15, 2021

Pastoral Effectiveness

Readings for today: Proverbs 19-20, 2 Corinthians 3

Recently I took a trip to Orlando to attend some denominational meetings. Part of the agenda was to discuss some of the common issues so many of our pastors and churches are facing during this season. According to the latest research from Barna, one third of pastors are considering leaving ministry due to the challenges of the past 18 months. A significant percentage are struggling with their mental health and well-being. Many more report feelings of exhaustion or being overwhelmed. Many are simply tired of being caught in the cross-fire of the decisions they've had to make that dwarf the normal conflicts of the church. Arguments over musical style, sacred space, or different programs have given way to outrage over COVID restrictions, ethnic tensions, ideological purity tests, and political debates. We see many of these same dynamics present in our own denomination and it's causing us to ask some deep questions about how to prepare and train pastors for this brave and difficult new world.

Before we begin evaluating our training methods, however, we need to know what outcomes we're shooting for. What's our target? What qualities and characteristics make a pastor effective? What metrics can we use to measure pastoral excellence? Here's where it gets very tricky. We've never actually done this before! We've never actually developed assessment tools to help us in this process. We've never set down benchmarks by which we can measure pastoral "success." If anything, we've gone the opposite way. We consider such conversations anathema on some level because of how unbiblical they sound. But then we run into these words from the Apostle Paul today…

"Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." (2 Corinthians 3:1-3)

Paul had a rocky relationship with the Corinthian church. He wrote no less than four letters - two of which we have in the New Testament - and probably more. Just a cursory reading of 1st and 2nd Corinthians reveal a host of problems. Factions. Sexual immorality. Class divides. Abuse of spiritual gifts. I imagine this church kept him up at night. Paul even shares how much he grieves over the pain he's caused as he confronted them on their sin. "For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you." (2 Corinthians 2:1-4)

Clearly if one were to evaluate the effectiveness of Paul's ministry in Corinth based on the surface level tensions that existed, one would have to conclude Paul wasn't a very good pastor. But when one probes deeper, one sees the fruit of the gospel present in their midst. Despite the conflict, lives were being changed. People were coming to faith. Miraculous signs and wonders were being performed. God was on the move. Paul is so confident in what was happening in Corinth that he literally calls them his "letter of recommendation." In other words, if anyone ever wanted to question the validity of his ministry, all Paul had to do was point to what was taking place in their church. It's a powerful reminder

to us all that no matter how challenging a season we may be going through, God can and still do His work through us if we are courageous enough to lean into the tension of the moment.

So back to my questions…what makes a pastor effective? What characteristics or qualities make for a "good" pastor? What metrics can we set to evaluate pastoral excellence? Surely at the top of that list has to be the number of lives being changed? The number of people being saved and the number of people growing more into the likeness of Christ? If we can't point to living "letters of recommendation" like Paul then perhaps we need to take a good hard look in the mirror and ask ourselves if we truly are called to pastoral ministry.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 21-22, 2 Corinthians 4

September 16, 2021

Jars of Clay

Readings for today: Proverbs 21-22, 2 Corinthians 4

I have this clay pot on my desk. A friend gave it to me years ago. She bought it in Egypt from a local vendor who literally spent his days forming these vessels out of clay and letting them bake in the sun before taking them to market to sell. It's simple. Ordinary. Fairly fragile. I imagine if I used it day in and day out like most people over in that part of the world, it would become chipped and cracked. Eventually it break apart altogether.

I think about this pot every time I read Paul's words to the Corinthians. "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. " (2 Corinthians 4:7) You and I are no different than the pot that sits on my desk. Simple. Ordinary. Fragile. It doesn't take much to wound us. Hurt us. Chip us. Crack us. Break us. And yet God is His unsurpassed wisdom and grace has entrusted to us the treasure of the gospel. Through His Spirit He has deposited Christ into our hearts. And we now carry Him with us wherever we go.

There is a lot of pressure in our world to be perfect. To never let anyone see you sweat. To pretend like we have it altogether. It's why so many compromise. It's why so many turn to "disgraceful, underhanded ways" or "practice cunning or to tamper with God's word…" (2 Cor. 4:2) They are trying to maintain an image. On the flip side, there seems to be just as much pressure - especially among younger leaders - to be "real" and "authentic." Doubts. Questions. "Deconstructing the faith" has become extremely popular, not to mention lucrative, to many with a platform. They often curate their brokenness on social media in the service of self-promotion. Both views are deeply misguided because they both focus on the pot rather than the Potter. They focus on the jar of clay rather than the treasure hidden within. They flip the script and ascribe power to the person rather than to God which is why all such efforts eventually fall apart. I've seen it happen far too many times in my own life. I've seen it happen far to many times in the lives of those I love and admire.

We are weak and feeble. We are foolish and ignorant. We are anxious and afraid. Each one of our "jars" is chipped and cracked and broken in so many different ways. But when we see ourselves as Jesus sees us, we see past all the hurts, wounds, and scars to the treasure deposited within. We see the light of Christ shining through all our imperfections, giving light and life and blessing to those around us. We understand the "vessels" we inhabit are ultimately not what's most important. Rather it is Christ in us that is the hope of glory! So it doesn't matter what hardships we suffer or what injustices we face. We recognize this world has nothing for us. It is not our home. We can spend our lives in service to Christ. We can wear these bodies out for the sake of Christ's mission in this world. We can exhaust our resources and our time and our energy. We can leave it all on the field so to speak, trusting there is a greater prize awaiting us in heaven. I love how Paul describes his own life, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you." (2 Corinthians 4:8-12)

Paul gets it. His whole life has prepared him for this moment. All his training. Upbringing. Wealth. Power. Privilege. All of it is now poured out like a drink offering before Christ. He must die so others may live. He must give away all he has for the sake of those who do not know Jesus Christ. He must

surrender all his needs, wants, and desires for the sake of the mission of proclaiming Christ. He understands the true worth of the treasure he carries inside and he lets his life become a living testimony to the surpassing power of Christ.

This is how the gospel spreads from one generation to the next. From one region of the world to the next. Through ordinary men and women who come face to face with the pearl of great price and sell all they have as a response. Ordinary people like you and me who grasp the infinite worth of the treasure we hold and do all we can to give it away to others.

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 23-24, 2 Corinthians 5:1-6:13

September 17, 2021

Who's in Control?

Readings for today: Proverbs 23-24, 2 Corinthians 5:1-6:13

Who's in control? It's a relevant question. Especially in our current cultural moment. Some argue it should be the government. The people charged to look out for our best interests. Those who have the authority to enforce the common good. But what happens when those same entities become corrupt? Influenced by power and money? Ideologically driven? How much control should they really be given? Some argue it should be the individual. Each person is responsible for themselves. They should be trusted to look out for their own best interests. They should have the power to make their own choices. But what happens when those choices result in consequences that negatively impact others? What happens when the choices we make become abusive, neglectful, irresponsible, or self-destructive? Do we really believe we are not influenced by selfish desire? Vanity? Ambition? Addiction? How much control can we really be trusted with?

The Bible makes it clear that God is in control. Whether we want to acknowledge it or not. Whether we want to accept it or not. God reigns over the universe and all that is in it. He runs things from His control room in heaven. His hand is always on the wheel. His sees all. He hears all. He knows all. And He exercises dominion over all He has made. To be sure, the world He has created exists in a state of rebellion against His sovereign will. The devil and his demons seek to disrupt God's designs. The human race continually rejects His control over their lives which is why we experience so much suffering and pain. Thankfully, God is patient with us. He refuses to abandon us to our fate. He is constantly at work, taking all things - including the evil of this world - and bending them towards His purposes. He will not give up. He will not let go. He will not rest until all things are set right once again. This includes us. We are God's chosen instruments sent out to proclaim the good news of what God has done to re-assert His control over the world. In Christ, God has re-staked His claim over the world and over our lives. In Christ, He has rescued us from the dominion of the devil. In Christ, He has redeemed us and set us free.

This is the heart of the message the Apostle Paul proclaims in our reading for today. Listen to his words again…"For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2)

What is salvation ultimately? It is the re-assertion of God's sovereign control over our lives. It is our humble submission to Him as Lord. It is our acknowledgement that He now is our King. Our lives are His to command. Our resources are His to use as He sees fit. Our talent and time and energy and passion are His to direct so that He might accomplish His purposes in and through us. We are no longer

our own. We are new creations. We no longer represent ourselves. We are ambassadors for Christ. We no longer get to be in control rather it is the love of Christ that controls us. What does that mean? It means we no longer regard anyone according to the flesh but treat every human being no matter their creed, color, or culture as someone beloved by God. Made in His image. A creature of inestimable worth and value in God's sight. It means we join Christ in His mission to make disciples of all nations, starting with the people living right outside our front door. It also means the work begins right now. In this moment. For now is indeed the favorable time! Today is indeed the day of salvation!

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 25-27, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

September 18, 2021

Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance.

Readings for today: Proverbs 25-27, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

Many years ago I heard God speak audibly. It doesn't happen all that often to me. Most of the time God speaks to me through His Word or through other people but in this particular instance, God spoke directly to me. I heard His voice. He gave me three words - obscurity, anonymity, and insignificance. I was taken aback. These are not normally words I would associate with myself. In fact, my tendency is to go the opposite way. I like attention. I want to be known. More than anything else, I want to make a difference. Do something significant with my life. That's how I knew these words were from God. They cut against the prideful grain of my heart. They confronted my natural arrogance and called me to a life of relinquishment, humility, and surrender.

When I asked God what He meant by giving me those words, He explained. "I want you to labor in obscurity, embrace anonymity, and pursue insignificance." Again, this is not my natural way of operating. I was raised to work hard and chase success. My whole life has been wrapped up and even defined to a great extent by what I can achieve. I am naturally competitive. I like to stand out. I like to be honored. I live for the praise of those around me. That's why God gave me these three words. God knows the sinful tendencies of my heart and He wants to set me free. So He called me to decrease rather than increase. He called me to a life of demotion rather than promotion. He called me to fade into the background rather than step into the limelight. One sees the same dynamic in play today in our reading from the Proverbs…

"Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble." (Proverbs 25:6-7)

"It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glorious to seek one's own glory." (Proverbs 25:27)

"Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips." (Proverbs 27:2)

"The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and a man is tested by his praise." (Proverbs 27:21)

Now why would God do this to me? Or as I have come to understand, why would God do this for me? It's because He's after my heart. He is shaping my heart to look like the heart of His Son. "As in water face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects the man." (Proverbs 27:19) God wants my heart to reflect His heart. Rather than pride, He wants humility. Rather than arrogance, He wants submission. Rather than striving to reach the top, He wants me to race to the bottom. The last shall be first and the first shall be last. The one who gives up his life shall find it. Jesus did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. The Son of God emptied Himself to become a slave, suffering the most humiliating death imaginable. To be made like Jesus is to take a similar journey. We humble ourselves under God's mighty hand and in due time, according to His sovereign plan and purpose, He exalts us just as He did His Son.

Here's the strange thing I've learned since I first heard God speak those words to me. The more I embrace them, the more He lifts me up. The more I pursue godly humility in my life, the more I find myself exalted in His presence. The more I empty my hands, the more He pours in. The more I let go of my trophies and achievements and honors, the more success He gives. What's the difference between

my former way of living and the way I live today? None of these things have a hold on me. In my former life, they would have become idols. They would enslave me. I would spend so much time and energy protecting them. Guarding them. Making sure everyone knew what I had earned. What I had achieved. What I deserved. Now I've been set free. God has unclenched my fists. He has opened my hands. All that I have is a gift from Him. A blessing from above. A grace I can enjoy without any pressure to perform.

Readings for tomorrow: None

September 20, 2021

True Repentance

Readings for today: Proverbs 28-31, Ecclesiastes 1-2, 2 Corinthians 7:2-8:24

John the Baptist came preaching a message of repentance. Jesus came preaching a message of repentance. Paul traveled all over the known world at the time preaching a message of repentance. Clearly "repentance" lies at the heart of the Christian faith. But what is repentance? Is it simply saying sorry to God? An existential feeling of guilt or condemnation? A deep sense that we are wrong? And how does one actually "repent?" Kneel in sackcloth and ashes? Engage in self-harm like the monks of old? Beat oneself up emotionally and spiritually? Subject oneself to rigorous, daily self-examination?

I love how Paul describes repentance in 2 Corinthians 7:10, "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death." The key to repentance is the fruit it produces in a person's life. If your grief - as deep and profound as it may be - produces death it is not from God. On the other hand, if your grief leads to salvation without regret than you can be sure it is from the Lord.

I cannot tell you the number of times I have counseled someone whose grief only produced death. They were sorry they got caught. Sorry for the mess they found themselves in. Sorry for the way life turned out. Sorry for the bad choices they made. But they weren't sorry enough to make a change. Their sorrow did not lead to repentance. It did not lead to surrender. It did not lead to submission. They still wanted control. Still wanted to be in charge. Still wanted to justify themselves. So we'd scratch the surface of their grief only to find excuses. Blame-shifting. Denial. As a result, their lives seemed perpetually locked in a death spiral.

At the same time, I have had the joy of walking with people through their grief as it produced salvation. Their sorrow was less about them and more about God. They had come face to face with the depth of their sin. The depth of their depravity. They realized no matter how hard they tried, they simply didn't have it in them to make things right. In their despair, they cast themselves at the foot of the cross where they found freedom and healing. Hope for their journey. And all their regrets. All the guilt from past mistakes. All the shame they carried was washed away. They fixed their eyes on Christ. They surrendered to His love. Submitted to His will. Gave Him control over their lives. Scratch the surface of their grief and you find beauty. Joy. Peace. And they enter a virtuous cycle of living that leads to fulfillment and true happiness.

Where do you find yourself this morning? When confronted by the Spirit over mistakes you have made. Sins you have committed. Ways you have fallen short and let people down. How do you respond? Is your grief grounded in Christ or in the world? Does your repentance lead to a changed life or are you still holding onto past regrets? Let me encourage you to let go of the death-dealing ways of this world so that you may receive the life-giving Spirit of Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 3-4, 2 Corinthians 9

September 21

Incarnational Community

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 3-4, 2 Corinthians 9

It is not good for human beings to be alone. From the opening pages of Scripture we hear these words and we know in our bones they are true. We are suffering through an epidemic of loneliness in our country these days. So many people feel like they have no one to talk to. No shoulder to cry on. No one to lean on when times get hard. No close friendships. A few years ago, the surgeon general released a study designating "loneliness" as a major health crisis. It is one of the major sources of depression, self-harm, and suicide. It reduces our life expectancy. Many therapists I talk to tell me that much of their practice is simply sitting and listening to people share about their daily lives. Their clients aren't seeking therapy so much as friendship. This is not to minimize the very real mental health crisis in our country today only to point out that one of the root causes is a lack of any kind of deep relationships.

Over and against this lonely way of life, the Teacher in Ecclesiastes offers this sound advice. "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken." (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12) Now I know we usually reserve these verses for weddings but they apply to all of life. Woe to the one who falls and is alone. Woe to the one who is cold and is alone. Woe to the one who is attacked and is alone. I'm sure we've all had these experiences at some point in time and it is painful.

God made us for incarnational community. He created us as relational beings. Cast in His image, we are built to relate to others in the same way the members of the Trinity relate to one another. Our hearts crave deep relationships. Our souls need to be knit together with other people. We all have this longing deep within. Not only that but we were created for a relationship with God! A threefold cord is not quickly broken! As we intertwine our lives with God's life and with the lives of other people, we find ourselves growing stronger, more confident, and more at peace. With God at our side and our brothers and sisters at our backs, we can withstand anything. This is how life was intended to be but sin separates. Separates us from God. Separates us from one another. So we must repent. Repent of our ungodly impulse to "go it alone." Repent of the excuses we make that keep us separated from flesh and blood community. Repent of the way we prioritize tasks and activities and technology over face to face interaction with the people we love.

I learned a long time ago that God most often shows up in my life with skin on. He speaks to me and He ministers to me through flesh and blood people. My family. My friends. My colleagues. My church family. I am blessed by these relationships and the more I let them into my life, the more I am encouraged, comforted, strengthened, and inspired to live for Christ. Who is God sending into your life? Who has He sent and what are you doing to grow that relationship? Are you open to new relationships? New people? New experiences? Or do you find yourself pulling back? Isolating? Growing more and more lonely with each passing day? Don't believe the lie, friends! You were made for community! You were built for relationships! You are hard-wired for connection! Lean into Christ! Lean into your family! Lean into your friendships! Let God fill your soul!

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 5-6, 2 Corinthians 10

September 23, 2021

Handling Criticism

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 7-9, 2 Corinthians 11:1-15

We live in an age of outrage. We live in a time where personal attack has become not just acceptable but almost virtuous. Motives are impugned. Character is assassinated. People are crucified for the littlest mistakes. These things have real world consequences. People lose jobs. People lose relationships. People lose opportunities. Often because of something careless they said or did years ago. We do not allow for any growth. We do not extend any grace. It is a merciless, pitiless, Darwinian process that tears everyone down.

The Apostle Paul has been pointing us to a different way. The way of Jesus. Throughout chapters 10-13, Paul is answering his critics. People who have personally attacked him. Self-proclaimed "super-apostles" who seem to follow Paul around to correct his theology. They take it on themselves to serve as the theological police of the fledgling early church. They preach that everyone must be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses. They attack Paul's methods and speaking skills. They attack his character and reliability. They accuse him of being a conflict avoider. They claim to have the same mission credentials as Paul and a better spiritual pedigree. Their CV's are filled, so they say, with church plants and signs and wonders and visions. This forces Paul's hand. He has to do what he hates. He has to defend his apostleship by citing his own hard-won credentials.

As we read, it is important to discern his tone. In our current cultural and political climate, it would be easy to assume Paul feels as we do. It would be easy to read anger and rage into his words as he defends his apostleship. That would be a mistake. Paul says right up front that he is coming to them in meekness and gentleness. Though confident in his authority as an apostle of Christ, he will not "boast beyond limits" nor will he "overextend" himself to make his point. He calls himself a fool numerous times throughout the reading and mocks his former "credentials." Over and over again, he reminds them of his love for them. Reminds them of his great desire to see them restored in their faith. I love how he ends his letter, "Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you." (2 Corinthians 13:11) This is Paul's heart on display.

Originally, Paul came to them in humility. He placed no financial burden on them, preaching the gospel free of charge. Living off the support of other churches, like the one in Macedonia which was extremely poor and yet very generous, he was able to live among them and teach them the good news of Jesus Christ. He didn't lord his authority over them. He didn't pass out his resume. He refused to promote his past success. Instead, he came to them in weakness. He shared in their sufferings. He intentionally relinquished his rights in order to build them up as a church. I love how he describes his love for them. "For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ." (2 Corinthians 11:2) "I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls..." (2 Corinthians 12:15) "For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for." (2 Corinthians 13:9)

Perhaps the most famous part of this set of readings has to do with the "thorn in Paul's flesh." Commentators throughout history have argued over what exactly Paul is referring to here. Is it an illness? An addiction? A persistent temptation? I believe Paul clearly identifies the thorn when he calls it a "messenger from Satan." In 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, Paul writes "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan

disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds." The Greek word for "angel" can also mean "messenger" and it is the same word in both cases. Essentially, Paul believes that these false apostles are being used by God to keep him humble and utterly reliant on grace. God is using these evil men and their lies to protect Paul from pride and arrogance. He is using them to remind Paul of his weakness and dependence on Christ. He wants Paul to understand that the power he possesses does not come from him but from Jesus Himself.

I remember several years ago having a member of my congregation turn on me. For months she would write hate-filled notes and put them in the offering plate for me. When the deacons started to throw them away, she placed them in an envelope with my name on it. Soon that wasn't enough. She began writing in our pew Bibles, calling for me to be fired. Attacking my character. Her anger and hate festered to the point that she even wrote a message on our Communion table cloth! It was brutal. We tried to talk to her. We tried to confront her. Even told her she would not be welcome if she persisted in her behavior. None of it deterred this woman. Eventually, she passed away. She certainly didn't want me anywhere near her funeral. I remember the morning of her memorial service sitting in a coffee shop waiting for my next meeting. As I prayed for this woman and her family, the Spirit of God spoke to my heart. "I have used this woman to keep you humble. To remind you of your need to depend on Me. To teach you the truth about grace and unconditional love. You will miss her. You need people like her in your life to keep you trusting in the sufficiency of Christ." It was a powerful lesson and one I will never forget.

How do you handle hate? How do you handle unfair criticism? Remember God uses all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Rather than lash out, take a step back. What is God trying to show you? What is God trying to teach you? Is His grace truly sufficient for you? Is His power made perfect even in your weakness?

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 10-12, 2 Corinthians 11:16-33

September 24, 2021

Choose Joy

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 10-12, 2 Corinthians 11:16-33

We haven't talked a lot about Ecclesiastes so I thought I'd recap a bit from the last couple of days. Lost in all Solomon's talk about vanity and emptiness and chasing the wind in this book is the number of times he encourages the reader to enjoy life. Enjoy the time they have been given. Enjoy the hours and days of blessing. Enjoy the seasons when life is good. Yes, you will experience bad times. Yes, you will experience hardship and adversity. Yes, you cannot place your trust in wisdom, wealth, influence, or a good name. But you can still find joy. Simple pleasures of feasting, friendship, and family.

"In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him." (Ecclesiastes 7:14)

"And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 8:15)

"Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do...Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going." (Ecclesiastes 9:7, 9-10)

"Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment." (Ecclesiastes 11:9)

To be sure, Solomon is encouraging a "sober" joy. A joy tempered by the realities of hard work, adversity, judgment, and death. A deeper joy that transcends superficial happiness. A joy that springs from a deep love of life and all the blessings God has given. The profound joy that comes from a life lived before God in this world. The joyful life for Solomon is not all bubbles and rainbows and unicorns. It's an utterly realistic joy. A joy that acknowledges the harsh truth about our broken world. A joy that walks eyes wide open to pain and suffering. A joy that doesn't run from trouble.

I've been a pastor for almost twenty years. I've spent countless hours counseling people from all walks of life. I've served congregations on the East Coast. The Deep South. The Midwest. And for the last decade or so, out West in Colorado. A common thread running throughout all those conversations is the universal desire for happiness. A craving for joy. But it's a joy without hardship. A happiness without sorrow. An unrealistic expectation that life can be lived...indeed should be lived...without pain and suffering. In the most extreme cases, the person seems to believe God "owes" them such a life. It's why one of the most frequent questions I have to help people wrestle with is "Why, God?" Why did God let this happen to me? Why didn't God protect me from this tragedy? Why does God allow suffering? Why does a good God allow evil to exist in the world? Such questions, at their best, reveal the longing we all have for the world to come. The world where God will wipe away every tear, end all injustice, and heal every hurt. At their worst, they reveal a deep misunderstanding of the world around us. A false expectation that this life can be lived without experiencing hardship and pain. Solomon is clearly confronting the latter attitude.

So how do you experience the world? When you wake up in the morning, what's your expectation? Do you walk into life eyes wide open to both the good and the bad? Are you willing to embrace the ups and downs? Do you understand that life will be filled with pleasure and pain? Accomplishment and adversity? Success and failure? I love how Solomon closes out this book, "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of humanity." (Ecclesiastes 12:13) Or as Jesus put it, "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." (Matthew 22:37-40) Friends, you and I were created to love God and enjoy Him forever. May you choose the joy that comes from knowing and loving Jesus Christ!

Readings for tomorrow: Song of Solomon 1-3, 2 Corinthians 12

September 25, 2021

Intimacy with God

Readings for today: Song of Solomon 1-3, 2 Corinthians 12

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

But what is this book about? The love of a man for a woman? The love of God for His church? Perhaps both? Are we comfortable thinking about our relationship with God in sexual terms? Or is that a bridge too far? It certainly was for many of the ancient rabbi's. They put a content warning on this book, restricting it to those who were 30 and over. Then again, the ancient church often read this text as they approached the Lord's Table. They recognized the deep intimacy God desires to have with us and they affirmed such love by tying this book to the most sacred act of worship. I firmly believe the Bible is inviting us to approach God in the most intimate of ways. The language of the Song is meant to arouse. Meant to touch the deepest places of our hearts. Meant to draw us into intimate embrace with the Father.

Our inability to embrace this book reveals how deep our corruption runs. We are so confused when it comes to human sexuality. We buy the lie that it's all about our personal pleasure. We depersonalize it through pornography, casual hook ups, and apps like Tinder. We see sex as dirty yet secretly gratifying. Something to be enjoyed yet something to be feared. Our culture boasts of sexual freedom but then seems shocked when such freedom leads to broken relationships, unplanned pregnancy, STD's, abuse, and violence. We want all the pleasure sex brings but none of the responsibility. If there's anything the #MeToo movement has taught us, it's that our sexual appetites are insatiable. Our lusts are impossible to satisfy. Sexuality without restraint is destructive and traumatic.

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

So is it possible to see the Song of Solomon as a prayer? As a way to express the deepest desires of our hearts to God? As a way for us to ask for deeper intimacy with Him? Or does our broken human experience of sexuality warp our thinking? Corrupt how we understand this most powerful and primal of drives? Does it poison this well and thus prevent us from fully grasping the depth of relationship God desires to have with us? The Song of Solomon is an invitation. An invitation from God to deeper intimacy. If you find yourself struggling to embrace Him, prayerfully meditate on this book. If you find yourself battling inner demons or shame from your past, let the words of this book assure you and heal you as you read about God's great love for you. If you've never submitted your sexuality to God or never even connected the gift of sex with God, let these words gently convict you and re-shape your thinking.

Friends, there's a reason Christ calls the church His "bride." There's a reason God so often refers to Himself in the Old Testament as a "husband" and Israel as his "wife." Marriage is the place where a

man and a woman become “one flesh” before the Lord and it is designed to point beyond itself to something even greater...the “oneness” God desires to have with His people for all eternity.

Readings for tomorrow: Song of Solomon 4-8, 2 Corinthians 13, Galatians 1, Isaiah 1

September 27, 2021

Death-Defying Love

Readings for today: Song of Solomon 4-8, 2 Corinthians 13, Galatians 1, Isaiah 1

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

I will admit I am partial to these verses. My wife inscribed them on my wedding ring. We've been together over twenty-five years now and the words ring more true than ever. Life has not been a fairy tale. We've had to weather some storms like all couples do. The loss of a child. The failure of a ministry. The dangerously premature birth of our twins. The battles with our children as they grew older. Facing our own demons as they revealed themselves over the years. It's been a journey. And there have been moments when I wasn't sure we'd make it through. In fact, I almost lost my marriage many years ago due to my neglect and workaholism. So we've definitely had our ups and downs. Our peaks and valleys. But the biggest lesson we've learned is that God's love never fails.

You may or may not believe that last statement. I remember talking to a friend several years ago who challenged me on this point. She pointed to her divorce as an example of the failure of love. She pointed to the estrangement of her children as an example of love letting her down. She gave me example after example from her own life of the many times she had been disappointed by love. Betrayed by love. Abandoned by love. It was heartbreaking. After listening, I asked her about the love of Jesus. She broke down and wept. Though she had so many negative experiences with human love, she found herself still holding on to the love of God. As we talked further, she slowly but surely was able to recognize how God's love had sustained her through all the "floods" and "fires" of her life.

In my last devotional on Saturday, I pointed out that the Song of Solomon is not simply a human love poem. Traditionally it has been interpreted by many as describing the love God has for His people. I know this was a new thought for many. Perhaps it even made your reading a little awkward or uncomfortable. Hopefully today it becomes more clear. It is God who sets us as a seal on His heart. It is God who sets us as a seal on His arm. It is God's love that is as strong as death. His love that is as fierce as the grave. When the devil offered Jesus the entire world in exchange for love, Jesus utterly despised him. God's love is eternal. Steadfast. Loyal. True. It is the one sure thing in this uncertain world in which we live.

Ponder the love of God today, friends. A love that will not let you go. A love that will relentlessly pursue you until the day you die. A love that was demonstrated on the Cross. A love that defeated the grave. A love that lives even now eternal in the heavens. A love that is being poured out continually by the Holy Spirit onto God's people so they will share it with the world. This love is available to us! This love never runs dry! Trusting in this love will save your marriage! It will transform your family! It will deepen your friendships! It will change everything if you let it. If you will simply let go and let Christ reign and rule in your heart. Rest in His love, friends. Let God quiet you with His love. May you walk today in His love and may you experience the blessing that comes from abiding in His love.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 2-3, Galatians 2

September 28, 2021

On Earth as it is in Heaven

Readings for today: Isaiah 2-3, Galatians 2

We live in a fallen world. A world full of pain and suffering. A world full of anxiety and fear. A world full of tragedy and heartbreak. Humanity is a fallen creature. Driven by passions it cannot control. Enslaved by desires it cannot constrain. We are our own worst enemies. Over the years, I've had lots of conversations with people from all different walks of life. All different backgrounds and culture. Because I am a pastor, they often ask me questions about the meaning of life. Why things are the way they are? Why the world is the way that it is? Why is humanity seemingly so hell-bent on self-destruction? The Bible has an answer. A diagnosis. It's not an easy one to hear. It's called sin. Human beings - made in God's own image and given dominion over all He has made - wanted to play god, wanted to be their own gods, and the results have been horrifying. We've made a huge mess of things. We can't get out of our own way. No matter how hard we try. No matter how many plans we put together. No matter how much we strive and toil and struggle and fight. We tend to relapse into the same evil behaviors. Violence. Greed. Selfishness. Outrage. Hate. This is the fruit of a corrupt nature. We are rotten to the core. And if you doubt the veracity of this statement, go spend time in the slums of our world. Stand at the mass graves of the victims of genocide. Listen closely to the overheated rhetoric of politicians across the world and across the political spectrum. We are as helpless as we are hopeless.

Thankfully, God knows we are poor and powerless. He knows we are weak and feeble and desperately anxious and afraid. So He makes a way where there is no way. He lifts high the deep valleys. He lays low the tall mountains. He makes smooth the rough places and straightens the winding roads. He tears down every dividing wall of hostility and eliminates every barrier that keeps us from His presence. His promise is sure. Our future secure. His vision for this world will come to pass. Listen to how the prophet Isaiah describes it, "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord." (Isaiah 2:2-5)

It's beautiful, is it not? A world full of peace. A world full of righteousness and justice. A world full of grace and mercy. A world where there is no need for self-promotion, self-protection, or self-preservation for God is the inexhaustible source for all we need. And He is more than enough. It's a world where the nations seek God. The nations serve God. The nations obey God. A world where God's name is lifted up. God's house is the center of all of life. And the worship of God becomes humanity's highest end once again. All things are made new. All things are restored. All things are full of light and life and love. This is God's vision for His world. God's vision for humanity. God's vision for our future.

I love that last line. Verse five. "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord." To put it another way, "Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We pray this prayer with great regularity. Some traditions even pray it every Sunday. It's the prayer Jesus taught His disciples to pray and it reflects His heart for our world. Jesus wants His people to walk in the light of the Lord. To live

as heavenly creatures in this earthly realm. To be a community of life in a culture of death. He wants us to embody our future in the present. He wants us to live as if we were already there in those “latter days.” We are to give people a foretaste of heaven. A glimpse of God’s Kingdom. In our worship. In our fellowship. In our relationships with each other and in our service to the lost and least of these in our world.

What does this practically mean for our day to day? It means we allow no human divisions or distinctions to separate us from our brothers and sisters in Christ. Not politics. Not ethnicity. Not economics. It means we practice forgiveness and pursue reconciliation when we’ve been hurt or wounded. It means the strong lay down their lives for the weak. The powerful seek to serve the powerless. Those in authority exercise it with grace and mercy and compassion. It means we cling to the truth and reject all lies. It means we refuse to let the ends justify the means, especially when those means require ungodly compromise. It means we humble ourselves continually under God’s mighty hand, trusting Him to lift us up in His time and according to His will. And these are just the outskirts of His ways.

Friends, each day presents a new opportunity for God’s mercies are new every morning and His faithfulness is great! Today can be the day of salvation! Today is yet another chance for the Kingdom in your life and in your world! Hear the Word of the Lord! Walk in the light of the Lord! Surrender yourself to His purposes! Let Him use you for His glory!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 4-6, Galatians 3

September 29, 2021

A Prophetic Call

Readings for today: Isaiah 4-6, Galatians 3

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

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

Isaiah presumably witnesses all of this. He sees it all go past. He lives it. His prophetic career begins at some point during the glory days under King Uzziah and ends at some point during the reign of King Hezekiah. Through it all, he watches his nation shift its allegiance from Yahweh to other gods. He watches his nation descend into cultural chaos as they abandon true worship and true righteousness. He watches the leaders of his nation attempt to reform and revitalize the country. He sees the ups and downs of their efforts. The successes and failures. I often ask myself what sustains Isaiah? How is he able to find the strength to persevere throughout his life and ministry? The answer, of course, comes in chapter six…

"In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me." And he said, "Go, and say to this people: "'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled." The holy seed is its stump." (Isaiah 6:1-13)

Isaiah has what's known as an "epiphany." He comes face to face with the glory of God. In the midst of his deep grief over the death of his beloved king, he receives a vision that will set the course for the rest

of his life. It is honest. It is real. It is raw. No holds barred. God essentially tells Isaiah that by answering this call, he will experience a lifetime of futility. A lifetime of failure. He will speak words the people will not hear. He will see things they cannot understand. He is called to the prophetic ministry. Not so much a ministry future-telling as much as a ministry of confrontation. Confrontation not birthed out of anger or frustration but out of hope. Hope for repentance. Hope for a return to the Lord where the people can find grace and healing and mercy. Listen to some of things he says over these first few chapters…

“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” (Isaiah 1:16-18)

“It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 2:2-3)

“In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.” (Isaiah 4:2-6)

One can easily recognize the parallels to our own time. How many of us lament the state of our nation? How many of us lament the moral drift of our culture? How many of us lament the pain and suffering and sin and degredation we see all around us? We lament the lack of prayer in our schools. The absence of the Ten Commandments in public spaces. The encroaching secularism that threatens to push our faith to the margins. And yet, are we willing to prophetically confront the deeper questions of why prayer doesn’t seem to fill our homes? Why the Ten Commandments aren’t posted and followed in our churches? How we have marginalized our faith by refusing to share Christ with our neighbors, friends, and co-workers? Are we not as guilty as the people Isaiah was speaking to? And are we willing to hear his words as the Word of the Lord to us? Are we willing to repent and return and re-commit ourselves to God’s ways?

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 7-9, Galatians 4

September 30, 2021

Layers of Meaning

Readings for today: Isaiah 7-9, Galatians 4

The prophetic books are difficult to interpret. There are often many different layers of meaning. They serve as a great reminder that while the Bible was written for us, it was not written to us. The people who heard Isaiah speak interpreted things quite differently than we do today. They recognized Isaiah was addressing current events happening all around them in their world and it is only later that they would come to recognize he was also speaking prophetically about what would happen in the future as well. Take Isaiah 7:14 for example, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” This is one of the great Messianic texts Matthew picks up in his gospel but it also has immediate implications for King Ahaz. Ahaz is staring down the barrel of a great invasion. His worst enemies, Syrian and Ephraim, have joined forces to conquer his kingdom. Ahaz and his people are rightly afraid. Isaiah 7:2 even says their hearts “shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.” In the midst of their fear, God sends Isaiah with a word of comfort. A word of hope. A word of victory. “And say to him, 'Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah...thus says the Lord God: "It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin. And within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people. And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.” (Isaiah 7:4, 7-9) But Ahaz does not accept the Word of the Lord. He cannot believe it. Ahaz has spent his entire life worshipping other gods so it shouldn’t surprise us when he doesn’t recognize Yahweh’s voice. So God takes it one step further. Not only does He give Ahaz a word of promise but also a tangible sign to hold onto so he knows these things will come to pass. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria!" (Isaiah 7:14-17) Some scholars suggest this is Isaiah’s son who appears in the next chapter. Others suggest it is the name given to a baby born in the king’s household, an event unrecorded in the Bible. Whichever it is, the point is that God will bring to pass His will for both Syria and Samaria as the Assyrian Empire rises up, spills its banks, and floods through both regions. This is the immediate meaning of the prophecy.

But there is an eschatological meaning as well. As mentioned above, Matthew picks up this text and applies it to the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. The ultimate sign of comfort. The ultimate sign of hope. The ultimate sign of God’s victory on behalf of His people. Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin and enters this world to bring eternal life through His death and resurrection. Because of Christ, we do not need to be afraid. We will not fall before our enemies. We are not left to the mercy of our circumstances. We are no longer enslaved to sin. We are set free. By His great love and mercy and grace. Like Ahaz, we hear these words, “Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint...” (Isaiah 7:4) And we are reminded again to place our trust in God.

I’ve been studying the Scriptures for over two decades now. I read through the Bible every year. I study it in-depth both personally and for my profession. I have spent countless hours meditating and praying over these texts and here is what I’ve discovered. Not only does Scripture have an immediate meaning

for those like Ahaz who are hearing it for the first time. And not only does it often have a secondary meaning as it relates to Jesus Christ or future world events. But it also takes on a third meaning. A personal application in my own life. When I read these stories and place myself in Ahaz's shoes and try to imagine his fear and trepidation; I realize God is speaking to my life as well. My circumstances. My struggles. My fears. How often have I stood face to face with my own enemies? My heart shaking like a tree before the wind? How often has God brought me a word of comfort, hope, and promise in those moments? How many times have I graciously been given a sign? How many times as I have waited on the Lord have I seen Him come through? Deliver the victory? My job is simply to wait. To hold onto faith. To trust. To surrender. To let Him do the work. When I do, I can look back and see the hand of God as He sovereignly directs all things according to His will in my life for my good and for His glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 10-12, Galatians 5

October 1, 2021

Christian Freedom

Readings for today: Isaiah 10-12, Galatians 5

Galatians is the manifesto for Christian freedom. The freedom we have in Christ. The freedom Christ won for us on the cross. Without Jesus, we are enslaved. Enslaved to our sinful desires. Enslaved to our corrupt thoughts and feelings. Enslaved to the ways of this world. Enslaved by the enemy of this world. It's why when we look at the world around us, we see such pain. It's why human beings are often so hurtful. So abusive. So evil. It's why man's inhumanity to man often knows no boundaries. Paul knew this. He had experienced this. Before Christ set him free, he was enslaved to his own passions and desires. He persecuted the church. Celebrated their pain and suffering. Rejoiced in their deaths. He relentlessly pursued them. Chased them down. Drug them from their homes and families. He was the chief of sinners. But then Christ came into his life and he was set free. So this freedom of which he speaks is not an abstract concept for him. It is something he experienced deeply, viscerally, and powerfully.

It's why he's so concerned for his Galatian friends. He is in anguish over what is happening to them. Having been set free by Christ, they are submitting themselves again to the yoke of slavery. Having begun so well in the Spirit, they are again seeking to ground their identity in something other than Jesus. Having been saved by grace through the gift of faith, they are now turning to their own work for justification. How often do we make the same mistake as Christians?

So how can we guard our hearts and minds from falling into this trap? Paul lays it out for us in the readings for today. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1) A great verse to memorize and meditate on. A great verse to remind yourself of when you start to feel the pull of temptation. A great verse to cling to when you feel trapped or defeated or depressed or anxious or afraid. You have been set free! Christ has accomplished all you need! Simply stand in this freedom. Rest in this freedom. Trust this freedom and do not return to the old ways of slavery.

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." (Galatians 5:13) Our world doesn't understand true freedom. The freedom it offers is an unfettered freedom. A freedom without boundaries. A freedom without restraint. A freedom centered ultimately on the gratification of our own selfish desires. This is not Christian freedom, friends! It is a lie from the pit of hell! It is the path back into slavery! Christian freedom results in service to God and to one another. Christian freedom means offering our lives back to God and to His people. It is a freedom constrained by love. A freedom bounded by grace. A freedom fettered by faith in the Son of God who gave Himself up for us. This is the freedom we were called to in Christ.

And we gain this freedom as we walk by the Spirit. "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." (Galatians 5:16) As we surrender our lives to the Spirit and His sanctifying work, we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. We will stand firm and resist the yoke of slavery. We will refuse to go back to the old ways of living. "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit." (Galatians 5:25) As we keep in step with Spirit - through daily prayer and Bible study and weekly worship with God's people - we will find our lives being transformed. Our awareness of the depth and the breadth of the freedom we have in Christ will grow. Our experience of

God’s presence will deepen. Our desire to love and serve both God and His people will increase. This is what Paul hopes and prays for his Galatian friends and it is my prayer for all of us as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 13-15, Galatians 6

October 2, 2021

The Danger of Self-Promotion

Readings for today: Isaiah 13-15, Galatians 6

There may not be anything more dangerous to our mental health than self-promotion. Recently, Facebook completed an internal study of the impact of Instagram especially on teenage girls. The results were not good. 1 in 5 girls reported Instagram makes them feel worse about themselves. 32.4% of them reported Instagram made them feel worse about their bodies specifically. Significant percentages reported increased rates of anxiety and depression as well. This squares with an earlier finding in Britain that measured the impact of mental health across all social media platforms. All of them reported similar increases in rates of anxiety, depression, and even physical illness. The greater the usage, the greater the impact. So here's the big question…why? What is it about social media that drives us to despair? Social media is literally designed to create a self-reinforcing feedback loop. It activates the brain's "reward" center by releasing dopamine with every "like" or "follow" or engagement. As such, it becomes addictive and like all addictions, you rapidly reach the point of diminishing returns. Simply put, you find yourself craving more and needing more to get the same dopamine effect. The results of the study show that - consciously or subconsciously - people are using social media to boost their self-esteem. Polish their self-image. Promote themselves and their accomplishments. They do this to create a greater sense of belonging in their social circle. When their posts receive a lot of attention, the pleasure centers in their brain fire up. Dopamine is released. They feel great. When their posts go unnoticed or are seemingly ignored, the pleasure centers of their brains remain dormant. Dopamine is not released. And just like any addict, when they are denied what they crave, they grow anxious and depressed.

This is not a new problem. Human beings have been struggling with this issue from the beginning. There is something innate within us that craves attention. We long to be recognized. Long to be loved and admired and respected. Call it pride. Call it arrogance. Call it the "idol of Self." It is rooted deep within our sinful nature and it is impossible to resist. We see a great example of it from our reading today in Isaiah. "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit. Those who see you will stare at you and ponder over you: 'Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who did not let his prisoners go home?' All the kings of the nations lie in glory, each in his own tomb; but you are cast out, away from your grave, like a loathed branch, clothed with the slain, those pierced by the sword, who go down to the stones of the pit, like a dead body trampled underfoot. You will not be joined with them in burial, because you have destroyed your land, you have slain your people." (Isaiah 14:12-20)

Traditionally, we believe this passage has a double-meaning. In human terms, it refers to the Babylonian king. The man who set himself up as ruler of the world. The man who believed himself to be greater than any human or god. He set up images of himself. He demanded to be worshipped. He clearly attempted to claim a position that was not his own. In spiritual terms, we also see this as a reference to Satan. Lucifer. The devil. An angel who once lived with God in glory but fell through pride and arrogance as he sought to usurp God's throne. Regardless of what interpretive stance you hold - and it is possible to believe both - they end with the same result. Those who exalt themselves are brought low. Those who promote themselves are cast down. Those who seek to raise themselves

through pride and arrogance to a lofty status end up falling on their faces. They become the subject of derision. They are quickly cast aside and forgotten.

We see it in our own world all the time. How many celebrities rise and fall? How many social influencers come and go? How many politicians get their fifteen minutes of fame? Those with any kind of staying power often have to resort to greater and greater acts of self-promotion in order to remain relevant. They become attention-seekers in order not to be forgotten. It's shameless and often borders on the absurd. By the way, I see the same thing happening with pastors. The pursuit of platform and performance and self-promotion over faithfulness and a long obedience in the same direction. It's why so many fall into sin. It's why so many fall into temptation. They are driven to create content. Driven to create a buzz. Driven by their success to create greater success. All defined by numbers reached. Butts in the seats. Online views. Books published. Conferences invited to. You name it. They become an industry unto themselves. But such fame is fleeting. Such attention is not good for the soul. The pressure to perform is too much which is why so many crater at the end.

So what's the answer? I think the Apostle Paul sums it up well, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." (Galatians 6:14) The only Person we should be platforming is Jesus. His is the only name under heaven by which we might be saved and therefore His is the only Name we should be promoting to the world. A famous saint once said, "Preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten." That sounds about right to me. At the end of the day…if my life is to count for anything…may it be because I pointed people beyond myself to Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: None

October 4, 2021

The Sovereignty of God

Readings for today: Isaiah 16-20, Ephesians 1-2

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven…” (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

I think of this verse every time I read through the prophets. On the one hand, God is bringing His righteous judgment against a people who have forgotten Him. A people who have earned their fate by bringing shame upon themselves and their communities and their nations through their actions. Cush shall be cut off. Egypt shall fall. Babylon will be destroyed. The desert tribes of the Kedar scattered. Not even God’s chosen people will be spared as Jerusalem is laid low. At the same time, there are signs of future hope. In a stunning display of grace and mercy, God reaches out to the enemies of His people and draws them close. “And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them...In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance." (Isaiah 19:21, 23-25) There truly is a time for everything under heaven!

One of the keys to understanding and interpreting the prophetic texts is to try to place yourself in Isaiah’s shoes. He is the court prophet. A godly politician. A man who is familiar with world events. He speaks to kings and princes and the rulers of his day. He knows the intricate plans they’ve laid. He knows the complex challenges they face. He knows the struggles and hardships and burdens that come along with leading a nation at a time when one is surrounded by far more powerful neighbors to the north (Assyria), to the east (Babylon), and to the south (Egypt). Israel has always sat at the crossroads of the Middle East. They have served as a highway for invading armies for centuries. And yet, as Isaiah prayerfully ponders all these things, the Holy Spirit opens His eyes. He takes a step back and surveys the ever-shifting political landscape from God’s perspective. He begins to see how God is at work orchestrating the course of human events. Sovereignly directing the rise and fall of empires. Bringing all things together in order to accomplish His divine plan.

Now think about our own context. The rise of social media makes us all “court prophets” of a sort. All of us are given total access (seemingly) to the best laid plans of our political leaders. As we watch certain events unfold, we are confronted with the complex challenges of a globally connected world. If Twitter is to be believed, the world is either coming to an end or its best days are ahead. Depending on one’s political affiliations, we are in for the best of times or the worst of times. Depending on one’s personal convictions and religious/social leanings, our politicians represent the anti-Christ or are being used by God to righteously bring about His will. Would that we would follow Isaiah’s example! Take a step back! Prayerfully ponder what over what we are seeing and ask the Holy Spirit for divine wisdom to interpret the signs. God is at work, friends! He is still on His throne! He is orchestrating the course of human events. He is sovereignly directing the rise and fall of human empires. He is bringing all things together in order to accomplish His divine plan. As Christians we should know better than to place our trust in kings or princes or presidents or prime ministers. We should know better than to place our trust in the uncertainty of a free market economy. We should know better than to believe our nation is somehow exempt from the volatility of human history. We should know better than to place our hopes in the next worldwide summit or peace treaty or trade agreement. Instead, we should place our confidence in God alone. Under God, every challenge becomes an opportunity to grow in faith. Every

crushing disappointment an opportunity to learn more about the sufficiency of grace. Every victory and success an opportunity to praise God and to give thanks.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 21-23, Ephesians 3

October 5, 2021

The Unsearchable Riches of Christ

Readings for today: Isaiah 21-23, Ephesians 3

One of the most common stumbling blocks to faith is the exclusivity of Christ. Why would God provide only one way to heaven? And why a 1st century Jewish peasant named Jesus? And what happens to all those around the world and throughout history who never get the chance to hear His name? Surely if God desires all to be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth, He would provide as many pathways as possible? All these questions make sense to me. They are questions I've wrestled deeply with myself. But as I dug down, I found myself grappling with an even deeper question. Why would God choose to save us at all? Why would a perfectly holy, righteous, and just God choose to save an imperfect, unholy, and unrighteous people? Why not wipe us out and start the whole project over? This question brought me face to face with the mystery of God's grace. The mystery of God's love. The mystery of Christ which Paul talks about in today's reading out of Ephesians 3.

"This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel…" It's tough to overstate how challenging this idea would be to Jewish believers. For generations they had been taught that the Gentiles were beyond the pale. Beyond salvation. Beyond the reach of God's love. For generations they had been taught that they were God's chosen people. They were God's treasured possession. They, among all the nations of the earth, enjoyed God's favor. They wholeheartedly embraced the exclusive nature of their relationship with God and rejected any idea of the universality of His grace. In fact, this was -at least in part - why their leaders had Jesus crucified. They simply couldn't get their minds and hearts around Jesus eating with sinners. Dining with prostitutes. Hanging out with Samaritans and other Gentiles along the way.

Paul was a product of his culture. In fact, if you know anything about his life, he was the standard-bearer for the exclusivity of the Jewish faith. So zealous was he for the faith of his ancestors, he persecuted the early church. Dragging followers of Christ from their homes. Throwing them in prison. Even rejoicing in their deaths. But then he met the Risen Christ on the road outside of Damascus and everything changed. He came face to face with the unsearchable riches of Christ. He went eyeball to eyeball with the Lord in all His glory. The grace and love of God that surpasses all human wisdom and knowledge and understanding utterly and completely transformed him from the inside out. Listen to how he describes it…

"To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:6, 8-10, 15-21)

So back to my original questions. If you were to ask Paul why God only provided one way to heaven, I think he'd give you a strange look. After all, the mystery he was called to preach was that God had provided a way for everyone to get in. Jew and Gentile alike. No one was left out. If you were to ask Paul why God chose to reveal Himself in this way through a 1st century Jewish peasant named Jesus, I think he'd walk you through all the prophecies of the Old Testament so you could see how this was the fulfillment of God's plan from the beginning. If you were to ask Paul what happens to all those throughout the world and throughout history who never get the chance to hear the name of Jesus, I think you'd see his eyes light up and passion fill his voice as he shared with you the urgency of his mission! The mission to proclaim the good news of the gospel! I think he'd go on to tell you it's why he dedicated his life to planting churches all over the known world so that the gospel could go to the ends of the earth. And I think he'd encourage you to trust the goodness of God. Trust that while Christ can use us as His messengers, He's certainly not bound to us. People come to faith all the time through dreams and visions. I've seen it myself.

Most of all, I think Paul would be confused by our line of questioning. He would wonder why we kept focusing on the exclusivity of Christ when the reality is the opposite. Christ represents the universality of God's saving grace. Jew and Gentile. Male and female. Slave and free. Rich and poor. Black and white and brown. Gay, bi, and straight. Republican and Democrat. Progressive and conservative. You name it. In Christ, we see the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love. A love that breaks down every barrier. A love that crosses every boundary. A love that knows no bounds and has no end. When we embrace Christ, we become rooted and grounded in this love ourselves and bearers of this message of good news to the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 24-26, Ephesians 4

October 6, 2021

The Honor of God

Readings for today: Isaiah 24-26, Ephesians 4

As I seek to understand more about the Scriptures, I find myself reading and researching about honor/shame cultures. It helps me not only understand the world of the Bible but also the world of places like Africa where I often minister. Consider this passage I ran across recently in a book titled, Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures, by Jayson Georges. “The world equates humility with shame and pride with honor. But God inverts this social matrix. Pride ultimately produces shame, and humility is the counterintuitive path to genuine honor.” It resonates, does it not? All of us have probably experienced this on a personal level at some point in our lives.

What’s true for us as individuals is also true for our families, communities, tribes, even nations. Think about what we read yesterday about Tyre and Sidon. Two of the great commercial trading centers in the ancient near east. What was their sin? Pride. Tyre saw itself as “the bestower of crowns, whose merchants were princes, whose traders were the honored of the earth...” (Isaiah 23:8) Sidon enjoyed tremendous wealth and privilege. “And on many waters your revenue was the grain of Shihor, the harvest of the Nile; you were the merchant of the nations.”(Isaiah 23:3) In their pursuit of worldly honor and riches and power, they forgot the Lord. They dishonored God. And they paid the price. “Wail, O ships of Tarshish, for Tyre is laid waste, without house or harbor! Be ashamed, O Sidon, for the sea has spoken...” (Isaiah 23:1, 4)

But it’s not just Tyre and Sidon who make this mistake. Isaiah points out that the whole earth has forgotten God. The whole earth pursues wealth and power and honor and glory apart from God. The whole earth seeks to exalt itself rather than humble themselves before their Creator. Therefore, the Lord will bring His righteous judgment. No one shall escape. “Behold, the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered; for the Lord has spoken this word.” (Isaiah 24:1-3) And why does the Lord speak such a harsh word? Why does the Lord render such a harsh judgment? Because the Lord is jealous for the glory of His Name. He is jealous for His own honor. He will not rest until the whole earth sings His praises. “They lift up their voices, they sing for joy; over the majesty of the Lord they shout from the west. Therefore in the east give glory to the Lord; in the coastlands of the sea, give glory to the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One.” (Isaiah 24:14-16)

Human beings were made for one glorious purpose...to bring honor to their Creator. To enjoy God and to worship Him forever. To praise God for all eternity. This is the great work we were designed for. This is the great work we were made for. And it is to our abiding shame that we neglect this great task and forget our God. It is to our great shame that we “exchange the truth of God for a lie and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!” (Romans 1:25) We pursue worldly honor and worldly wealth and worldly power to our own destruction. Because we have turned away from God and gone our own way, He has “given us up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. We become filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. We are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” (Romans 1:28-31) And God simply will not allow such evil to stand. So He brings judgment. He lays

low the proud. He shames the arrogant. He dishonors the honored among all the earth. “The Lord of hosts has purposed it, to defile the pompous pride of all glory, to dishonor all the honored of the earth.” (Isaiah 23:9)

This is why we must consider carefully the priorities of our lives. Why do we do the things we do? What drives us? What gives us purpose and fulfillment? Are we truly seeking to honor God in all we say and do? Or are we trying to steal a bit of that honor for ourselves? Are we truly seeking to glorify God in our homes, neighborhoods, schools, and places of work? Or these just means we are using to justify our own ends? Prayerfully consider these things, friends! Be honest with yourself! Get real! And then humble yourself before God lest you fall under His judgment.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 27-28, Ephesians 5

October 7, 2021

A New Day

Readings for today: Isaiah 27-28, Ephesians 5

“In that day...”

The Lord will punish and slay Leviathan

The Lord will plant His vineyard

Israel will blossom and bear fruit

The Lord will gather all His people from where they have been exiled back home to Jerusalem

The Lord will be a crown of glory to His people

The Lord will restore justice to the land

These are just a few of the promises gleaned from the reading today. God acting on behalf of His people. God bringing mercy out of judgment. Peace out of conflict. Honor out of shame. God not passing over the iniquity of His people or allowing sin and shame to pass but instead purifying His people through righteous judgment and holy discipline that He might restore them once again.

The heart of the reading for me today is Isaiah 28:15-18. Here God confronts His people with a powerful Word. “Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement, when the overwhelming whip passes through it will not come to us, for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter..." I think about our own culture. The covenant we too have made with death. Abortion on demand. Suicide. Euthanasia. I think about the lies we believe. Our seeming inability to sift through what’s true and false. Our tendency to naively accept whatever fits our ideological worldview rather than pursue honesty and transparency. I grieve our propensity towards violence. School shootings. Racially-motivated hate crimes. Sexual abuse. I grieve our morbid fascination with self-destruction. Legalization of marijuana and other harmful substances. Addiction to opioids and other pain-killers. All in an attempt to numb our pain. I grieve the fact that we continue to seek refuge in the lies we tell ourselves and in the falsehoods we cling to at all costs. If I were not a Christian, I would despair.

But then I read these words, “Therefore thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: 'Whoever believes will not be in haste.' And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb line; and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter. Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand...” Once again, I am overwhelmed. God does what I cannot do. God does what we cannot do. God does what no government or business or church or non-profit agency - no matter how pure and righteous their motives - can do! He annulls the covenant we made with death! He sets aside our agreement with Sheol! He lays a foundation in Zion. A sure foundation built on tested and precious stone on which we can build our lives! He doesn’t ask us to rescue ourselves. He doesn’t ask us to clean up our act. He doesn’t expect us to find a way out of the mess we’ve made. He simply steps in. He restores justice. He restores

righteousness. He sweeps away all the lies and falsehoods. He destroys death. He robs the grave. And He grants His people new life...abundant life...in Him!

Will we still sin? Yes. Are we still a rebellious people? Absolutely. Will we still run from God? Crawl off the altar? Try to build our lives on shifting sand? All that and more. But thankfully God is patient with us. “Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.” (Isaiah 30:18) And because God is faithful, we can be sure a day is coming when...

We will weep no more

We will see Him face to face

We will know His ways and walk in them

We will tear down every idol in our lives

Our brokenness will be bound and our wounds healed

We will sing a new song in the night

We will keep the holy feast

We will witness the victory of the Lord our God

Friends, that day is coming and is already here! In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the new day has dawned! God has laid His cornerstone! God has set His foundation in Zion! God has annulled our covenant with death! God has set aside our agreement with the grave! God has given us the victory! All we have to do is trust. Believe. Have faith. Place our lives in His hands. He will never let us down.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 29-30, Ephesians 6

October 8, 2021

Spiritual Battle

Readings for today: Isaiah 29-30, Ephesians 6

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:10-12)

I am blessed to walk among giants. Men and women who make amazing sacrifices in the face of incredible adversity, persecution, and hardship. I think of a young couple I know who serve the poorest of the poor in the streets of La Paz, Bolivia. Every day they work with a community of people who wear masks to hide the shame of their existence. Their work is costly. It takes a toll. And yet they continue to faithfully serve. I think of a South Korean Pastor I know who risks his life to save North Korean refugees. He is known as the "Asian Schindler" and has been involved in running an Underground Railroad from North Korea through China to Southeast Asia in order to repatriate North Korean refugees into South Korean society. It is a ministry fraught with danger. There is a price on his head in North Korea. He has spent many months in a Chinese prison. Still he continues to faithfully serve. I think of another young man I know who serves in Central Asia. He works in countries where it is illegal to preach Christ. Illegal to share your faith. Illegal even to practice your faith on some level. He has to change his name when he is abroad. He cannot share the name of the country where he works. It's hard. It's a struggle. And yet he continues to faithfully serve. I think of a pastor I know who serves a small church nearby. It's a church that used to be much bigger. The pews and the offering plates were full. But now the sanctuary is mostly empty on Sundays. Each month is a struggle to make ends meet. The community around the church has changed dramatically which only increases the challenge of it all. Still the pastor faithfully serves. Though each of these dear friends serves Christ in radically different contexts, they are all engaged in the same spiritual war. They all recognize we aren't fighting flesh and blood. Our earthly context doesn't matter. No, the war we are fighting is ultimately spiritual. Our enemy is greater than any human adversary we may face. And that's why we need to put on the full armor of God if we are to prevail.

The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was to convince the world he doesn't exist. You and I live in a culture that largely ignores the spiritual realm. We ignore the spiritual forces of evil arrayed against us in the heavenly places. We pretend these things don't exist. We arrogantly assume we are beyond such things. We believe such things are for the superstitious. The primitive. The ignorant. But the Bible clearly acknowledges the spiritual realm. The Bible clearly declares that there is a great enemy of our souls and he is actively seeking to rob, kill, and destroy. And we must take him seriously.

Every day is a spiritual battle. From the moment we wake up to the moment we go to bed, we are actively being attacked and influenced by our enemy. He wants to discourage us. He wants to sideline us. He wants to tempt us to compromise our deeply held convictions. More than anything else, he wants us to live selfish lives. Lives wrapped around our own well-being. Lives focused on getting as much as we can for as long as we can to make life as comfortable as possible. Frankly, he wants us to pursue the American Dream rather than God's dream and when we do, we suffer. The world suffers. And the enemy gains a foothold.

Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Resist the temptation to live for yourself. Resist the temptation to live a life of achievement and accumulation. Resist the temptation to hoard God's

blessings. Instead, put on the whole armor of God. Resist the devil that he may flee. Engage the battle. Wrestle with the spiritual forces of evil. Don’t give in! Don’t sell yourself so cheaply! Don’t compromise with the enemy! Don’t give him an inch in your life! Live for Christ. Dedicate your whole life to Christ. Seek Christ with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. As you do, God will do great things through you for His Kingdom.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 31-33, Philippians 1

October 9, 2021

The Impact of Righteousness

Readings for today: Isaiah 31-33, Philippians 1

Our world is a mess. On this point just about everyone agrees. Our world is full of pain and suffering. Violence and oppression. Abuse and anger. Hatred and deceit. It's hard to hold onto hope. It's hard to see any way out. It seems like the harder we work, the worse things get. The more we strive, the less we achieve. Every action results in an equal and opposite reaction with diminishing returns. Each generation is convinced they have the answer only to watch their plans turn to dust just like the plans of those who came before them. What's the problem? Why is it so hard to make progress? Why do we find Eden so elusive?

There are many answers out there, of course. Many people out there who claim to know the truth. But humanity has consistently failed to complete this project. Their strength gives out. Their wisdom is not up to the task. No matter how many technological advances we make or how hard we try to socially engineer our environment or how often we attempt to correct Mother Nature; we ultimately fall short. Our best laid plans go to waste. Our condition worsened by unforeseen and unintended consequences. This is as true in the church as it is in the world today. We have all forgotten God.

This is why I loved the words from Isaiah this morning. "The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever." (Isaiah 32:17) Of all the things I strive for in my life, I have to admit righteousness is not always at the top of the list. I strive for success. I strive for significance. I strive for influence. I strive to make a difference in the world. These are not sinful strivings per se but they are not what the Lord has required of me. He wants me to pursue righteousness. He wants my church to pursue righteousness. He wants my community to pursue righteousness. He wants my nation to pursue righteousness. And when we do, He promises us peace. Quietness. The restoration of trust. It's a beautiful vision of God's Kingdom come to earth. And it is a byproduct of seeking Him. "The Lord is exalted, for he dwells on high; he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness, and he will be the stability of your times, abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is Zion's treasure." (Isaiah 33:5-6) We do not know the pathway to peace. We do not know the road to righteousness. We do not know the way to salvation. We are lost. Blind wanderers in a world that is not our home. Only God can direct us. Only God can set our feet on the narrow way that leads to a life of blessing and honor and shalom. So we must go to Him. We must seek Him. We must pursue God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And once we find Him - and the great news of the gospel is He delights in being found! - we will find what our hearts so long for. We will find righteousness, justice, stability, peace for these are the gifts that come from being in His presence.

You say, "Okay, preacher. I got it. Seek God with all my heart. But what about my life? What about those I love? What about the world in which I live? Aren't I to seek the good of those around me as well?" Absolutely. "He who is noble plans noble things, and on noble things he stands." (Isaiah 32:8) God has placed a noble heart inside you. As such, you will find yourself longing to make a difference. You will find yourself longing to be part of God's mission. You will find yourself longing to spread the good news of His Kingdom. The call to seek God is not a call to inactivity. It is not a call to complacency. It is not a call to passivity. It is a call to action. Righteous action. The kind of action that can only come as we stay in step with the Holy Spirit and walk with Jesus through all of life. Flip over to our reading from Philippians. Listen to how the Apostle Paul describes it, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain…Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that

whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel…" (Philippians 1:21, 27) Clearly Paul is calling for righteous action. He is calling for those who have been made "noble" through the gospel of Jesus Christ to strive for the faith of the gospel and live in a manner worthy of the gospel so that the world will stand up and take notice.

It's a stirring vision. Can you imagine a world where the church is known for righteousness? A righteousness born not of rules or regulations or winning the culture war but of love and peace and joy and grace? Can you imagine what might happen if the church laid aside her pursuit of political power or social platform? Can you imagine what would happen if the church would lay aside her addiction to personal wealth and cultural privilege? Can you imagine what would happen if the church would engage in a life of humble service, mutual submission, and radical sacrifice for the sake of others? Would it not change things? Thankfully, you can see this happening all over the world today. So many churches in so many places bearing witness to the power of the gospel. And each day presents an opportunity for us to link arms with them as well. Will we make mistakes? Of course. Will we fail and fall? Absolutely. Will we say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing at times? Sure. But thankfully our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. And like the Apostle Paul, I am confident "that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6)

Readings for tomorrow: None

October 11, 2021

The Mind of Christ

Readings for today: Isaiah 34-37, Phil. 2-3

"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus..." (Phil. 2:5) Sadly, this is largely missing from the American church today. Could you imagine what would happen if the people of God who profess to believe in the authority of the Word of God simply put these words from Philippians 2 into practice? If we truly did nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit? If we truly counted others more significant than ourselves? If we truly grasped the mind of Christ that is already ours through faith in Jesus?

If we are honest, most of what we do is for selfish purposes. Self-protection. Self-provision. Selfish ambition. We do not believe others are more significant than ourselves because we are swimming in a culture that is addicted to self-promotion. Why is social media so popular? Because we can share our highlight reel with the world. We can be the hero of our own story. We can be center of attention. Why is social media so depressing? Because of the competition it invites as we scroll through our feeds and compare ourselves to our friends. Even those who trade in "authenticity" do so in a curated way. Meaning that even as they share their struggles and frustrations and brokenness, it is done in such a way as to draw attention to themselves.

Paul calls us to a different way. The way of Christ. And this way requires humility. It requires us to check all our selfish desires at the door. The pattern Christ sets for us is very specific and very concrete. Christ did not consider his status as God something to be held onto. Christ willingly relinquished all His divine authority and rights and prerogatives. Christ emptied Himself of His divine glory and power in order to become a human being. There is no greater example of humility than the infinite God of the universe limiting Himself by taking on finite human flesh. And not just any flesh but the flesh of a servant. And there is no greater act of humility than this same God becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. The humilitation of Jesus stands in direct contrast to the prideful self-absorption of our culture. And it is something all who claim to follow Jesus must embrace.

Paul embraced the way of Jesus. This letter comes at the end of Paul's life. He's in prison in Rome awaiting his trial and probable execution. As he reflects back on all he has experienced, what is his great desire? Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

"To live is Christ and to die is gain."

"Whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ."

"I count everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ."

"I have no righteousness to call my own but only that which comes through faith in Christ."

All my strivings cease as I "press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

I want to know nothing else but "Christ and the power of His resurrection."

Does this mean we should abandon everything and live as hermits in the wilderness? No. Some have actually made this attempt but even there pride found them. Even alone in the wilderness, they could not escape themselves. The only answer is to intentionally and relentlessly set your mind and heart on

Christ. Through daily prayer and meditation on Scripture. Weekly corporate worship with your church family. Active participation in some kind of small group where you can share openly, honestly, and vulnerably and be held accountable for your spiritual growth. Finding a place to serve Christ through the local church. These are the means of grace God uses to shape our hearts and minds over a lifetime.

The mind of Christ is not abstract, friends. It doesn't magically appear. It takes concrete form as we walk in relationship with one another and with God. Humility is something that must be practiced because the inertia of our lives is always towards self. Our hearts are inwardly inclined. We navel gaze as a general rule. Imitating Christ requires us to die to self on a regular basis. Crucify the sinful desires of our flesh. Empty ourselves of all our foolish pride, ambition, and conceit. Only as we believe the Jesus Truth and follow the Jesus Way will we obtain the Jesus Life.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 38-40, Phil. 4

October 12, 2021

Promise-Keeper

Readings for today: Isaiah 38-40, Phil. 4

I love the promises listed in Philippians 4. “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (4:7) “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (4:13) “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” (4:19) They are some of the most beloved in all of Scripture. People memorize them. Post them in special places all over their homes or workplaces. Some even tattoo them on their bodies. But as we read through the passages assigned for today, it struck me that none of the promises listed in Scripture would be worth anything if God were not truly God. The juxtaposition of Isaiah 40 with it’s glorious vision of God and the very ordinary, very practical promises listed in Philippians 4 for provision, protection, and peace hit me hard. Too often, I tend to focus on my needs, my wants, my desires and can feel overwhelmed. I focus on the challenges and difficulties of my own life and can feel anxious or afraid. I look at what’s happening in my community, my country, or the world around me and I lose hope of things ever getting better. It’s just too much for me to handle. But then I read a passage like Isaiah 40 and I am reminded of the greatness and glory and majesty and splendor of God. Nothing is beyond Him. Nothing is too hard for Him. Nothing is too big for Him. Nothing overwhelms Him. Yes, I grow faint and get tired. My wisdom and understanding fails. Not so with God! He never wears down and His knowledge is unsearchable! His power immeasurable! His love unconditional! His faithfulness extends to all generations!

Take a moment and re-read the wonderful words from Isaiah and let yourself rest in the glory of your God! “A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust. Lebanon would not suffice for fuel, nor are its beasts enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness. To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? An idol! A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains. He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot; he seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move. Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on

high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might and because he is strong in power, not one is missing. Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God”? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:3-5, 9-31)

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 41-42, Colossians 1:1-2:5

October 13, 2021

Serving the Servant

Readings for today: Isaiah 41-42, Colossians 1:1-2:5

I remember when it hit me. I was driving on the Garden State Parkway from a weekend in Boston where my wife and I celebrated an anniversary. We were relatively poor. Living on public assistance. I was a full-time grad student at Princeton. Kristi was a part-time curriculum coordinator for an afterschool program in a local school district. We had an 18 month old and one on the way. Life was not easy but we loved each other and we were pursuing the dreams God laid on our hearts. Kristi had fallen asleep as we drove. Incubating another human being was taking it's toll on her. ;-) So it was just me, the Lord, and the open road. As I reflected on our life together, the Lord spoke very clearly to me. He said, "I want you to give the rest of your life in service to others, starting with the woman in the seat next to you. Don't worry about your needs. Don't focus on your wants or desires. I will take care of you. I will provide all you need. Your job is to serve just as My Son served." It's been over twenty years since that conversation and I have no regrets. I've tried to embrace that call as best I can and the Lord has blessed my life beyond measure.

When we read a passage like the one from Isaiah 42 this morning, it's tempting to read it as exclusively applying to Jesus. While we rightly see the life of Jesus reflected in this ancient prophecy, it's important to think about how it might apply to our lives as well. After all, are we not called to be servants of the Servant? Are we not called to align our lives with His life? Live our lives in such a way that we reflect His glory? Imagine how different the world would be if Christians would seek to give their lives away in the same way Jesus gave His life away? What would happen if we gave our lives in service to God's justice in the world? What if we pursued humility rather than pride? Meekness rather than strength? Gentleness rather than power? What if we understood the church to be a "covenant for the people" and a "light to the nations?" What if we sacrificed time and talent and treasure to open the eyes of the blind, set free the oppressed, and rehabilitated those in prison? Would we not experience God's glory? After all, He's very clear. He will give His glory to no other. He will not share Himself with those who refuse to walk in His way.

I think the Apostle Paul hits on some of the same notes in his letter to the Colossian church. Listen to how he puts it, "And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light." (Colossians 1:9-12) Filled with the knowledge of God's will. Filled with all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Walking in a manner worthy of the Lord. Bearing fruit in every good work. Increasing in the knowledge of God. Strengthened by His power. Never ceasing to give thanks. It's a beautiful picture of a life lived for the glory of Christ. A life lived in service to Christ. It's a life every Christian should aspire to live.

So where does one begin? What's the first step? I think it begins with what the Lord shared with me as I drove back to our small apartment in Princeton. It begins with a resolution to serve. To give our lives - like Jesus - as a ransom for many. I'm not talking about adding to the saving work Jesus accomplished on the cross. That was a once for all kind of event that will never be repeated. No, what I'm talking about is dying to self each and every day. Picking up our cross. Bearing the sufferings of others. Bearing the injustices of others. Bearing the pain and heartaches of others. Bearing the burdens of others. This is how we fulfill the law of Christ. This is how we manifest the love of Christ. This is how we live a life of service to Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 43-44, Colossians 2:6-3:17

October 15, 2021

Words Matter

Readings for today: Isaiah 45-47, Colossians 3:18-4:18

How do you engage the world around you? What words do you use when you speak? When you tweet? When you post on Facebook or Instagram? When you comment? When you send email? How do the people around you experience you? How do they receive you? What would they say about you if asked? Are you known as a kind person? A gentle person? A positive person? If someone were to record you today as you went about your life, what would they discover? What kind of wake do you leave? Do you build others up or tear them down? Are you quick to speak and slow to listen? Do you find yourself getting easily riled up? Going on the attack? Taking things personally and getting defensive? Lashing out in anger and frustration?

When I was growing up, we would tell ourselves this lie - "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Of course this isn't true. Words matter. Words have power. Words can be used to encourage and words can be used to discourage. Words can be used to lift the spirits of those who are down and bring down the spirits of those who are feeling good. The Apostle Paul recognizes the power of words which is why he encourages his Colossian friends with this verse - "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." (Colossians 4:6)

Convicting, isn't it? Especially if you are the kind of person who binges on cable news or scrolls endlessly through your twitter feed. As a pastor, I purposefully try to enter these spaces. I purposefully try to engage in a healthy, positive way on social media. I follow people from all across the political and theological and social spectrum. I try to stay up on the news of the day by browsing several different platforms. I have to tell you it isn't easy. My heart gets beat up along the way. My soul takes a pounding from all the anger and hate and vitriol that is out there, We don't seem to know how to talk to each other anymore. We apply litmus tests to each other based on the company we keep. I think of the blowback television personality Ellen DeGeneres received a few years back after being "caught" watching a football game with former President George W. Bush. People from her own tribe questioned her "liberal credibility" because she ate popcorn at a sporting event next to someone from the other side of the political aisle. I think of the blowback a pastoral colleague received recently for meeting with someone from a different theological tribe than our own. Rumors. Gossip. Innuendo. Christians bearing false witness about this man because he dared to meet with someone outside our stream. It's getting out of hand. And real people are suffering real consequences as a result. Jobs are being lost. Livelihoods destroyed. Businesses are being shut down. All because we can't seem to follow Paul's advice. To speak with grace. To season our words with salt so that we might preserve and add flavor to our conversations. To treat everyone with the dignity and worth they deserve as people made in the image of God.

Why is this so hard for us? I believe it has to do with fear. We fear what we don't understand. We fear those who are different. We fear change and uncertainty and our world is full of that right now. Not only do we find ourselves in the midst of massive cultural upheaval but the pace at which it's happening is scary. One day vaping is considered a safe alternative to cigarettes. The next day we are performing funerals for young people who are dying from it. One day we affirm surgical transitions for young people still struggling through puberty and the next some of those same people are asking for de-transitioning surgeries to return to their biological gender. One day we legalize marijuana and the next we are finding out the negative impacts on the adolescent brain. Our "ready, fire, aim" approach is

not working. Our inability to sit down and reason together is costing us dearly. Our unwillingness to hear the other side or listen to different opinions or consider alternative evidence is harmful and abusive.

So what can we do? Each of us is given a sphere of influence. For some of us it is our home. Our family. Our circle of friends. For others it is the team we lead at work or the business we run. For others it is our congregation. For still others it is the constituency we serve. Whatever authority God has given you, use it to build up. Whatever power God has given you, use it for the good of those around you. Whatever influence God has given you, use it to bless others even if they don't agree or belong to your tribe. Speak words of grace. Words of life. Words of hope into those around you. For this is what God has done for us. Remember, none of us agreed with God. None of us stood on His side. None of us came from His tribe. Still He came to us. Still He laid down His life for us. Still He loved us so much He gave His only Begotten Son. So believe in Him. Speak in His name. Allow His Spirit to sanctify your words today.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 48-49, 1 Thessalonians 1

October 16, 2021

Raising Expectations

Readings for today: Isaiah 48-49, 1 Thessalonians 1

What did you expect when you first came to faith in Jesus Christ? Some expect all their problems to go away. Some expect all their suffering will end. Some have no expectations that anything will change other than their eternal destiny. Some expect to see miracles of healing and provision in their life. Some expect to receive a new circle of friendships. Some expect to live with an intimate sense of God's abiding presence. Others expect the church to become their family. What are your expectations? Have they been met? Have they been fulfilled? If you're like most Christians, I expect you've been disappointed along the way or felt let down at times in your journey of faith.

One of the real problems in the American church is we expect so little. We expect so little from God. We expect God to bless all our plans. We expect God to sprinkle fairy dust on all our problems. We expect God to indulge our sin. We expect God to be "on-call" when we have an emergency. But God is much greater than we can ever imagine. He is far wiser and far more powerful and far more loving that we can possibly fathom. Just think what would happen if God said "yes" to all our prayers? Wouldn't our lives turn into an absolute disaster? Haven't you ever prayed for something only to find out later it wouldn't have been good for you? Thankfully, God is a good Father. He knows what's best for us. We can trust Him.

We expect so little from the church. We expect the church to be a safe place for us but we're unwilling to help make it safe for others. We expect the church to meet our needs but rarely raise a hand to help out. We expect the church to produce programming that makes us or our children feel good but then jump ship the moment another church down provides something more attractive or exciting. We expect the church to be family but we are not willing to make the sacrifices necessary in our own lives to build the deep relationships required. Deep down, we all know what's required. We know becoming a family requires something from each and every member. The church will only be as strong as the shared commitment and sacrifice of the people who call her home.

And that brings me to my last point this morning, we expect so little from ourselves. We do not humble ourselves before God and seek to follow His ways. We do not plant ourselves deep in His Word and in prayer. We do not pursue holiness and righteousness. We do not offer forgiveness and grace nor are we willing to do the hard work of reconciliation with those we've wounded or who've wounded us. Admittedly, these are broad stereotypes. I recognize there are many who do all these things and more but in my twenty plus years of pastoral experience they are more the exception rather than the rule. It is any wonder then that the church in America experiences so little of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit?

Listen to how Paul describes the early believers in Thessaloniki…"For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that God has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." (1 Thessalonians 1:4-7) The early church held great expectations. They expected God to work miracles on their behalf for His glory and the expansion of His Kingdom on earth. They expected much from each other as they built diverse worshipping communities across racial, cultural, and generational barriers. They expected much from themselves as they pursued lives

of personal holiness before the Lord. And God added to their number daily those being saved. God used them to conquer an empire not through violence or the exercise of political power but through self-sacrificing love. The men and women of the early church laid down their lives for the sake of the gospel. For the sake of their church family. For the sake of one another and their example has inspired millions through the ages to do the same.

What are your expectations as a Christian? What do you expect from yourself? Are you intentionally growing a deep, intimate relationship with Christ? Are you seeking to faithfully walk in His ways? To live a life of holiness and righteousness before Him? What do you expect from your church family? How are you helping to build her up? How are you helping people get connected with each other? How are you plugging in and serving and giving and helping your local church thrive? What do you expect from God? Does He exist to serve you and your needs or do you exist to serve Him and His Kingdom? God has great expectations for His people. He had made us in His image. Redeemed us through the death of His own Son. And He now sends us out into the world to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Readings for tomorrow: None

October 18, 2021

Invitation

Readings for today: Isaiah 50-55, 1 Thessalonians 2

I still remember receiving the invitation to attend Princeton Theological Seminary. I was frankly shocked. After all, I was not an impressive candidate for admission. I had flunked out of college and even though I re-applied and finished my degree, my cumulative GPA was not good at all. I had only been a Christian for a few years so my ability to articulate my faith in the essay section of the application was weak at best. My interview didn't go all that well either as I lacked self-confidence. To this day, I am not sure why Princeton felt led to extend an offer to me to become a student but I will be forever grateful that they did. I loved my time there. I loved the friendships I forged. I loved the atmosphere of academic freedom and learning from some of the most brilliant minds in the world.

One of the greatest blessings for me personally was getting to know Dr. Tom Gillespie. Dr. Gillespie served both as President of the seminary and a New Testament professor. I took two classes from him and got to know him pretty well. He and I would walk to and from class in the basement of Miller Chapel or Stuart Hall and talk about life and ministry. He was a wise mentor who pastored me well. One of my favorite memories of him was when he would lead communion during chapel each week. He always gave the invitation to the Lord's Table from Isaiah 55:1-3.

"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant…"

As amazing as the invitation to attend Princeton was for me, it pales in comparison to the invitation the Lord gives us to feast at His Table. At the Table of the Lord, God provides the richest of fare. His own body and blood, freely given to all who would seek Him. The food He provides sustains us through the challenges of this life. The drink He provides quenches every possible thirst. The bread and the cup are signs and symbols of the eternal covenant God has secured for us by offering up His very life. And every time we share in this meal, we remember and proclaim the Lord's saving death until He comes again.

Every time I read this passage, I am brought to my knees. The words of an old hymn immediately come to mind, "Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my God, wouldst die for me?" I am not worthy. There was nothing commendable about my life that would attract God's attention. Nothing admirable about the way I was living that would draw God's gaze. Nothing holy about my life that would earn God's favor or demand His respect. I was lost. I was lonely. I was headed for a life of addiction. A life of pain and suffering. A life of disappointment and defeat. Then I met God. And He invited me in to dine with Him and His family. He set me a place at His Table. He quenched my soul's thirst and satisfied my soul's hunger and I have never been the same. Friends, His invitation is open to all who would seek Him. His grace is free to all who would believe in Him. Listen diligently to His voice! Incline your ear and come to Him! Hear and believe that your soul may live!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 56-58, 1 Thessalonians 3

October 19, 2021

A House of Prayer for All People

Readings for today: Isaiah 56-58, 1 Thessalonians 3

One of my favorite worship experiences took place in South Chicago when I was in college. We were in La Villita or "Little Village" which is a predominantly Mexican-American enclave, working at a church there. We painted and helped restore the old building they were meeting in. We led youth group for the teenagers and afterschool programs for the younger kids. We built relationships with former gang members from the Latin Kings and Two Sixes. It was an eye-opening experience for a group of relatively wealthy white college students from Boulder, CO. The week kicked off with a worship service and it just so happened that on the particular week we had arrived, the pastor had arranged to do a pulpit swap with a black church in North Lawndale which is a predominantly African-American community a few blocks north of La Villita. The service started with the black choir processing in singing and dancing. Once they got to the front, the Latino worship band began playing praise songs in Spanish. The praise leader then offered a bi-lingual prayer on behalf of the entire community and introduced the preacher. He preached in true African-American style. "Start low. Go slow. Rise higher. Strike fire. Sit down in a storm!" Brilliant in oration. Passionate in delivery. Deep in biblical/theological reflection. It was awesome. So awesome, in fact, that about midway through his sermon, the interpreter sat down. He was no longer needed. It was clear to him and to everyone else in the room that even though the preacher was speaking English, everyone was hearing him in their own heart language. It was like Pentecost. The Holy Spirit became the interpreter. My mouth was hanging wide open. It was a taste of heaven.

I thought back to that experience when I read these words from Isaiah today, "And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, "I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered." (Isaiah 56:6-8) I am so thankful for these words because I am - by the Bible's definition - a foreigner. A Gentile. Someone not chosen. I was born apart from God. I am not of the biological lineage of Abraham. I am not a child of the covenant. I know nothing of the significance of circumcision or the Passover or the Promised Land. The Exodus story is not my story. The Old Testament doesn't represent my history. And yet, God has adopted me as His own child. God has grafted me into His covenant. God has made His story my story and for that I am forever grateful.

Do you ever wonder what heaven will look and feel like? What languages we'll speak? What the worship experience will be like? Do you ever wonder about the people who will be there gathered with you around God's throne? Isaiah gives us the answer. "God's house will be a prayer for all peoples." It will include Jews and Gentiles. It will include those of African, Asian, Latino, European, and Indigenous descent. Every family. Every tribe. Every clan. Every nation will be represented around God's throne. They will speak a multitude of languages. They will come from a myriad of cultural backgrounds. They will have had a variety of life experiences. This has been God's plan from the beginning. To gather that which has been scattered. To restore that which has been lost. To tear down every dividing wall of hostility that sets us apart.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 59-61, 1 Thessalonians 4

October 20, 2021

Christian Hope

Readings for today: Isaiah 59-61, 1 Thessalonians 4

Hope seems so elusive these days. The world is groaning. Our nation is struggling. Our communities are hurting. Our churches are dying. People we know and love are suffering. I think of the families of those who have lost loved ones over the past 18 months to COVID. I've spent time with many of them. Listening to them share their grief. I think of the families of those who have lost loved ones to suicide recently. I've spent time with many of them as well. Listening to them share their pain. I think of the people I know who've had to shut down their businesses due to the lockdowns or supply chain issues or lack of a steady workforce. I've listened to them share their frustrations. I think of the people I know who can't find work in their field anymore because of all the changes that have taken place. I've listened to them share their fears. I think of the pastors I know who've watched their churches be torn apart through divisions over masks, vaccines, politics, social/cultural issues, etc. Stunned by the lack of grace among the people of God, they feel paralyzed and isolated and question their call. It's heartbreaking and soul-crushing and if we aren't careful, we will fall into despair.

We are not the first to face such things. We are not the only ones weighed down by such burdens. The early church suffered greatly as well. They too knew hardship and pain. They were intimately acquainted with death and disease. They understood what happened when economies crashed and nations failed and divisions threatened to tear them apart at the seams. Most of Paul's letters are written to churches who were struggling with all these things and more. They too found themselves on the brink of despair. That's why I find his words so comforting this morning…

"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words." (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

We do not grieve as those who do not have hope. We do not suffer as those who have no salvation. We believe Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again. We are not fighting a losing battle. We are not engaged in a war that will never end. We are not doomed to wander in the ruins of this world with no escape. There will come a day when the Lord Himself will descend from heaven. He will sound the trumpet of God. With the voice of an archangel, He will issue His glorious command. The dead in Christ will rise. Those who are alive will join them. Together they will ascend to meet the Lord to celebrate His return just as the Roman citizens used to rush out of the city of Rome to meet their victorious generals as they returned from conquest. As Christians, we are to keep our eyes fixed on the horizon. We are to pray continuously for the Lord's return. We place our ultimate hope in Jesus not technological advance or scientific research or political compromise or social policy or homogenous community or military might or cultural hegemony. He alone will set all things right. He alone will make all things new. He alone will wipe every tear from our eye and put an end to all evil and sin and suffering and pain. Fix your eyes on Jesus, friends, and encourage your brothers and sisters in Christ to do the same.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 62-64, 1 Thessalonians 5

October 21, 2021

Potter's Hand

Readings for today: Isaiah 62-64, 1 Thessalonians 5

A few years back, I had the privilege of visiting one of our mission partners outside of Kigali, Rwanda. Hope Haven is doing amazing work bringing hope and opportunity through education to some of the poorest of the poor in that part of the world. On our last night in town, we had dinner at a rooftop restaurant overlooking all of Kigali. It was a beautiful evening spent eating great food and sharing with new friends. Jason and Kimberly Peters were our hosts for the week and they were amazing. Jason serves as the CEO of Hope Haven and often spends his summers in Rwanda with his wife and family. We became very fast friends. Pastor Jimmy and his wife Sharol lead Potter's Hand Church in Kigali and Pastor Jimmy was instrumental in helping build Hope Haven due to his civil engineering background and experience in construction.

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

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

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

Potter doing in your life today? How is He shaping you? How is He forming you? Where is He at work in you? Give Him thanks no matter what season you find yourself in.

If you want to find out more about Hope Haven or Potter's Hand Ministries, here are the links…

https://www.facebook.com/ThePottersHandMinistries/

https://hopehavenrwanda.org/

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 65-66, 2 Thessalonians 1

October 22, 2021

With God's Help

Readings for today: Isaiah 65-66, 2 Thessalonians 1

"To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power..." (2 Thessalonians 1:11)

A common misconception in the Christian life is that while God performs the act of salvation, the rest of life is up to us. We raise our hands and come forward as a response to the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration in our hearts but then leave the sanctuary with this inner resolve to live by our own will-power. How many sermons have we heard over the years that could double as motivational TED talks? How many Bible studies turn into self-help sessions with a little Jesus thrown in? How many conferences and retreats have we attended where the main message was simply work harder? Do more? Be better for Jesus? I cannot tell you how many times I have picked up a book, downloaded a podcast, or attended a conference hoping to hear the gospel only to be told overtly or covertly that the quality of my life really depends on me. My self-discipline. My ability to resist temptation. The intentional way I live my life.

The Bible is clear. We simply do not have the power to live the Christian life. We do not have the will or the discipline to make it happen. Left to our own devices, we will struggle. Left to our own resources, we will fall. Trusting in our own strength, we will fail. Living the Christian life is not a matter of learning some new techniques. It's not a matter of turning over a new leaf. It is about transformation. Total-life transformation from the inside out and it is the work of God.

In the verse above, Paul prays for three things for his Thessalonian friends. All of them come from God. Not a single one is rooted in the human heart. He prays God will make them worthy of His calling. Essentially, he is praying for God's Spirit to so root and ground them in the righteousness of Christ that every facet of their lives - home, community, work, school, etc. - would reflect His glory. He prays their lives might become a living reflection of the reality God has already brought about through their salvation in Jesus Christ. In Christ, we are the very righteousness of God. Those called by Christ are constantly being formed and re-formed into His image, thereby being made worthy of the initial call God placed on their lives when He first saved them. This involves human activity of course. A change in human behavior. But even that is not accomplished through our own willpower alone.

The second thing Paul prays for is for God to fulfill their every resolve for good. Each and every day, we are faced with a fundamental choice. Will I live for God or will I live for me? Will I live selflessly or selfishly? Will I seek to honor God or will I gratify the desires of the sinful nature? This fundamental choice works itself out in lots of different situations in every facet of our lives. It pops up in every conversation. Every task assigned to us. Every chore we perform. Every interaction we have with another divine image-bearer who crosses our path. However it manifests itself, the fundamental choice is always the same. Will we do good or evil? And because we are predisposed through our sinful nature to do evil, we need God's help to do good.

The final thing Paul prays for is the power to perform every work of faith. Once God has called us and set us apart for Himself. Once He has reoriented our desires away from evil and towards the good. The final piece we need is the power to actually perform the action. We need the power to actually take the next step. To confirm our calling by acting on our resolve to walk by faith and not by sight. Only by tapping the limitless power of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit will we ever find the strength

to live for Christ. And this is why we must spend so much time with Him. Learning to hear His voice. Seek His wisdom. Surrender to His strength. This is why prayer and meditation on Scripture is absolutely vital to the Christian life. It's why weekly worship with a local body of believers is essential for every single Christian. It is through these ordinary "means of grace" that God makes us worthy of His calling. Fulfills our every resolve for good. And gives us the strength to perform every work of faith.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 1-2, 2 Thessalonians 2

October 23, 2021

Broken Wells

Readings for today: Jeremiah 1-2, 2 Thessalonians 2

For generations, my family owned land in western Nebraska. Farmers. Ranchers. Feedlot owners. We managed a fairly significant operation. Over time, the land has been broken up and parceled out. Each generation taking a piece. Children and grandchildren left home and didn't return. The line of farmers has now died out though we still rent back what we do own to others who work the land in our place. A few years ago, I took my children back to see the land. Back to see the home where their grandparents and great-grandparents grew up. Back to see the cemetery where so much of their family is buried. It was a great trip. Filled with lots of stories. Lots of laughter. A reunion with cousins. A renewed sense of connection to a "place."

One of the big things I talked to my children about was the availability of water. Access to water is everything in this part of the country. If you don't have access, you are locked into a crop like dry-land wheat. The yield is poor. The value of the land plummets. It's incredibly hard to make a living. If you do have access, you can grow crops like corn. The yield is high. The value of the land skyrockets. Making a good living becomes far more feasible. The same is true for the pasture. We have a well system that benefits the herds of cattle that graze there all summer long. Ease of access to water makes for a better beef product in the long-run. Thankfully, our wells go all the way down into the Ogallala Aquifer which is one of the largest in the world. It means we'll have access to life-giving water decades to come.

One of the striking images from our reading today comes from Jeremiah 2:13, "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water." Cisterns in the ancient world were holding tanks built at ground level or just below it to capture rain water. While important, they were highly dependent on consistent weather patterns. During seasons of drought, these cisterns ran dry. If they developed a leak, they became useless. In short, they were a poor substitute for a fountain or a natural spring. Human survival depends on having a reliable source for freshwater. Without this supply, humanity suffers and dies. Their crops wither and die. Their herds grow famished and die. I've seen the effects firsthand in southern Ethiopia where they have to depend on the annual rains for their water supply. I've also seen it firsthand on our own land when wells run dry or break down and water no longer is easily available.

God essentially tells Jeremiah that the same truth holds for the spiritual life. God is like the Ogallala Aquifer. He is a never-ending source of abundant, life-giving water that flows like a spring or fountain. He is more than enough to quench any thirst. More than enough to bring life to an otherwise arid land. More than enough to supply all their needs. Why then do God's people feel the need to make their own cisterns? Why do they feel the need to provide for their own water supply? Why do they turn to other gods who cannot supply what they need? Cannot bring life to their land? Cannot quench their spiritual thirst?

We face those same questions today. What cisterns are we building as we seek to provide for ourselves? Is it our 401k? Our rainy day fund? Our operational reserve? What happens when our cistern springs a leak? The market crashes. A pandemic strikes. A lockdown ensues. What then? What other gods are we turning to? What priorities are we placing before our Lord and Savior? Is it youth sports? Business? Leisure activity? Sleeping in? When we feel depressed or anxious, what drug do we use to find peace?

Is it alcohol? Marijuana? Opioids? When we feel isolated or lonely, to whom do we turn? Pornography? A casual hookup? Friends, we are as guilty as the people of Israel. We have placed our trust in our own strength, our own wisdom, our own power to get us out of the mess we find ourselves in. We place our trust in leaders who are unfaithful. We place our trust in markets that are unstable. We place our trust in a future that is uncertain. When will we learn? The only hope we have is that we belong - body and soul - to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ! He is the only Source of Living Water that will quench our soul's thirst.

Readings for tomorrow: None

October 25, 2021

The Pain of God

Readings for today: Jeremiah 3-7, 2 Thessalonians 3, 1 Timothy 1

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

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

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

What if God is in anguish over us? What if being in relationship with us breaks God's heart? What if God's choice to love us from before the foundations of the earth involved Him choosing unimaginable

suffering? Would this change how you relate to Him? Change how you see Him? Change how you experience Him? Change how you love Him?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 8-9, 1 Timothy 2

October 26, 2021

Truth

Readings for today: Jeremiah 8-9, 1 Timothy 2

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

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

"Again the Lord said to me, "A conspiracy exists among the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem..." (Jeremiah 11:9) AHA! There it is! Confirmation of the deep state! Confirmation that those who don't agree with us are plotting to take over! Confirmation of the most nefarious intentions of our enemies! SEE! It's all right there in the Bible! But then Jeremiah confronts us with the hard truth. The "conspiracy", as it were, exists not "out there" but "in here." Inside every human heart. Deceit. Fake news. Blatant falsehoods. Hidden agendas. Guess what? They're all right here. In my heart. I fight them every single day. My entire life is a battle against such evil. So is yours if you're honest. Listen to Jeremiah's own words, "For they are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men. They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 9:2-3) He's describing us. He's describing humanity. The pagans and the people of God.

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

who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."(Jeremiah 9:23-24)

Truth can only be found in God. The only way to discover truth is through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Only after our dead hearts have been revived by the Holy Spirit can we discern what is true and false about our world and about ourselves. Only as we continue to surrender our own agendas, our own ideas, our own thoughts, our own opinions, our own truth to our Lord will we come to see His Truth for what it is and rejoice. Only as we fix our eyes on Jesus will we be able to see through all the lies and deceit this world has to offer.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 10-11, 1 Timothy 3

October 27, 2021

Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing

Readings for today: Jeremiah 10-11, 1 Timothy 3

Imagine you're Timothy. A young man (perhaps in his late twenties or early thirties) who's been entrusted by Paul with the church in Ephesus. Ephesus is at the zenith of its power and influence. Made capital of the region by Caesar Augustus, it is a center for learning and commerce. It is home to one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. The Temple of Artemis draws thousands of pilgrims from all over the region. They came to worship. They came to trade. They came to make deposits at the Temple which served as the largest bank in the area as well. The cult of Artemis created great wealth. An entire economy had grown up around the worship of their deity. The priestesses exercised great political and social influence. Your mentor Paul started a riot here when he preached the gospel and the church he left behind was facing some significant challenges.

Whenever the gospel penetrates a new region, one of the real dangers that pops up almost immediately is syncretism. The merging of older, pagan religious beliefs with the truth of the Christian faith. Some of it is brought on by the missionaries themselves as they try to translate the gospel into the local language and culture. Some of it is brought by the new believers as they struggle to leave the old ways behind. What often ends up emerging is a faith that is sub-Christian or pseudo-Christian and this is exactly what Paul warns Timothy about in the beginning of this letter. "As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith...Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions." (1 Timothy 1:3-4, 6-7) Of course, the same challenge holds true in areas that are gospel-saturated. Consider the challenges of the post-Christian west. The rapid decline of Christianity in Europe and the United States. The fracturing of the church. The emphasis on non-essential doctrines. The utter lack of grace and charity for fellow believers. It's just so hard to keep the main thing the main thing.

So what is the "main thing" you might ask? Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 3:16, "Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory." Put another way, Christ was born. Christ died. Christ was raised. Christ's resurrection was witnessed by angels. Christ has been proclaimed among all the nations. Christ has been believed by all kinds of people. Christ ascended into heaven. This is the great mystery of our faith. This is the beating heart of the gospel. It has nothing to do with us and everything to do with what God has done for us. Sure, we can parse out the finer points of our theology. We can engage in all kinds of metaphysical speculation on how Christ's two natures co-existed. We can wax philosophical about the eternal mysteries of the Godhead. We can debate the ethical implications of the Kingdom. We can argue over the specifics of eschatology. But all of it is meaningless - vanity of vanities according to Solomon - in comparison to what God has revealed in Jesus Christ.

These words are as much for us as they are for Timothy. The challenge is just as real for the church today as it was for the church in Ephesus. Unity in the essentials. Liberty in the non-essentials. Charity for all. The reality is it is so easy for us to get bogged down. Even as we read this letter, we find ourselves tempted to focus on non-essential questions like who gets to serve and in what role or what people should wear to worship or the patriarchal/misogynistic nature of 1st century culture. Friends, put

aside the petty squabbles. Let go of any personal preferences. Relinquish your grip on theological certainty and instead embrace the great mystery of our faith - Christ was born, Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ ascended, and Christ will come again. Focusing on Jesus is how we keep the main thing the main thing for He Himself is the main thing! Amen?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 12-13, 1 Timothy 4

October 28, 2021

COVID Fatigue

Readings for today: Jeremiah 12-13, 1 Timothy 4

For months I've been praying for dear friends in ministry across the country. I've had countless conversations with pastors and ministry leaders from all walks of life. All kinds of churches. Across all sorts of denominations. For years they've served their congregations faithfully. They've wept with those who weep. They've laughed with those who laugh. They've mourned with those who mourn. They've rejoiced with those who rejoice. They've baptized, married, counseled, and buried countless people. They've been invited into some of the most sacred and tender spaces in people's lives. They've been trusted with secrets. They've born incredible burdens. They've done all they can to model Jesus to those they love and serve. But the last 18 months has taken a toll. They're burned out from the stress. Broken by the pressure. Beaten down by the constant conflict. They feel betrayed by the very people to whom they've dedicated their lives. According to most estimates, 30% of them are now considering leaving the ministry. Almost 70% report feeling overwhelmed on a regular basis. 40% struggle with anxiety. Another 40% feel exhausted most of the time. It's heartbreaking.

I certainly am not immune to these pressures. However, I also recognize I've benefited from certain built-in advantages. I live in an affluent, extremely healthy community that has weathered the COVID storm relatively well. I've served my church for almost twelve years and can draw on a deep well of trust. I've got an unbelievable leadership team of elders and staff who have shared the load. My marriage is strong as are my relationships with my teenage and adult children. Perhaps most of all, the years I've spent working with pastors in the developing world has helped me maintain perspective in the midst of everything. My brothers and sisters who serve in places like Ethiopia and Uganda and South Sudan have faced, are facing, and will face far more significant challenges that I ever will in my own ministry.

Perhaps that's why these words from Jeremiah hit so close to home this morning, "If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you are so trusting, what will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?" (Jeremiah 12:5) Here God is answering Jeremiah's complaint. He is tired. He is weary. He has been ignored, dismissed, and betrayed by the very people he feels called to serve. He serves at a difficult time in Israel's history. The kingdom is about to fall. The line of kings has failed. Injustice, oppression, tyranny, and corruption have brought the nation to her knees. People are suffering terribly. Those he loves are dying all around him. And though he has a Word from the Lord, no one listens. In the midst of his own heartache, Jeremiah cries out to God. How long, O Lord? Why God are you allowing these things to happen? Where are you in the midst of our pain?

God's answer is direct. If Jeremiah is already tired from racing with men on foot, what's going to happen when God calls him to even greater sacrifice in the days ahead? If Jeremiah is losing heart while he dwells in relative safety and security, what's going to happen when God brings destruction on Jerusalem and drives him into the wilderness? Is God being unkind? Does God lack compassion? Is God being mean? Not at all. He is preparing Jeremiah for the journey ahead. Things are only going to get harder. The suffering of God's people is only going to increase. Pagan nations will invade and burn Jerusalem to the ground. The Temple will be destroyed. The remnant who are left will be dragged into exile. Those who remain will barely survive. And still God's call remains. Jeremiah is to remain faithful. He is to stand at his post. He is to preach God's Word. He is to proclaim God's judgment. He is

to minister to those who fight him and attack him and abuse him and oppress him and say all manner of evil about him.

Does any of that sound familiar? You see, I don't think it's just pastors and priests who are struggling these days. I can't tell you the number of first responders I've talked to who feel exhausted as well. I can't tell you the number of doctors and nurses I know who are on the verge of quitting. I can't tell you the number of teachers and administrators who feel like they are caught in the crosshairs of all that's going on in our culture today. It's heartbreaking. And yet God's call remains for us as well. If we are weary from racing with men on foot, what will happen when the pace picks up and the pressure increases in the days ahead? If we who dwell in relative ease and safety and abundance can't seem to find any peace, what will happen if supply lines truly crash and the economy fails and our political system implodes and our lives get upended permanently? What will we do then?

God calls His people to be salt and light in the world. He never promised it would be easy. He never promised we'd be understood. He never promised we'd be liked or appreciated. In fact, being salty in a world that's lost it's flavor can feel very lonely. Being light in a world that grows ever darker can make us feel very alone. That's how Jeremiah felt. That's how many of my friends and colleagues feel. Perhaps that's how you feel today as well. Take heart! Keep the faith! Lift your eyes above the hills, above the circumstances of this world, and look to God! He is with you. He will never leave you or forsake you. He will give you all the strength and wisdom you need to persevere to the end.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 14-16, 1 Timothy 5, 6:2

October 29, 2021

Discouragement

Readings for today: Jeremiah 14-16, 1 Timothy 5, 6:2

There is a myth many Christians believe. If we are walking faithfully with the Lord. If we are obeying His commands and living according to His Word. If we are praying and worshipping and serving Him then we will not face hardship. We will not struggle or suffer or endure any pain. Life will be good and blessed and we will be happy. Fundamentally, we believe if we do our part, God is bound to do His and our lives should reflect His favor.

But then we read a passage like this one from Jeremiah today... “Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me...Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?” (Jeremiah 15:10, 16-18) Jeremiah is angry with God. He’s bitter and frustrated. He’s fulfilled the call of God. He’s been faithful. He took God’s Word and proclaimed it to the people at great personal cost. They beat and persecute him. They spit on him and mock him. He has no friends. No family. He sits alone. Who knows how long he has suffered? We only know he’s finally reached a breaking point. He is in anguish. He is in pain. He is depressed. He is discouraged. He accuses of God of being deceitful. Lying to him. Pulling a bait and switch.

It’s real. It’s raw. It’s honest. It’s not uncommon. I’ve been there myself. I remember well the 19 months we spent in Wisconsin. We were fully convinced God called us to go there to plant a church. We were excited. We were passionate. We couldn’t wait to get started. God had given us a vision. He had given us plenty of resources. We were confident we would do great things for Jesus. Within a few months, our dream became a nightmare. For the first time in my life, I became a man of “strife and contention” to those I worked for. I felt cursed. Afflicted. Unjustly accused. I didn’t handle it well. I complained. I grew frustrated. I got angry with God. I felt like He had let me down. I felt like He had broken faith with me. After all, I had given up a thriving ministry and uprooted my family and poured my heart and soul into this new work. All to no avail. I ended up broken. Battered. Bruised. I contemplated throwing in the towel on ministry altogether. My wife was in an even darker place. It was the most painful time of our lives.

In the midst of our heartache, I cried out to God and this is what He said. In essence, “Should you accept good from me and not hardship? Did you think this life I called you to was only going to be up and to the right? One success after another? What if it is my will to crush you? To break your pride? To make you suffer so you learn to depend on Me? Am I not enough for you?” It was sobering and convicting and strangely...comforting. Even in our darkest moments, God was there. Though His presence was a refiner’s fire, it felt good. The kind of good one feels after a hard workout or when one has overcome something incredibly difficult. You may still bear the scars but they become badges of honor along the way.

Such was true for Jeremiah as well. Listen to the Lord’s response to him in the midst of his pain. "If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not

prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the Lord. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless." (Jeremiah 15:19-21) The call on Jeremiah's life will be a hard one. God is relentless. He will use Jeremiah as a hammer to break the nation's pride. He will be ostracized. Isolated. Hated. Persecuted. He will suffer and struggle and endure tremendous pain. But through it all, God will be with him. God will give him the strength he needs to bear up under the burden.

Only you know the burdens you carry in life. Only you know the source of those burdens. Sometime we suffer because of our sin. The choices we make lead us down dark paths. We have to own those choices. Take responsibility. Repent and turn back to the Lord. Sometimes the Lord leads us into suffering. To refine us. Test us. Break sinful patterns of pride and self-sufficiency in our lives. In those times, we must submit. Accept. Surrender to His sovereign will and trust even the hard times serve His purposes in our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 17-19, 1 Timothy 6:2-21

October 30, 2021

Follow Your Heart?

Readings for today: Jeremiah 17-19, 1 Timothy 6:2-21

"Just follow your heart." It makes for a great Disney tune but it's not a great philosophy for life. Unfortunately, our culture promotes this lie relentlessly. Everyone from Silicon Valley icons to Hollywood entertainers to academic luminaries to political activists to sports stars all share the same advice. "Follow your heart." "Trust your gut." "Believe in yourself." "Do what your heart tells you and your mind will follow." It sounds really good, doesn't it? Almost biblical. It taps into our innermost longings. It affirms our secret desires. It seems like the only path to true happiness and joy.

Sadly, the opposite seems to be true. How many stories do we know of men and women who "followed their heart", achieved international celebrity and great success, but lost their families in the process? How many stories do we hear of the secret lives of famous men and women that are filled with addiction, abuse, neglect, and trauma? How many experiences have we had where our "hearts" led us to some pretty dark and twisted places? Shoot, I could give you several examples from my own life where "following my heart" led me into a ditch. None of us start out intending to go there of course. None of us begin with bad intentions. We are simply human. We make mistakes. We are prone to failure. We can't seem to get out of our own way.

So here's the question…Why? Why is it that human beings seem so naturally bent towards self-destruction? Why, after tens of thousands of years, do we still exhibit a penchant for cruelty, hatred, greed, violence, and an unbridled lust for power? Jeremiah 17:9 offers us a clear and compelling diagnosis. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" These ancient words ring so true, do they not? We simply cannot trust our hearts. We cannot trust our feelings. We cannot trust our emotions. They change with the wind. They are influenced far too easily. The endorphin rush they create overrides our rationality. Eats away at our commitments. We find ourselves doing the very things we hate and not doing the things we love. We find ourselves wrapped up in all kinds of "wrong" when we know there's a better, truer path to "right." We find ourselves compromising or rationalizing all sorts of sin. It's craziness. Literal insanity to trust in an organ that is so fickle and yet we seem to fall into this same trap over and over again.

So what's the answer? We turn to the Lord. The One who made us and shaped us and formed us and fashioned us. The One who called us and claimed us as His own from eternity. The One who first established us and gave our lives purpose and meaning and showed us the way to true fulfillment. The One who would not abandon us in our sin but came to us. Suffered for us. Died for us. All to set us free so that we might live again. "I, the Lord, search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds." (Jeremiah 17:10)

Here is the fundamental question we have to answer on a daily, even hourly basis. Do we trust the One who created us and loved us or do we trust ourselves? Do we trust in the One whose love is always steadfast, loyal and true or do we trust our fickle, human hearts? Do we trust the One who never makes mistakes? Never falls down on the job? Never fails to deliver on His promises? Or do we trust the guy or gal in the mirror with the incredible spotty track record? The great news of the gospel is that we have a Good Father in heaven who delights in giving good gifts to His children. We have a gracious Savior who gave His own life to deliver us from slavery to sin. We have the Holy Spirit living inside us who promises to guide and direct and show us the way to true joy and everlasting peace. Trust Him today!

Readings for tomorrow: None

November 1, 2021

War with God

Readings for today: Jeremiah 20-23, 2 Timothy 1-2

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

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

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

Jesus is our righteousness, friends! God made Him who knew no sin to actually become sin on our behalf. To bear the full weight of the world’s sin. Past. Present. Future. He took all my sin. All my brokenness. All my fears. He took all my rebellion. All my rejection. All my disdain. He took all my selfishness. All my greed. All my lusts. And He nailed them to the cross. By His wounds, I am healed. By His brokenness, I am made whole. By His chains, I am set free. By His death, I am given new life.

The reality is my flesh is at war with God. The desires of my heart are bent towards evil. My thoughts and attitudes and actions are corrupt. And God is at war with me. His Spirit waging a battle for my

heart. He has invaded my life. Invaded the innermost depths of my being in order to cleanse me. Purify me. Refine me. He is a consuming fire. He will not rest until my life reflects His glory. And the more I surrender. The more I submit. The more I cooperate with the work of the Spirit, the more I will experience the freedom Christ promises. This is no easy task. The flesh and its desires must be crucified. Put to death. There can be no safe harbor for them in our souls. We must allow the Spirit to "save to the uttermost." We must open ourselves up fully and completely to His work. Only then will we be truly set free.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 24-26, 2 Timothy 3

November 2, 2021

A Prophetic Word

Readings for today: Jeremiah 24-26, 2 Timothy 3

Yesterday, I had a conversation with a good friend about my views on the state of the world. He felt I was taking too dismal an approach. He felt I was too down on humanity. Too cynical about her future. Too pessimistic about her ability to make progress. He is not a Christian so he does not believe in original sin. He does not believe in total depravity. He believes human beings are essentially good and just need to be loved in order to be successful in this world. So I challenged him in return. What evidence does he see in the world today that would suggest to him humanity - as a whole - is essentially good? One only has to consider the greed of the ultra-wealthy. The corruption rife in every human government. The lust for power and control. The objectification and abuse of women. The persistent hatred between tribes and ethnicities. The penchant for violence - physical, emotional, professional, personal - against those we consider our enemies. The selfishness of the average person. Shall I go on? Certainly, individuals are capable of great good as our groups of individuals but on the whole, on balance, when one honestly considers the natural state of humanity, it isn't good. It's almost as if the Apostle Paul had caught wind of it…

"But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power." (2 Timothy 3:1-5) Not much has changed in two thousand years. Humanity is still a wilderness calling for a voice. Still a dumpster fire desperate for water to put out her flames. Yes, we've made some progress. Yes, life expectancies have gone up. The amount of wealth we create on an annual basis is staggering. Technology has made life so much easier. But to what end? Why live longer in misery? Why pursue wealth when it so easily snares our hearts? Why innovate when such technology can be turned to horrifyingly destructive ends?

Please hear me out. I am not saying we shouldn't do these things just that we need to rediscover our purpose. Our chief end. Our primary goal which is "a godly life in Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 3:12) Without Jesus as our North Star. Without Jesus as our True North. Without Jesus leading the way, we fall into all sorts of error. We fall into all sorts of self-inflicted suffering and pain. We fall into all manner of evil and sin. Only Christ can lift us up out of the hole we've dug for ourselves. Only Christ can set our feet on a firm foundation rather than the shifting sand we too often choose for ourselves. Only Christ can satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts which is to be loved.

My friend was right about one thing. We all long to be loved. We all need to be loved. We all were made to be loved. Loved by God. Loved by others. The lack of love in our world is the fundamental issue we face. It is the scarcity of love that creates so much of the world's problems. None of this is new to God. He saw it in Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and all the generations down to Noah. He saw it in humanity after the Flood and identified a family through which He would reveal His great love to the world. But Abraham and Isaac and Jacob struggled with to love as well as did Moses and Joshua and David and Solomon and Israel. So God sent His one and only Son into the world. Jesus came with a mission to show the world the heights and depths of the love of God. He gave His very life to make God's love known. And all who look to Him in faith have received the gift of God's faithful, steadfast, everlasting, loyal, covenant love in return. This is the story the Bible tells and it's why we must spend time in God's Word every single day. To remind ourselves we are loved and to remind ourselves of the

charge to go and tell the world about the love we have found in Christ. This is why Paul tells Timothy, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Friends, God is equipping you for every good work. God is preparing you to be His instrument of love and grace in our world. God is getting you ready to endure the persecution that will come to all who truly seek to follow Jesus. Abide in God’s Word and let His Word abide in you. Abide in God’s love and let His love abide in you. Do all you can to live a godly life in Christ Jesus and you will find the peace and joy your heart longs for.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 27-28, 2 Timothy 4

November 3, 2021

False Prophets

Readings for today: Jeremiah 27-28, 2 Timothy 4

Lately, I've been listening to the podcast titled, "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill" and my heart is heavy. Though I do not Mark Driscoll, I certainly have met too many like him. They are arrogant. They are narcissistic. They do not listen. They refuse any kind of real accountability. They abuse those around them. They groom and gaslight. They manipulate congregational systems for their own personal gain whether it be a lavish lifestyle or a influential platform. They are often celebrated until they fall. The warning signs dismissed because of the size of their "reach" or "impact." The victims who do have the courage to come forward often suffer further abuse as those in power close ranks around the abuser in order to protect themselves and the reputation of their ministry. I think of the systematic coverup by the Roman Catholic Church. Hundreds of priests abusing thousands of children over decades. I think of the late Ravi Zacharias who sexually abused hundreds of women over the span of his ministry. I think of spiritual abusers like Mark Driscoll or James MacDonald or many others who've caused so much suffering. Frankly, it all makes me want to vomit.

I wish I could say such incidents are rare but they are not. There are far too many false prophets running around these days. They masquerade as end times prophets, health and wealth preachers, and sexual predators who prey on their congregations. They are cult leaders. Religious charlatans. People who claim to speak for God but in reality are purveyors of hate. They defend the indefensible. They justify their abuses. They claim special anointing and protections from the Lord himself. And they lead many astray with their lies. Unfortunately, the religious life seems to attract such shady characters. Men - and it is almost exclusively men - whose character is utterly corrupt and who see the church as an easy mark. A soft target because of the grace she proclaims.

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

Friends, God will not be mocked. When Hananiah falsely prophesied a great victory over Babylon, Jeremiah foretold his doom. "Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the Lord: 'Behold, I will remove you from the face of the earth. This year you shall die, because you have uttered rebellion against the Lord.'" In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died." (Jeremiah 28:15-17) Over the course of my short life, I have seen this pattern repeated over and over again. Those who speak falsely in the Lord's name are eventually exposed for the religious hucksters they have become. They fall into disgrace and the examples are legion. God will not allow His name to be spoken in vain. God will not be manipulated for our purposes or bent to our will. He will not share His glory with another and woe to any man or woman who declares falsely a Word from the Lord! Woe to any man or woman who calls evil "good" and good "evil!" Woe to any man or woman who would subvert the Word of God and twist it to serve

some other purpose! God is watching! He sits on His throne even now! He will expose what is done in secret! He will bring to light the sinful agendas of every human heart! Nothing is hidden from His sight!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 29-30, Titus 1

November 4, 2021

God's Good Plans

Readings for today: Jeremiah 29-30, Titus 1

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

If only I had a dollar for every time I've heard this verse quoted at a graduation, wedding, seen it on a t-shirt or coffee mug. It has become cliche. A platitude we like to use to support the fulfillment of our dreams and desires. It's also exhibit #1 as to why proof-texting can be so dangerous.

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

Think about the collective shock we all felt on 9/11 when the planes hit both towers and the Pentagon. Think about the grief. The rage. The anger. Now multiply that many times over. Imagine terrorists taking over our country. Capturing our leaders. Torturing them on national television and executing them. Imagine them systematically destroying every monument we've ever built. Washington. Lincoln. Jefferson memorials all destroyed. Arlington. Mount Vernon. Monticello. All burned to the ground. Imagine them trying to erase "America" from the face of the earth. This is what the Israelites experienced and as they begin to settle into captivity…into slavery…into their new lives as refugees in a foreign land, they receive this letter from Jeremiah…

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

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

"For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place." (Jeremiah 29:10) Settle in for the long haul. This is not going to quick or easy. You will be in exile for generations. Your children and children's children will be born here. You may actually never return home yourselves.

Woof. Those are hard words when you know the context. And it is only AFTER all these difficult things have been said that Jeremiah pens the words we love to quote so much, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me,

when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile." (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

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

Can you see some of the parallels to our day and age? Think of all the conflict raging in our nation today. Think of the competing worldviews and ideologies. Think of how challenging it is becoming to practice our faith in the public square. Think of how easy it is to be cynical or pessimistic and depressed about the future. And yet, isn't God still with us? Surely God has not forgotten us? So even though it may feel like we are entering a period of exile, we can trust that Jeremiah's words to his people hold great value for us today. We too should build our homes and plant our gardens. We too should get married and have families. We too should seek the blessing of the communities where God has planted us. We too should pray for them and work for their welfare. We too should settle in for the long haul for our current cultural drift is only picking up steam. Things will never go back to the way they once were. It's only going to get more challenging in the years ahead but God will be faithful! He will visit us! He will gather us! He will bring us back home!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 31-32, Titus 2

November 5, 2021

Recovery

Readings for today: Jeremiah 31-32, Titus 2

This morning I was thankful to read the recent report on the number of jobs added to the economy in the last month. It's good for people to go back to work. It's good for employers to fill empty positions. It's a strong sign that we are recovering from the devastation of the pandemic. But there is still so much work to be done. Not just in the economy. The last eighteen months has been traumatic for so many. I think of the first responders I know who've had to carry an enormous load of stress as they served on the front lines of this pandemic. I think of the healthcare professionals who have risked their lives and worked countless overtime shifts to care for their patients. I think of teachers who find themselves in the crosshairs of the culture wars that rage all around us. I think of our political leaders who work so hard to try to find a way out of this mess. Not to mention the parents who've had to balance homeschooling with working remotely or the business owners who've had to find ways to remain operational during enforced lockdowns. It's not been easy. We've experienced a collective shock to our system. A traumatic event that significantly impacted all of us emotionally, mentally, physically, even spiritually. It will take time to recover. It will take time to heal. It will take time to rebuild trust and find peace both as individuals and as a nation.

That's why I find such comfort in Jeremiah's words this morning…"Behold, I will gather them from all the countries to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation. I will bring them back to this place, and I will make them dwell in safety. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul." (Jeremiah 32:37-41) Yes, God in His divine Providence has allowed this pandemic. The pandemic, in turn, has exposed some of the deepest, darkest sins of our nation. The stain of racism. The vast economic inequalities. The injustices so many face on a daily basis. Layer in all the hatred and outrage and violence and vitriol we expose ourselves to through cable news, social media, or even some so-called "Christian" preaching. What you end up with is a toxic brew that we drink to the dregs. This is what God's judgment looks like in real time. It's when He simply withdraws His protective hand. Gives us over to the lusts and desires of our sinful hearts. Forces us to come face to face with the deadly consequences of our narcissism. And we would be lost but for His faithfulness.

Thankfully, the same words God gave Jeremiah to speak to the nation of Israel are the same words He speaks to us through His Son Jesus Christ. They are words of comfort. Words of hope. Words of promise. They speak of a future day when God Himself will wade back in. He will intervene to save us from ourselves. Save us from our individual and collective sin. He will restore the nation. He will renew His church. He will remember His people. How will we know the Day is drawing near? We will see a great movement of repentance. God's people will come together in humility to confess their sin, forgive each other, and reconcile their hurts. God's people will humbly confess their sins on behalf of our nation. They will work towards righteousness and justice which are the foundation of God's throne. They will show mercy and compassion to those who are poor and orphaned and abandoned and abused. They will sacrifice and serve and give generously, even extravagantly, for they God is their Protector and Provider. Most of all, they will walk in the fear of the Lord, giving Him all the reverence and honor He is due.

Our “recovery” is fundamentally tied to revival, friends. And revival can only come as God’s people humble themselves before the Lord. Confessing their sins. Admitting their mistakes. Acknowledging how far we have fallen short. God is gracious. He will forgive. God is faithful. He will cleanse us from all unrighteousness. And God expects the same from His people. To whom much is given, much is expected. To whom much is forgiven, much is expected. The healing and recovery we all long for - both individually and collectively - will only come as we extend forgiveness and grace and work to reconcile every relationship in Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 33-35, Titus 3

November 6, 2021

The Plain Meaning of Scripture

Readings for today: Jeremiah 33-35, Titus 3

One of the most important things to keep in mind when you are reading Scripture is to remember that the Bible was not written to us. It was written to different groups of people in different cultural contexts throughout history who had radically different ways of seeing and understanding the world around them. At the same time, while we acknowledge the Bible is not written directly to us, we do believe the Bible was written for us. Meaning we believe the lessons God was teaching His people throughout history are just as applicable today. What God was revealing about Himself is just as true for us as it was for them. This is why after thousands of years, we still find ourselves reading and studying this sacred book. It is inspired. It is infallible. It is inerrant on the matters on which it speaks. It is our only rule for faith and life.

In order to understand God's Word, there are often times when we have to dig deep into the cultural context to understand what's going on. We have to look back and try to understand how the original hearers of the Word would have received what the Biblical authors had to say. What frame of reference would they use? What worldview did they have? And the more obscure the text, the harder we have to work. However, there are other times when the Lord makes things very clear. There's little left to chance. Little left to interpretation. Little left to the imagination. There are times when the Lord speaks directly to us. He leaves no ambiguity. No wiggle room. No confusion. Today is one of those days. Listen to what the Apostle Paul has to say to Titus…

"Remind God's people to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people. For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people. But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned." (Titus 3:1-11)

Titus is a pastor. He leads a church planting movement on the island of Crete. Paul charges him to raise up leaders for these churches. People of godly character. People of good reputation. People who will be effective at leading God's people to live and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. What will such a people look like? Paul makes it very clear. They will be humble and submissive to their governing authorities. They will speak evil of no one. They will avoid arguments, quarreling, and fights. They will be gentle and will treat all people with respect. Why will God's people act in this particular, even peculiar way? Because they recognize they were once foolish and ignorant and enslaved to their passions. They were once angry and violent and given over to malice and hate. They too were once lost and wandering in helplessness, hopelessness, and fear. But now they have been found! The goodness and tender loving kindness of the Lord reached down to them and delivered them from their sin! They

have been set free by Jesus Christ and have now been made heirs according to His promise! This is why Paul insists that Titus insist that God's people walk in newness of life. They must devote themselves to good works. They must avoid unprofitable and worthless arguments that only lead to division.

I am a pastor. I lead a church in Parker and I help lead a church planting movement in the Horn of Africa. I train future pastors and church planters and missionaries in my work at Denver Seminary. Just as Paul charged Titus to raise up leaders for God's church in his context, so he is charging me to do the same. To raise up leaders of godly character. Leaders of good reputation. Leaders who will be effective in living and proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. Such leaders will be humble and submissive to their governing authorities no matter whether they are Democrat or Republican. They will speak evil of no one no matter their ethnicity, socio-economic status, political affiliation, religion, or sexual orientation. Such leaders will avoid arguments, quarreling, and fighting especially on social media. They will be gentle and treat all people with respect, refusing to make flippant and rude comments or share snarky and profane memes designed to tear others down. Why are these things out of bounds for the people of God? Because we too were once lost and wandering. We too were once enslaved to our passions. We too were once foolish and ignorant. But God was gracious towards us. He showed kindness and mercy towards us. He was good to us and therefore we must be good to others. We must exhibit the same tender loving kindness that God showed us to those around us. This is our calling as Christians. There are no exceptions. There are no excuses. There are no extenuating circumstances that give us a pass. We either obey Jesus or we do not. It's that simple.

Readings for tomorrow: None

November 8, 2021

My Will or Thy Will?

Readings for today: Jeremiah 36-41, Philemon 1, Hebrews 1

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

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

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

I believe it was C.S. Lewis who pointed out that when we appear before the throne of God on Judgment Day, we will either say to Him, "Thy will be done" or He will say to us, "thy will be done." There are no other options. Furthermore, it is critically important to remember that our answer on Judgment Day is conditioned by the choices we make right now in our everyday lives. You see, each and every day we are faced with this same choice. Will we obey God's will for our lives or will we go our own way? It is a serious matter to reject the Word of God. To disobey His commands. Whether by ignorance or by deliberate defiance, we rebel against God to our own peril. God takes our sin seriously. Far more seriously than we know. He is so holy. So righteous. So just. His nose cannot bear the stench of sin. His

eyes will not behold the stain of sin. His presence will not endure even the appearance of sin. It must be dealt with. It must be done away with. A price must be paid. A sacrifice offered. It will either be us or it will be Christ. Either you receive Christ as your perfect sacrifice. Receive Christ as your perfect substitute. Receive Christ's atoning death on your behalf or you will bear the punishment yourself. You will receive all the judgment and righteous anger of God. It will be eternal and unending because the depth of your sin and rebellion is eternal and unending.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 42-43, Hebrews 2

November 9, 2021

Running from God

Readings for today: Jeremiah 42-43, Hebrews 2

Deion Sanders is one of the most amazing athletes of all time. He is the only person to participate in both a World Series and a Super Bowl, winning two of the latter. He was a nine-time All-Pro cornerback and kick returner who moonlighted as a professional baseball player. Everything the man touched seemingly turned to gold and he had the ego to match. He gave himself the nickname "Prime Time." He was loud and brash and cocky to a fault. And yet, all that success could not satisfy so in 1997 - at the height of his success - he drove his car off a cliff in an effort to commit suicide. Incredibly enough, he survived the 30-40 foot drop with no significant injuries and it was then that he began to turn his life over to the Lord. I once heard him remark in an interview, "I was one of the fastest human beings on the face of the planet but I could not outrun God."

I imagine all of us know what it's like to run from God. All of us at one time or another in our lives have tried to run as fast and as far as we can from Him. Perhaps we were running from faith like Sanders. Perhaps we were running from obedience like the rich young ruler Jesus met one day. Perhaps we were running from hardship and suffering like the disciples in the wake of the crucifixion. Perhaps we were running from His call on our lives like the Old Testament prophet, Jonah. Whatever the circumstances, I imagine all of us can think of a time where we ran from the Lord. Here's my question…how'd that work out for you? ;-) I know how it worked out for me. God was relentless. He pursued me tirelessly. He ran me down. I never did have much of a chance.

Neither did Israel or Jeremiah. You can understand their thinking. You can sympathize with their point of view. Their whole world has just been destroyed by Babylon. They've witnessed firsthand the horrors of war. The futility of trying to resist. And now the very governor Nebuchadnezzar appointed to rule in his stead has been murdered. Surely his vengeance will be swift and total and final. Surely he will return and wipe out everyone who's left. So they make a plan. They will flee to Egypt. Take refuge in a rival empire. Surely the arm of Nebuchadnezzar cannot reach them there. But before they go, they seek the Lord. They want the Lord to confirm their well-laid plans. God tells them something different. He calls them to surrender. He calls them to humble submission. He calls on them to plead for mercy. If they will trust the Lord with their lives - even in the face of their fear and anxiety and hardship and suffering - He promises He will deliver them. Listen again to what the Lord says to His people, "If you will remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down; I will plant you, and not pluck you up; for I relent of the disaster that I did to you. Do not fear the king of Babylon, of whom you are afraid. Do not fear him, declares the Lord, for I am with you, to save you and to deliver you from his hand. I will grant you mercy, that he may have mercy on you and let you remain in your own land. But if you say, 'We will not remain in this land,' disobeying the voice of the Lord your God and saying, 'No, we will go to the land of Egypt, where we shall not see war or hear the sound of the trumpet or be hungry for bread, and we will dwell there,' then hear the word of the Lord, O remnant of Judah. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: If you set your faces to enter Egypt and go to live there, then the sword that you fear shall overtake you there in the land of Egypt, and the famine of which you are afraid shall follow close after you to Egypt, and there you shall die. All the men who set their faces to go to Egypt to live there shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. They shall have no remnant or survivor from the disaster that I will bring upon them." (Jeremiah 42:9-17)

God is giving His people a clear choice. One with real life consequences. Obey the Lord even in the face of their fear and anxiety, suffering and hardship and they will be blessed. God will protect them.

God will re-plant them. God will build them up in the land. Disobey the Lord. Run to Egypt. And surely God's judgment will find them. The violence they are trying to escape will follow them. The famine they are trying to avoid will be waiting for them there. All who go to Egypt will die there. None shall escape. It's a choice between life or death and Jeremiah implores them to choose life. Sadly, they choose death and bring on themselves further judgment. All because they tried to outrun God.

Where do you find yourself today? Are you still running from God? Are you still seeking to flee His presence? Live life your own way? Follow your own heart? Satisfy your own desires? Or perhaps you find yourself exhausted? Worn out by the rat race? Tired of chasing the brass ring? Maybe like Sanders, you've caught the ring. You've achieved success. You've made your way to the top only to find it lonely. Isolating. Deeply unfulfilling. Friends, God is going to relentlessly pursue you until the day you die. He will never stop fighting for you. Never stop reaching out to you. Never stop coming after you because He longs for all to be saved and come to knowledge of His truth. He longs for all to know the love and grace He offers in Jesus Christ. Will you stop running and turn to Him today?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 44-45, Hebrews 3:1-4:13

November 11, 2021

Our Great High Priest

Readings for today: Jeremiah 46-48, Hebrews 4:14-5:10

God is eternally consistent. From the beginning to the end of Scripture, a single story unfolds. God creates the universe and all that is in it. It is good. It is beautiful. It is right and true. He makes a man. Made in His own image. Places him in creation as a "priest" of sorts. One who exercises dominion over all God has made. One who keeps the Garden and makes it flourish. One who lives for God and His glory. But Adam fell into sin. The original high priest unfaithful. The impact is devastating. All of creation falls into ruin for lack of a faithful high priest who will present her to God holy and without spot, wrinkle or blemish.

Time moves on. Another priest is called. Noah. Set apart by God to exercise dominion over a new creation. The new world that emerges from the flood. But again, the high priestly line fails. Rather than be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth; they stick together. They build a tower. A temple to their own name. God looks down. Confuses their languages. Scatters them across the earth.

More time passes. Another priest. Abram. Called out of Ur, he will be the father of a new nation. They will become a holy priesthood. A people for God's own possession set apart to exercise dominion over the earth. They are to walk in the light of God and teach the other nations to do the same. Once again, the high priestly line fails. They turn inward. They hoard the blessings of God. They become entitled. Prideful. They scorn the Gentiles they are called to serve. God punishes them and sends them into exile.

God goes silent. Hundreds of years pass. God raises up yet another high priest. His only begotten Son. Jesus becomes one of us. Takes on human flesh. Assumes a broken human nature. He lives among us. Walks among us. Teaches us. Heals us. Suffers for us. Dies for us. He experiences all that human life has to offer. The good. The bad. The ugly. All so He can fully and rightfully represent us before the Father. At the same time, He remains God. His divine nature is never relinquished. So He can fully and rightfully take on the sins of the world. Jesus is the perfect high priest. His divine and human natures satisfying every aspect of the covenant God first made back in the Garden.

Listen again to how the author of Hebrews describes it, "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin…In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek." (Hebrews 4:14-15, 5:7-10)

Friends, this is what makes Jesus unique. Superior to every angel and every prophet who has come before or after Him. He plays His unique, high priestly role even now on your behalf. He lives to make intercession for you. His sacrifice on your behalf has been accepted. All the necessary work of salvation is finished. "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16)

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 49-50, Hebrews 5:11-6:12

November 12, 2021

Discernment

Readings for today: Jeremiah 49-50, Hebrews 5:11-6:12

I love what Hebrews 5:12-14 says, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.” Discernment rests on our ability to become “skilled in righteousness” or skilled in God’s ways. If we walk in His love. If we obey His commands. If we submit our lives to Him, we can know the will of God for our lives.

One of the most important gifts we can exercise is an ability to discern between right and wrong. Good and evil. God’s will and our own will. Consider the proliferation of fake news. The tacit acceptance of deceit as a necessary means to a greater ideological end. The promotion of false information in both the mainstream and social media. It’s literally tearing us apart as a nation. Why? Because our powers of discernment have not been trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. Tragically, this has been a problem for God’s people for centuries.

Anyone remember King Saul? The first king of Israel. Saul is the man God hand-selected from among the twelve tribes to lead His people. Saul is a strong man. A valiant man. He literally stands head and shoulders above his peers. But he is not a wise man. He is not a discerning man. He makes rash decisions. He takes vows in the name of the Lord that come back to haunt him. He is often his own worst enemy and it eventually costs him everything. For example, consider the time his son Jonathan won a great victory for Israel. He and his armor bearer undertook a dangerous, potentially even suicidal, mission. They invaded the camp of the Philistines. They killed twenty men and the result was chaos. The Philistine army started to panic and raced in every direction. Saul sees the confusion and takes advantage of it. He marshals the rest of his army and sends them after the Philistines. God gives them a great victory. However, in his zeal, Saul issues an edict that no Israelite shall eat until their defeat of the Philistines is complete. The battle is hard. The fighting is fierce. God’s people grow faint. In the midst of it all, Jonathan - who didn’t know about his father’s command - eats some honey and it strengthens him. He openly questions his father’s wisdom. The people follow his example, slaughtering animals for a feast. The news gets back to Saul. He interprets their actions as sin. He attempts to talk to the Lord who remains silent through the whole episode. In response to God’s silence, Saul casts lots to determine who has broken his command. It’s Jonathan. In his foolishness, he decides to kill him but the people of God stand in his way.

The whole story is a mess. It’s a confusing jumble and hard to follow. But it points to what happens when human beings take matters into their own hands. When we fail to discern the difference between God’s will and our own. How often do we make this mistake? How many times over the course of my life have I pursued something out of pride or selfish desire, foolishly assuming it to be God’s will? How often have I grown impatient and rushed into a decision I later regretted? If I am completely honest, there have even been times in my life where I chased something I knew to be sin but did it anyway, hypocritically asking God for forgiveness in advance.

So how do we discern the will of God? First, we have to know God’s Word. We have to study His commands. We have to commit ourselves to obey His divine Law. It is never God’s will that you disobey Him. It is never God’s will that you live out of alignment with Jesus. Second, we have to ask

God for wisdom. The wisdom to faithfully follow Jesus. God promises in James 1:5 to give this wisdom generously to all who ask. So we pray in faith, trusting God to keep His promises. Finally, we learn through constant, daily practice to discern the difference between good and evil. Right and wrong. God's will and our will. There is a process of trial and error here as we get better at listening to God's voice above our own or the voices in our world. Friends, let me encourage you to put Hebrews 5 into practice. Train yourself for righteousness. Strengthen your powers of discernment. Then teach others to do the same.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 51-52, Hebrews 6:13-7:10

November 13, 2021

God's War with Sin

Readings for today: Jeremiah 51-52, Hebrews 6:13-7:10

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

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

As we finish the book of Jeremiah, we see God leveling His judgment on the nations. God sets out to destroy the Ammonites. To punish them for their sin. The discipline of God is harsh and brutal and terrifying. But the section ends with a strange promise. God will restore the fortunes of the Ammonites. God sets out to destroy Elam. To punish them for their sin. The discipline of God is harsh and brutal and terrifying. But again, there is this strange promise. God will restore the fortunes of Elam.

God set out to destroy His own people. The nation of Israel in both its northern and southern kingdoms. "Israel is a hunted sheep driven away by lions. First the king of Assyria devoured him, and now at last Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has gnawed his bones." (Jeremiah 50:17) He punished them for their sin. The discipline of God was harsh and brutal and terrifying. But now the tables turn. The very instruments God used to bring about His discipline now come under His judgment. Where is the might of Assyria? What happened to her? Her meteoric rise in human history was matched by her sudden fall. The same is true for Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was the mightiest ruler of his time but his empire would not last. Why? Jeremiah is clear. "I will repay Babylon and all the inhabitants of Chaldea before your very eyes for all the evil that they have done in Zion, declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 51:24) You see, Nebuchadnezzar didn't just go to war with Israel, he went to war with God Himself.

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

until the whole earth repents and turns to Him. He will not let up until sin and evil is utterly defeated and destroyed.

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: None

November 15, 2021

The Pervasiveness of Sin

Readings for today: Lamentations 1-5, Hebrews 7:11-28

There is a debate raging in our culture today. Is sin systemic or is it personal? Is sin communal or is it individual? Are we guilty of sin as we participate and perhaps unwittingly perpetuate sinful systems of injustice and oppression or are we only guilty of the sin we personally commit? The Bible's answer is "yes." It's not an either/or but a both/and.

We have to remember that while the Bible was written for us, it was not written to us. In the case of the Book of Lamentations, it was written to people living in an ancient near east, honor/shame culture where the group identity of a particular people was far more important than the individual identity. In fact, you would be hard-pressed to get an ancient Israelite to even understand what an "individual" identity might look like apart from his or her community. When God brings judgment on the nation for the sins they've committed, they would have understood it as the just punishment for their collective guilt. The righteous action of a holy God against His people for the sin that has been building up over generations. The author of Lamentations says as much when he writes, "Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear their iniquities." (Lamentations 5:7) He suggests as much when he personifies Jerusalem and gives her a collective voice in the narrative.

"How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave…Jerusalem remembers in the days of her affliction and wandering all the precious things that were hers from days of old. When her people fell into the hand of the foe, and there was none to help her, her foes gloated over her; they mocked at her downfall. Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore she became filthy; all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans and turns her face away…Look, O Lord, and see, for I am despised. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger. From on high he sent fire; into my bones he made it descend; he spread a net for my feet; he turned me back; he has left me stunned, faint all the day long. My transgressions were bound into a yoke; by his hand they were fastened together; they were set upon my neck; he caused my strength to fail; the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand." (Lamentations 1:1, 7-8, 11-14)

Conversely, we live in a guilt/innocence culture where everything is viewed through a highly individualistic lens. As such, we believe each person must be held accountable for their own choices in life. They must be responsible for their own actions. Therefore any and all punishment - if it is to be just - must be leveled against individuals for the crimes they've personally committed. And, to be sure, this idea is also present throughout Lamentations. We see Jeremiah lifting his own lament in the pages of this book. Acknowledging his own sin, suffering, and pain. Chapter three, in particular, seems to reflect Jeremiah's experience.

"I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long. He has made my flesh and my skin waste away; he has broken my bones; he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation; he has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago. He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has made my chains heavy; though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer; he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones; he has made my paths

crooked…Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me." (Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-20)

We get no sense from Jeremiah that he is innocent or that he should escape or be protected from God's righteous judgment. Instead, Jeremiah suffers the penalty for his sin and that of his nation. He accepts God's judgment as just and then looks to Him for hope even in the midst of all he is going though. "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord…For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men." (Lamentations 3:21-26, 31-33)

Now I know we struggle with God's judgment. We struggle with it's severity. We struggle with it's seeming cruelty. We think to ourselves, "What about the innocent? Why do the righteous suffer alongside the unrighteous? What have the children or the poor or the outcast or the marginalized done who get caught up in this terrible holocaust?" These are thoroughly modern and thoroughly western cultural questions. In the Bible's view, no one is innocent. All are born into sin. All are born under judgment. All bear the guilt of our forefather and mother, Adam and Eve. We confirm our collective guilt each and every time we act in selfish and self-centered ways. As the Apostle Paul puts it, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned…But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many…Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 5:12, 15, 18-21)

You see, as much as we may want to deny the idea of collective guilt, we absolutely cling to the idea of collective righteousness. As much as we may want to deny the idea that we are held accountable for the sins of our fathers and mothers, we absolutely want to believe we are set free by the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We can't have one without the other and the great news of the gospel is the sacrifice of Christ is sufficient for all sin. Individual and collective. Personal and communal. Systemic and singular. When Christ died, He died once for all. He made atonement not just for our individual sins but for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 1-3, Hebrews 8

November 16, 2021

Visions

Readings for today: Ezekiel 1-3, Hebrews 8

Welcome to Ezekiel and some of the strangest writing of the Old Testament! The next several days will be confusing if it's your first time through so let me give you a few tools to help you navigate this book. Let's begin with some history on Ezekiel himself. Ezekiel was born into a priestly family, most likely during the reign of King Josiah in Judah. You will remember King Josiah was one of the faithful kings of Judah who dedicated his reign to cleansing the land of idols and restoring the true worship of Yahweh. Ezekiel was married but his wife died just prior to the siege of Jerusalem in 587 BC. He was taken into exile along with many of the leaders and influential people of Judah and resettled in Babylon. There it appears he held an important leadership position among the exiles even before receiving his call to be a prophet.

What sets apart the leadership of Ezekiel are the strange visions he received from the Lord. Like Daniel and the Apostle John, he was given the gift of being able to see beyond the veil of this world into the next. But what he sees is overwhelming. It was as confusing to him as it is to us as 21st century readers. This is a style of writing known as "apocalyptic." Not unique to the Bible, it has parallels in a lot of ancient near east literature. It has several features you will need to keep in mind as you read.

Revelation - The very word, "apokalypsis" in the Greek means "revelation" or "disclosure." Apocalyptic literature is marked by a direct revelation from God to a seer or prophet, usually in visions or dreams, who then writes down what he sees.

Mystery - The meaning of the visions are often shrouded in mystery. They might refer to past, current, or future events. They may include strange images from the world beyond. While the seer or prophet may write them down in great detail, decifering them is a significant challenge.

Symbolism - The visions are rife with symbols drawn from nature, ancient near east mythology, astral phenomena, etc. These symbols are used by the seer or prophet to make sense of what he sees and may represent coded language so that any correspondence would be able to pass the imperial censors who were probably screening their mail.

Resistance Literature - Because the prophet is typically writing from an "exilic" perspective where he and his people live under oppression, his focus is on the future rather than the present. The visions are meant to provide hope to a people who are suffering.

God is sovereign - The overarching message of the apocalyptic genre in the Bible is that God reigns. He is supreme. He will judge the nations. He will have the final victory. Despite their present conditions, God's people are to place their trust in Him.

So Ezekiel is given a vision. God appears to him in all His glory and splendor. Living creatures with strange faces. Wheels heading in every direction. High winds. Burning coals of fire. And above it all a throne where a majestic figure sits. It's so overwhelming that Ezekiel sits speechless for seven straight days.

What is the content of the revelation Ezekiel receives? He is called to be a prophet. He is called to be a "watchman" for Israel. He will speak God's Word to His people. He will embody God's messages

through his actions. He will become the vessel through which God will make known His will. This will not be an easy call. Serving God as His prophet never is! There is always a cost! The people will resist him. The people will reject his message. The people may even beat and attack him. But Ezekiel's job is simply to be faithful. To sound the trumpet. To give fair warning. To confront God's people on their sin.

And what will the confrontation look like? Well, consider the strange scene we'll read about tomorrow in chapter four where Ezekiel lays on his side for 390 days and 40 days respectively to atone for the sins of each kingdom. The 390 days represents the 390 years between the apostasy of Jeroboam of the Northern Kingdom of Israel when he set up idols for his people to worship and the Babylonian Captivity that Ezekiel is now experiencing. (975-c. 583 BC) The forty days represents the final years of apostasy of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Taken together, the 430 days, representing 430 years, matches the same number of years Israel was enslaved in Egypt before the Exodus. And this vision is intended to convey hope for the same God who delivered His people slavery in Egypt is the same God who will deliver them from bondage in Babylon. God will repeat what He has done and save them again but only after they have returned to Him with all their hearts.

What does any of this have to do with us? Wise and discerning Christians will see the similarities between the apostasy/exile of Israel and the reality of our own apostasy/exile in the church. We too have a need for God to raise up faithful "watchmen and women" who will proclaim the Word of God with boldness. Prophets who will speak God's truth regardless of how it is received. Men and women who understand their first call is to please Christ rather than people. This is just as hard for us today as it was for Ezekiel back then. And it is the job of every Christian. The call of every single person who claims to follow Jesus. We are the ones whom God has sent! We are the vessels He has chosen to use for His purposes!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 4-6, Hebrews 9

November 17, 2021

The Purpose of Judgment

Readings for today: Ezekiel 4-6, Hebrews 9

Today's reading is as brutal as they come. Violence. Disease. Famine. Destruction. Pain. Suffering. God delivering His people over to judgment. It is hard to read. Harder still to try and picture. But the hardest part is to accept is that this is all from God. All a part of His plan. It raises some extremely difficult questions. How can this be the same God who promised compassion and steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love Him? How can this be the same God who will later reveal Himself fully and completely in Jesus Christ? How can this God of wrath be the same God of love? Is God bipolar? Manic? Schizophrenic? Does He have rage issues? Can He be trusted? Is such a God even worthy of our love?

These are all important questions to ponder but they also ultimately miss the point. God is God. He has made known His will. He has established His covenant. He has made clear His expectations. From the beginning, He has held nothing back. Nothing hidden. Nothing secret. He created us to fulfill His purposes. He is the Potter. We are the clay. Our problem is that we keep forgetting our place. We keep rejecting our role. We refuse to acknowledge His Lordship over our lives. Starting with Adam and Eve, we keep asserting our independence. We keep trying to be our own gods. Do things our own way. Worship as we please. And we forget the One whom we were created to serve. We forget the One we were created to please. We forget God is God and we are not.

We cannot say we haven't been warned. God is more patient with us than we deserve. He forbears for generations as the sin piles up. He continues to reach out in love only to have the door slammed in His face over and over again. He continues to show us grace though we deserve judgment. He continues to be faithful though we ignore Him and walk away. There are consequences to such actions. The apostle Paul talks about them in Romans 1, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..." And how does that wrath manifest itself according to Paul? God simply withdraws His hand. He "gives us over" to the lusts of our hearts. The lust of our eyes. The pride and arrogance of our lives. And the results are ugly. Harsh. Tragic. Horrifying. Human beings, left unchecked, are brutal creatures. It was Robert Burns who first coined the phrase, "Man's inhumanity to man" in a poem he wrote in 1787 and the events of the last few hundred years only serve to confirm his analysis of the human condition. We are capable of unfathomable evil. We are capable of the most brutal violence. We are capable of the most horrifying, dehumanizing behavior. And if we're totally honest, we all know this to be true. Given the right conditions, all of us are capable of just about anything. (See the infamous "Stanford Prison Experiment" of 1971.)

How should a just and holy God respond? Righteous judgment. Our sin offends God on a level we simply cannot understand. Listen to how Ezekiel describes how God feels, "Then those of you who escape will remember me among the nations where they are carried captive, how I have been broken over their whoring heart that has departed from me and over their eyes that go whoring after their idols." (Ezekiel 6:9) God takes our sin seriously. Our problem is we don't take it seriously enough. We gloss it over. We make excuses. We rationalize our behavior. We justify our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. We foolishly believe we are somehow special and will escape judgment. We presume upon our relationship with God. We are just like Israel who believed they were "immune" because they were God's chosen people.

But God will not be mocked. He vents His fury without mercy. "Thus shall my anger spend itself, and I will vent my fury upon them and satisfy myself. And they shall know that I am the Lord —that I have spoken in my jealousy—when I spend my fury upon them." (Ezekiel 5:13) It is scary. It is frightening. It makes us tremble. And if we aren't careful we will miss what God is trying to do. In our fear, we will focus yet again on all the wrong things. God's judgment is NOT an end in itself! It points beyond itself to something far greater! Far more important!

"That they may know I am the Lord." Over and over again we read this refrain. God using judgment to cleanse His people. To refine them. To separate the gold from the dross. The wheat from the chaff. He disciplines them in His love. He confronts the evil of their hearts. He forces them to come face to face with the depth of their sin and degradation. The utter futility of their idolatry. The full measure of their rebellion. Yes, it is harsh but it is also true. It is just. It is fair. It right. It is good. And it is ultimately so they may return in humility to the Lord. They must be broken. Their hardened hearts must be cracked. Their stiff necks bent. Their locked knees bowed. God will indeed bring them to their knees through judgment so they may experience the joy of being in right relationship with Him. This is the point of their exile. This is the point of their suffering. God wants His people back. And He will not relent until they return.

It's a sobering reality. Especially for us Christians. To think of all that Christ endured as the Father poured His wrath out on His Son. To consider all Christ went through as he experienced the depths of hell and God-forsakenness. He took on the full weight of human sin. As terrifying as the judgment is in Ezekiel, it pales in comparison to the judgment Christ suffered on the Cross. Reading these words through the prism of the Cross should make us appreciate the wonder of Christ's sacrifice for us. We should find ourselves marveling at the great love of God who would take our place. Bring judgment on Himself. Freely lay down His life in order to save us from our sin. Amazing love! How can it be that Thou my God wouldst die for me?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 7-9, Hebrews 10

November 18, 2021

Strike Fire!

Readings for today: Ezekiel 7-9, Hebrews 10

I know I've been focusing on the Old Testament quite a bit in my devotionals lately but today I want to turn to our New Testament reading and reflect a bit. Whoever the author of Hebrews is, he is intimately familiar with the Old Testament. He is also skilled at Jewish midrash which is an intepretive method that infused fresh meaning into the biblical texts. Jesus is his interpretive lens. He looks back on the ceremonial religious laws of the Torah and reinterprets them in light of Christ. The priesthood, sacrifices, and Temple are all reimagined. The high points of Israel's history are revisited as are the great heroes and heroines of the faith. It's like a fog has lifted for the author and they are seeing things clearly for the very first time.

Many years ago, I had LASIK surgery on my eyes. I have worn glasses since the fourth grade. My vision was terrible. I was as near-sighted as they come. Then I had the procedure. I remember walking out of the office and it was literally like scales had been lifted from my eyes. I could actually see things like the alarm clock in the morning or the individual leaves on the tree in my front yard. It was an incredible feeling.

I imagine the author of Hebrews felt the same way. You can almost feel the energy coming off the page. If you listen closely, you can sense his excitement and joy as he shares what he's discovered. Now it all makes sense! Now it all has become clear! This is why God instituted the sacrificial system and this is how God brings that system to fulfillment! His own Son serves both as High Priest and Perfect Sacrifice. He bears His own Body into the Holy of Holies in the heavenly Temple and satisfies the just demands of God's Law once and for all. This is the mystery of salvation all of our forefathers and mothers in the faith looked forward to and now it is ours to see and to touch and to taste! The promised new covenant has been given. The new age inaugurated. The gates of heavenly Jerusalem thrown open. The angels gathered, along with the saints who have gone before us, to join the party. A gift is being offered. An unshakable kingdom that will never fall for it's foundation is Christ Himself!

Can you feel it? Can you sense the passion behind his words? The excitement? The energy? It comes to a crescendo in passages like the one we read today. "Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:19-25) You can almost hear him shout these last words, amen?

Friends, the gift God offers us in Christ is nothing short of heaven itself. Through Him we receive eternal life in an eternal relationship with an eternal God who reserves a place for us in His eternal Kingdom. To Him be all the praise, honor and glory forever!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 10-12, Hebrews 11:1-16

November 19, 2021

The Glory of the Lord

Readings for today: Ezekiel 10-12, Hebrews 11:1-16

It is hard for us to fathom the national catastrophe that befell Israel. Harder still for us to understand the depth of their pain and suffering. Living as we do in the world's most powerful nation, we cannot begin to grasp what it would be like to watch your entire way of life destroyed. However, all of that pales in comparison to the tragedy Ezekiel sees in his vision today. All the destruction. All the loss of life. All the famine and disease. None of that would have compared to the grief he felt watching the Lord leave His Temple.

From the moment God indwelled the Tabernacle in the wilderness, Israel had never been alone. They enjoyed His protection. They enjoyed His provision. He gave them victory after victory. Established them in the Promised Land. Taken up residence in Jerusalem with them once they built the Temple. Over time, the Israelites began to take Him for granted. In fact, there was a sense in Jeremiah and Ezekiel's time that the Lord was somehow "trapped" in the Temple. They believed they had the Lord caged. He ceased to be their god and had now become a totem. A magic talisman to keep them from evil. This is why they stubbornly refused to leave Jerusalem when Jeremiah called them to submit to Nebuchadnezzar. They falsely believed as long as they had the Lord locked down in His Temple that they could never be fully defeated.

Imagine their shock when Ezekiel relates his vision of the Lord leaving the Temple. Departing from the east gate. Rising above the cherubim where He normally sat. Heading out of the city that bore His name. Imagine their fear as their one hope departs, leaving them alone for the first time since their days in Egypt. It's difficult for us wrap our minds around simply because we believe God is everywhere all the time. We hold onto the promise that God is always with us. We trust He will never leave us or forsake us.

But what if the Lord leads us into exile? What if the Lord leads us into a season of suffering? What if the Lord seeks to refine us and sanctify us? Are we willing to go where He leads? The reality is we too can take the Lord for granted. We too can act as if He's "trapped" in a relationship with us. As if God is "bound" by His unconditional love for us. We falsely believe our thoughts, attitudes, and actions don't matter. We false believe we can reject holiness as a way of life. We falsely believe God's primary goal is our personal happiness. Nothing could be further from the truth. Yes, God does love us with an everlasting love. But make no mistake, God is not "bound" to us. He is not "trapped" in this relationship. He is not co-dependent on us nor does He allow our whims, our feelings, or our desires to shape His will for our lives. We sin at our own risk. We run ahead of God at our own peril. We stubbornly refuse to follow Him to our own detriment.

Perhaps the best example of how God relates to us comes from the story Jesus tells of the prodigal son in Luke 15. The younger son comes to his father in the tale and asks for his inheritance. He wants nothing to do with his family any longer. He wants to be on his own. Live according to his own rules. Follow his own path. Find his own happiness. So he takes his money and leaves. The father lets him go. Many years pass. The son spends all he has on sinful pursuits. He abandons all his father taught him. Now he's desperate. Alone. Afraid. Ashamed. One day he plucks up the courage to go home. He has no hope his father will accept back into the family but he thinks he might be able to catch on as a hired servant. But while he is far off, the father sees him. The father's been waiting by the door. Watching out the window. Longing. Praying. Looking forward to the day when his son will come to his

senses. The father runs to him. Embraces him. Gives him a robe to wear and places the signet ring back on his finger. He is home. He is part of the family again.

It's a powerful story. One that reminds us of the great love of God. It should also remind us of the consequences of our sin. The father never stopped loving the son just as God never stops loving us. But the father did let the son go. He did let the son make his own sinful decisions and then face the terrible consequences. The same was true for Israel. God did indeed come to dwell in His Temple. Like the father from the story, He loved His children unconditionally. Over and over He forgave them. But then there came a day when they finally said, "We don't want you here anymore. We don't want to be your children. We want to do our own thing. Live our own lives. Pursue our own happiness. Chase our own dreams. And they don't include you." So the Father did what they asked. He left His home in their hands. He removed His glorious presence. The result is pain. Suffering. Heartbreak. Such is always the case when we abandon God.

At the same time, Ezekiel sounds a note of hope. Presumably, God could have chosen to leave His Temple and head in any direction. But He went east. East to where the exiles lived. East to Babylon. East to find His wayward children. East to be with them in captivity. East to comfort them in their diaspora. East to provide for them and make them prosper. East to join them so they never would be alone.

Friends, God's glory doesn't need a Temple. A house made with human hands. A sanctuary covered in gold. The Bible declares that we are temples of the Holy Spirit! Our hearts have become the residence of God Himself! This is why Ezekiel declares, "And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God." (Ezekiel 11:19-20) Furthermore, it's why the Apostle Paul will later declare, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16) Because God's Spirit has taken up residence in our hearts, we ourselves are "being transformed into the Christ's image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18) Amazing! The great news of the gospel is that God's glory now lives in us! And this is why we do not take Him for granted or presume upon His grace. Rather we should be deeply humbled by God's willingness to dwell with us and in us and work through us.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 13-15, Hebrews 11:17-40

November 20, 2021

By Faith

Readings for today: Ezekiel 13-15, Hebrews 11:17-40

Some say faith is blind. Some say faith is foolish. Some say faith is an opiate of sorts for the masses. A delusion we are indoctrinated into by religious institutions. That's not how the Bible defines faith. It is a fundamental belief. A conviction that what remains unseen is nonetheless very real. It is an assurance for the future where all our hopes and dreams for eternity will come to pass. It is ultimately a deep and abiding trust in God and His plan for our lives and for our world.

Hebrews 11 is rightly called the "Hall of Fame" of faith. It lists the many heroes and heroines who walked by faith. Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain. Why? Because he offered it in faith. Enoch did not taste death. Why? Because he walked with God. Noah risked it all to build an ark. Why? Because he loved God more than he loved the things of this world. Abraham left home, kindred, and country. He left behind all that was familiar. All that was safe. All that was secure. Why? Because he had his eyes fixed on a better country. A heavenly one. Sarah embraced a miraculous pregnancy in her old age. She carried Isaac to term though the toll on her body must have been enormous. She risked her life to bring the child of promise into the world. Why? Because she knew God was faithful. The list goes on and on. And it's not meant to be exhaustive. It's meant to be illustrative. To encourage those of us who are still fighting the good fight of faith in this world. Who are still sojourning on this earth that is not our home. It's written to encourage those of us who are still seeking a homeland, eternal in the heavens. The place where God dwells.

What does walking by faith look like for you today? In what areas of your life are you being called to trust God? How are you placing your life, your future, your hopes and your dreams into His hands? Are you intentionally seeking to live by faith? Remember, "without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." (Hebrews 11:6) Living by faith requires intentionality. Walking by faith requires self-discipline. It means dying to self every moment of every day. Laying aside the desires of the flesh in favor of the fruit of the Spirit. It means trusting God to reveal His will in His time. It means taking all that we are and all that we have and placing it at God's disposal to use as He sees fit. It means walking with open hands before the Lord, allowing Him to guide and direct our steps.

I can tell you from personal experience there is nothing more exciting and nothing more daunting than following Christ. You end up on these amazing journeys you never thought possible. You have this experiences you never would have imagined. You get taken to the end of your own wisdom and strength and resources again and again as God teaches you to rely on Him. It's not easy. It's often scary. But God is faithful and He delivers on His promises. Make your decision right now to live this day by faith!

Readings for tomorrow: None

November 22, 2021

The Gospel according to Ezekiel

Readings for today: Ezekiel 16-20, Hebrews 12-13

Today's reading isn't easy. But if one can get past the graphic imagery of chapter 16, one will see a compelling picture of the gospel emerge. A gospel that is as much for Israel as it is for the church today. In this chapter, God retells their national story from His point of view. He reminds them of their humble beginnings. Reminds them of His lavish blessings. Reminds them of their great betrayal. Reminds them of His everlasting covenant. This is their story. This is our story. This is the gospel story.

Where does our relationship with God begin? Not with us. We did not choose to love God. We could not choose to love God. No, we were helpless like babes. Abandoned. Left all alone. Stillborn spiritually. It was not our beauty that caught God's eye but our desperation. "And as for your birth, on the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you, but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born. And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!'" (Ezekiel 16:4-6) Out of pure compassion and grace, God adopted us as His own. Brought us into His family. Took us from the field where we had been cast. Bathed us. Fed us. Clothed us. Rocked us. Sang to us. Raised us. "I made you flourish like a plant of the field. And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full adornment. Your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare." (Ezekiel 16:7)

What does our relationship with God look like as it matures? We grow up under His watchful eye and gracious care. When the time is right, God takes us as His bride. He covers our nakedness with the corner of His garment. He makes His vow and covenant with us. He bestows riches and honor and glory on us as befits the bride of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And the whole world marvels at what God has done. Just like the whole world came to see the splendor and glory of Israel. The whole world envied the relationship she had with her God.

But Israel grew proud. She began to believe her own hype. She read her own press clippings. She trusted in her riches and beauty and power and influence. She abandoned her covenant with the Lord and began to serve other gods. God's bride was now playing the whore. She literally took the gifts God had given her and gave them away to idols. Fed them with the bread God provided from His own hands. Things got so bad Israel began sacrificing their innocent children to appease those other bloodthirsty gods. "How sick is your heart, declares the Lord God, because you did all these things, the deeds of a brazen prostitute..." (Ezekiel 16:30)

Therefore God brings judgment on His bride. "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God..." (1 Peter 4:17) God will not spare His bride. In fact, He holds His bride to an even higher standard. Higher than Samaria. Higher than Sodom. "Bear your disgrace, you also, for you have intervened on behalf of your sisters. Because of your sins in which you acted more abominably than they, they are more in the right than you. So be ashamed, you also, and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous." (Ezekiel 16:52) God disciplines those He loves out of a desire to see them cleansed from sin and brought to glory. "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son or daughter whom he receives." (Hebrews 12:5-6) His desire is for His bride to return. To come back to Him. To be faithful and true once more. To remember from whence she came and to

honor her Husband for all He has done. Why? So the world may again marvel at the intimacy of their relationship. So the world may again say, “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?” (Deuteronomy 4:7)

This is why Ezekiel 16 ends with a note of hope. “Yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant...I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the Lord, that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord God." (Ezekiel 16:60, 62-63) God has atoned for His bride. On the cross, He paid for all her sin. He took all her punishment. All her shame. All her self-inflicted degradation on Himself. On the cross, the faithful Husband gave His life for the sake of His bride “so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” (Ephesians 5:27)

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 21, James 1

November 23, 2021

The Problem with Anger

Readings for today: Ezekiel 21, James 1

“For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” (James 1:20)

I still remember when God hit me right between the eyes with this verse. It was several years ago and I was struggling with one of my children. We were locked in perpetual conflict. Every conversation seemed to end in an argument. Our voices would raise. Our bodies would shake. Threats would be made. Things would often spiral out of control. Our relationship was deeply broken. Now I could give you all sorts of reasons why I felt justified in my anger. I could even support my reasons biblically. I am a pastor after all. But none of that mattered when I read these words from James 1:20. I realized I had no excuse. My anger could never be righteous. My justifications - as good as they were - ultimately fell flat in the face of the fact that I was losing my child. Something needed to change. We went to counseling. The Christian counselor asked me a simple question, “Have you ever seen anything positive come from your anger?” It felt like a paraphrase of James 1:20 and it cut me to the heart. From that moment on, I made a commitment to my child that I would do all I could to redirect my anger. To choose a different path. To react in a more positive, more peaceful, more godly way. I repented. I humbled myself before my child. I asked for their forgiveness. And we made a new beginning.

I wish I could tell you I never did get angry again. That is not true. It took some time and a lot of fasting and praying for my heart to change. My reactions by this point in time in my life were pretty ingrained. But as I continued to bring the broken pieces of my heart before the Lord and the broken pieces of my relationship with my child before the Lord, I began to heal. I began to mend. I began to see the fruit of a different approach. One based on grace and acceptance and encouragement and unconditional love. Fast forward several years. My child and I have a great friendship. One built on mutual respect and love. Despite all my fears and anxieties over their future - much of which drove my anger in the first place - they are doing great. They work hard. They are responsible. They are building a great life for themselves. And I am thankful.

One of the great lies circulating through our world today is that human anger can somehow be righteous. We rage against injustice. Rage against abuse. Rage against suffering. Rage against tyranny. It doesn’t matter which side of the political aisle you are on. It doesn’t matter where you fall on the social spectrum. Everyone seems angry these days and I get it. Anger is a powerful emotion. It makes us feel strong and good and righteous. Sadly, it is not sustainable. The adrenaline rush does eventually wear off. We run out of steam. Our pent up energy eventually dissipates leaving us feeling weak and vulnerable. And then we have to face the fallout. The people we’ve hurt along the way. The bodies we’ve left in our wake. The wounds we’ve created as we’ve lashed out. It’s vicious cycle.

How different things would be if we followed the advice of James? What if we were quick to hear? Slow to speak? Slow to anger? What if we obeyed with meekness and humility the Word of God which is able to save our souls? What if we were doers of the Word and not just hearers? What if we practiced what we preached? What if overcame evil with good? Overcame hate with love? Overcame sin with grace? What if we patterned our life after the life of Jesus?

Things have radically changed in my home as a result of me putting away my anger. My children no longer are fearful of dad’s eruption. My wife no longer has to do damage control after dad loses his cool. Our relationships are closer. The bonds of love we share are tighter. Yes, we still make mistakes. Yes, we still have to have hard conversations. Yes, we still have to confront disobedience and enforce

boundaries and there are consequences when the rules are not followed or responsibilities not kept. But by God's grace we are making great progress as we rely on the power of God's love rather than the power of human anger to find our way.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 22-24, James 2

November 24, 2021

Justice

Readings for today: Ezekiel 22-24, James 2

This morning the news came down that the three men who killed Ahmaud Arbery were found guilty of murder. This is a good thing. It is a just and righteous verdict. It gives us yet another reason to hope that we are making progress as a nation when it comes to ending racial discrimination. It also serves as a sober reminder of the work we have yet to do. It's important to keep in mind that without the video being leaked to the media, the suspects might never have been arrested. The trial might never have happened. Justice might never have been done. So there is still much work left to do.

Many years ago, I had the privilege of serving as a volunteer chaplain at New Jersey State Prison. This is the maximum security facility for the state and, at that time, was also the location of death row. (The death penalty has since been abolished in New Jersey.) Most of the inmates had been convicted of some form of violent crime and were serving long sentences as a result. However, as I began to hear their stories and study the data from within the system, it became readily apparent to me that race and socio-economics had a significant and disproportionate influence on the types of charges filed, conviction rates, substance of plea deals, and sentencing outcomes. Those who could hire a private lawyer were far better off than those assigned a public defender. Those who were white were often treated differently than blacks or Latinos. Even adjusting for human error could not account for the disparities within the system. (For those looking for great research on the topic, check out the Equal Justice Initiative led by Bryan Stevenson at https://eji.org.)

What does all this have to do with today's reading? I'm glad you asked. ;-) James begins his second chapter with these words, "My brothers and sisters, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." (James 2:1) He goes on to warn his fellow believers against showing favoritism to the rich and dismissing those who are poor. Catering to the powerful while ignoring the powerless. He reminds them that God Himself identifies with the poor and powerless, including the Jews themselves who were chosen by God when they were slaves in Egypt! "Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?" (James 2:5) Tragically, for too much of our history as a nation, we have tended to let factors like race and economics and gender influence far too many outcomes. We have been guilt of showing partiality to those who are rich and powerful and white and male, giving them the benefit of the doubt. Consider not just the disparities highlighted by the case cited above but sexual abuse cases like the one against Larry Nasser or many Roman Catholic clergy or several high profiled evangelical pastors in recent years. Consider how differently Felicity Huffman was treated when compared to Kelley Williams-Bolar. Huffman is a white, wealthy, and well-known actress who bribed an SAT proctor with $15,000 to illegally change her daughter's answers so she could get into a good college. She got fourteen days in federal prison, a $30,000 fine, and 250 hours of community service. Williams-Bolar used her father's address to redistrict her children to get them into a better public school and was originally sentenced to five years in prison! Yes, her sentence was eventually reduced to ten days in jail and three years probation - thankfully - but the point still remains. We all have natural, sinful tendency to privilege some over others.

So what are we to do? We cling to the gospel. The gospel declares that those who were dead in their trespasses (death penalty) have been made alive through Christ! Those who were once trapped in spiritual poverty have now been made rich in faith and heirs to God's Kingdom! Those who were once defined by their race, gender, or socio-economic status have now become one in Christ Jesus! This is the foundation on which true justice is built and it is the only way forward for the church, for our communities, and for our nation.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 25-26, James 3

November 25, 2021

Watching our Words

Readings for today: Ezekiel 25-26, James 3

"The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, these things ought not to be so." (James 3:6-10)

Reading these words today makes me wonder if James looked into the future and saw the dumpster fire that is social media these days! Everything from our national discourse down to the conversations we have around so many dinner tables only serves to prove James' point about the untamable tongue. How many fires are started by careless words? How much violence is stoked by those who peddle lies? How much damage is done to people and to communities all across our country because some choose to weaponize their words to further their own selfish ends? Indeed the whole body that is America has become stained. Our entire way of life set on fire. So many relationships ended due to the restless evil and deadly poison that is spreading throughout our land. All because we can't seem to tame our tongue. We can't seem to control our words. We refuse to follow grandma's advice, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say it at all."

Sadly, far too many Christians are leading the charge. Rather than submit their words to Christ, they throw gasoline on the dumpster fire that's raging. They speak out of both sides of their mouth. Praising God one minute and cursing those made in the image of God the next. Rather than offer a gentle answer to turn away wrath, they respond in kind and the flames only rise higher. Rather than overcome evil with good, they retaliate with "an eye for an eye" mentality and the fire only burns hotter. Rather than embrace humility and gentleness like our Lord, they feel the need to be prideful and arrogant, rude and abrasive, and the conflagration burns out of control. They are highly critical of everyone but themselves. They sing of God's amazing grace but then refuse to extend it to anyone who might disagree with them. They assume the worst of their opponents and refuse to love their enemies. One might think James had caught wind of it or perhaps this is simply the way Christians have always acted.

My brothers and sisters, these things ought not to be so. The same mouth that praises God should not damn those made in His image. The same mouth that blesses should not curse. Imagine how different our world would be if those who claimed to follow Christ simply took these words to heart? Imagine how different our interactions would be if those who claimed to follow Christ refused to vent their anger and frustration but instead carried it to the Lord? Imagine how different our communities would be if those who claimed to follow Christ seasoned their words with love and grace and joy and peace? Imagine how different your Thanksgiving would be if you simply sought to bless each and every person who came to your home and sat around your table?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 27-28, James 4

November 26, 2021

The Deadly Sin of Pride

Readings for today: Ezekiel 27-28, James 4

One of the besetting sins of humanity is pride. Like Adam, we all want to become our own gods. Human history is replete with example after example of what happens when a person or tribe or nation achieves a certain measure of power, wealth, and privilege. They become proud. Arrogant. They forget God. They ignore God. They replace God. The most megalomaniacal even believe they've become God.

Interestingly enough, those who would be gods almost always fall into the same pattern. They almost always make the same mistake. In an effort to prove their "godliness", they build monuments to themselves. Monuments to their own glory. Monuments that stretch as high as possible, reaching up towards the heavens. Think of the Tower of Babel. Think of the obelisks and images and pyramids of Pharaoh. Think of the temples and palaces and structures archaeologists have discovered all over the world in almost every great culture. Now think of our own time. Think of our own country. Think of how those who would be god build monuments to themselves through social media. Marketing. Advertising. The goal is to have the #1 hit single. The #1 bestseller. The largest, multi-national corporation. The most political influence and clout. They use their resources to self-promote, all in an effort to make their own name great. Pastors and churches are not immune. The goal for many is to draw the largest crowds. Raise the most funds. Build the biggest buildings on sprawling campuses across the country.

Do we not realize the risk we are running here? We who would be great should take heed from the warnings God has given through the prophet Ezekiel to the kings of Tyre. "You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle; and crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you. In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence in your midst, and you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and I destroyed you, O guardian cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. I cast you to the ground; I exposed you before kings, to feast their eyes on you. By the multitude of your iniquities, in the unrighteousness of your trade you profaned your sanctuaries; so I brought fire out from your midst; it consumed you, and I turned you to ashes on the earth in the sight of all who saw you. All who know you among the peoples are appalled at you; you have come to a dreadful end and shall be no more forever." (Ezekiel 28:12-19) Whew. This pride thing is no joke!

I know I've shared this before but it's worth mentioning here again. Several years ago, the Lord spoke to me during a time of prayer. You see, I am as ambitious as the next person. I am as prideful as any. My heart longs for success and recognition. I too would love to see my name in lights. So the Lord confronted me. And He gave me three words to guide the rest of my life…

Obscurity: God has commanded me to labor in obscurity. To be content with where He puts me. He has made it clear that I never seek another position. Never seek another raise. Never seek another opportunity. I am simply to walk with open hands before Him and let Him fill them with whatever He desires for my life.

Anonymity: God has commanded me to embrace anonymity. He has made it clear that I am never to self-promote. Never seek to make my name great. Never seek out recognition or pride of place. I am to spend my life and ministry promoting others above myself and let them have all the credit.

Insignificance: God has commanded me to acknowledge my insignificance. In the grand sweep of God's eternal plan, my contributions are very small. I am not an essential cog in this machine. I am easily replaceable. I am simply one servant among billions who has been called to play a very minor role in God's Kingdom.

Does this mean all my success is evil? Does this mean all the wealth and power and privilege God has granted me is to be despised? Does this mean I should never aspire to anything? Never work hard? Never try my best? Anyone who knows me, knows that cannot be true. The key is motivation. True humility is not thinking more highly of oneself than one ought or less of oneself than one ought. Rather it is thinking of oneself less. Again, it means walking with open hands before the Lord. Letting Him fill them up with His plans for your life.

As I've learned to walk with an open heart before the Lord, it's been amazing to see where He's taken me. Humbling to see what He's entrusted me with. Professionally, I get to be the pastor of an incredible church. I've been given leadership opportunities nationally in my denomination. I am an adjunct faculty member at Denver Seminary. I've been blessed to teach overseas and help lead a revival in the Horn of Africa. Personally, He's taught me how to be a better husband and father. A better friend and neighbor. All of this came to me from God's own hands. I did not seek it out nor was I remotely qualified on paper for most of these positions. God simply moved me like a pawn on His great chessboard as He works out His will for the world. And I am happy and content to play my part.

What about you? Do you find yourself aspiring to greatness? Seeking to achieve all you can? Accumulate all you can? Earn the recognition of your peers? What drives you? What feeds your ambition? Is it the Lord or is it your pride? Heed the words of Ezekiel. Take care lest you follow in the footsteps of Pharaoh. Humble yourself before the Lord and let Him guide your steps.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 29-31, James 5

November 27, 2021

Effective Prayer

Readings for today: Ezekiel 29-31, James 5

“Is any among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” (James 5:13-16)

I’ve been praying about prayer lately. Perhaps it’s because I feel like I’ve fallen into a bit of rut. Perhaps it’s because some of my normal spiritual disciplines have become routine. Perhaps it’s because I find myself running out of words when I pray or simply repeating the same phrases over and over again. Perhaps it’s because the list of people I pray for is long and I don’t want to rush through their names. Whatever the reason, I’ve been asking the Lord to teach me how to pray on a deeper and more intimate level and He is answering my prayer. Here are just a few of the reflections I’ve written down over the last few days…

November 18 - “Prayer is colossal work. It is the nakedness of a soul intent before God - heart and mind and will, answering deep unto deep.” Prayer involves the whole person. Heart, mind, body, and will. It requires each of these facets of a person to intentionally direct themselves towards God. It’s a posture physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. This is the secret to true prayer. It is about orientation. I think of my Muslim friends who orient themselves towards Mecca or my Jewish friends who orient themselves towards Jerusalem. As a Christian, I orient myself towards no earthly city. No earthly place where a Temple once stood. No, I orient myself towards a Person. I fix my soul’s gaze on Christ. He is the fount of heaven from which I drink. He is the bread of heaven on which I feast. He is the joy of heaven which fills my heart. He is the strength of heaven which sustains my life. He is the wisdom of heaven which guides me through life’s challenges. He is the comfort of heaven in the midst of my griefs and losses. No matter where I am, He is there to greet me. No matter what condition I find myself in, He is there to receive me with open arms.

November 23 - Prayer is simply entering into Your presence each morning in the silence and quiet before the noise of the day gets too loud or the demands force me to pick my pace. To stand in that place before You with all the confused business of my life and this world spread out at Your feet. To try and see things as You see them. To try and see the people as You see them. To seek to understand the situations as You understand them. To have compassion. To open my heart to grace. And then to take up the burden once more onto my shoulders, full of confidence that I do not bear the burden alone, and go about my day not really having known what I should pray for but knowing that even as my words fail the Spirit prays for me with groanings too deep for words. This is what it means to pray.

November 25 - Prayer begins by slowing down long enough to truly see people. To listen long enough to truly hear people. To spend enough quality time so others feel valued and of worth. Prayer is attending to the hearts and souls of others. Hearing the words behind the words. Paying attention to body language and what’s being communicated subconsciously as well as consciously. Prayer is spending your day focused on others and then bringing them before Me in the quiet of your office at the end of the day. Keeping them in your mind’s eye with all their hopes and dreams, fears and failures, hurts and confusion, anger and frustration, joys and sorrows, loves and desires as you come into My

presence. Holding them out to Me as I speak blessing and grace and peace over them. I know their needs before you speak them. You do not have to give Me a list. You can simply speak their names and the names of their children and any particular burdens you know they carry before Me and trust Me to meet them right where they are. You can do this not only for the individuals and families you know but also for entire churches and communities and nations. You can hold up the Town of Parker before me. The State of Colorado. The United States. You can hold up before Me the people of Ethiopia and South Sudan and Uganda and Bangladesh and Dominican Republic and North/South Korea and Afghanistan and Bolivia and the many, many other nations you've been and where you have friends doing My work. I am with them in their suffering and heartbreak and I am at work bringing beauty from the brokenness just as I am doing with you.

November 26 - Doug, the challenge of prayer has very little to do with finding the time for it or the space or the quiet or the solitude. It has very little to do with the internal wrestling that ensues when you feel you aren't being heard or your prayers go seemingly unanswered. It has very little to do with the doubts that creep in when you try to make sense of prayer or evaluate it's effectiveness or square it with science. No, the real challenge for you is allowing yourself to be stripped naked before Me. To be strapped in the "prison house of your own life." To sit long enough for all the stuff you try to hide or stuff down deep inside to bubble to the surface. Prayer keeps you honest. Prayer keeps you real. Prayer reminds you that you cannot run from yourself nor from Me. You cannot hide from yourself nor from Me. You cannot ignore yourself nor can you ignore Me. We are linked - you and I - in an eternal relationship. We are locked - you and I - in an eternal dance. So hear my invitation to pray yet again this morning…""Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." (Matt. 7:7) I am always here, waiting for you with open arms.

These are just a few of the thoughts that I've had recently and I believe they are leadings from the Holy Spirit. Ways He is answering as I seek to learn more about how to pray. You see, I want to be a man of prayer. I want to pray righteous prayers. Prayers that are powerful and effective for healing and forgiveness and reconciliation. Prayers for peace and wholeness and shalom. Prayers for my family, my church, my country, and my friends around the world. I want to pray bold prayers. God-sized prayers. Prayers of faith that will move mountains, drive out demons, and bring revival. I want to pray in such a way that the devil trembles and the kingdoms of this world shake. I want to pray such prayers not for my own sake but for the sake of the world God loves so much. Lord, teach me to pray!

Readings for tomorrow: None

November 29, 2021

The Watchman

Readings for today: Ezekiel 32-34, 1 Peter 1-2

Long have I prayed over these words in Ezekiel. What does it mean to be a watchman? To be given God's Word to speak to a specific people in a specific place and time? To be able to look out on the culture at large and see the coming judgment? To speak to it not in anger or outrage but in tenderness and compassion and love? To lay aside my natural prophetic zeal and instead kneel in sackcloth and ashes and weep over the sins of God's people? To plead with them to return to the Lord with their whole hearts?

Ezekiel was a faithful prophet. He understood his call from the Lord clearly. He was to speak God's Word to God's people. Only God's Word. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else. He was to speak God's Word as boldly and clearly as possible. He was to speak with full conviction and hold nothing back. In so doing, he is creating the conditions whereby God's people might respond in repentance and humility. It's important to note that the watchman is not responsible for the results. They are only responsible for the warning they provide. So Ezekiel's success or failure in ministry doesn't ride on how the people respond. Those who listen to his words will be saved. Those who reject his words will be destroyed. Ezekiel will only be held responsible to speak. Truthfully. Honestly. Openly. Transparently. "So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul." (Ezekiel 33:7-9)

At the same time, I imagine Ezekiel loves his people. All good pastors do. We live and die with the decisions we watch people make. We grieve when they fail to turn from sin. We rejoice when we see true life change. We get discouraged when we see spiritual complacency. We get excited when we see someone finally hit rock bottom and turn to Jesus. So the burden of the watchman is a heavy one. And I imagine Ezekiel felt this weight keenly. Especially as he watches God's people respond to the Word of God preached. Some rest in their own self-righteousness. Others turn from their wickedness. The ups and downs of ministry are reflected in these words from Ezekiel 33, "The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness, and the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins. Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die. Again, though I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he shall surely live. "Yet your people say, 'The way of the Lord is not just,' when it is their own way that is not just. When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it. And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by this. Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways." (Ezekiel 33:12-20)

There is nothing worse than seeing God's people choose their own way over God's Way. Nothing more disheartening God's people choosing the path of pride and arrogance and selfishness and greed over the path of humility and surrender and selflessness and generosity. Nothing more discouraging than watching God's people "live their truth" rather than embrace God's Truth. It never ends well. God will not be mocked. He will not bless sin nor will He let us escape the consequences of our actions.

I think about all I see happening in our world today. There is such a lack of compassion and empathy and love towards those who are different than us. The differences may be ethnic. The differences may be economic. The differences may be political. The differences may be social. No matter where the differences lie, we seem to have so little tolerance for one another. Our hearts are extremely hard. And if we let our hearts continue to harden, we will end up expressing only anger and hate both of which are poison to the soul. We must renew our commitment to one another. We must recover our calling to be our brother's and sister's keeper. We must embrace the command God has given us to be watchmen and watchwomen for our families, neighbors, friends, and communities, always speaking His truth in love.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 35-36, 1 Peter 3

November 30, 2021

Refugee Faith

Readings for today: Ezekiel 35-36, 1 Peter 3

It is good for my soul to spend time with refugees. Men and women from other countries who flee violence and persecution. Forced out of their homes for political, social, and religious reasons. They live as aliens and strangers in a new land. Sojourners and exiles in a foreign culture. No matter how long they may live in a place, they never truly adjust. A large part of their heart remains broken by the loss of their homeland. I remember talking with the Anglican Archbishop in Rwanda. His family was forced out of their home when he was very young due to tribal conflict. Through a miraculous series of events, he was able to make his way to America and get an education. He joined a large Christian non-profit and worked his way up to vice-presidential level of the organization. He was successful in every way one could imagine and yet, when the opportunity came to return, he immediately sold all he had and went home. Willingly re-entered poverty. Willingly gave up his comfortable and safe life here in the States to help his country recover from the violence of their recent past. I have another good friend who fled his country after being imprisoned for his faith. He was a teenager when the Communists put in him prison. He made his way across the border into a neighboring country to a refugee camp. He applied for refugee status and came to the US. He has been here for thirty years pastoring a church in Aurora, CO. But his heart longs for his home. He and I go back now to the region of the country where he was born and he is welcomed like a national hero. It's amazing.

In our readings from 1 Peter, Peter addresses his fellow Christians as "elect exiles" living in dispersion throughout the Roman Empire. He addresses them as aliens and sojourners in a foreign land. He calls them to live in radically faithful ways. Rejecting the ways of this world in order to live as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. They are a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9) They are in the world but they are not of the world. The nature of their exile is not easy. They face trials of various kinds. Harsh persecutions. Their faith is under constant assault. Their way of living is strange. The holiness of their conduct sets them continually apart. The core values of their life together - "unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind." (1 Peter 3:8) - make them easy targets. One would think this movement doomed to destruction. How in the world can they survive with no political access or power? No wealthy patronage to protect them? No military might at their disposal to keep them safe? They are scattered across the Roman Empire. They have no Temple. No earthly city to call home. They have no cultural center. Not even a common language. And yet they persevere. They hold fast to their faith. This ragtag group of exiles overcomes the world.

There is no more unlikely story in history than the church of Jesus Christ. And that history continues to be written. In 2019, Pastor Wang Yi of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, China was sentenced to nine years in prison for attempting to subvert the state. He had been arrested a year earlier with 100 of his parishioners. Like the Apostle Paul, he wrote a letter from jail which has been published in its entirety online. I commend it to you. However, here is an excerpt that I believe sums up what it means to embrace an "exilic identity" in this world...

"If I am imprisoned for a long or short period of time, if I can help reduce the authorities' fear of my faith and of my Savior, I am very joyfully willing to help them in this way. But I know that only when I renounce all the wickedness of this persecution against the church and use peaceful means to disobey, will I truly be able to help the souls of the authorities and law enforcement. I hope God uses me, by

means of first losing my personal freedom, to tell those who have deprived me of my personal freedom that there is an authority higher than their authority, and that there is a freedom they cannot restrain, a freedom that fills the church of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. Regardless of what crime the government charges me with, whatever filth they fling at me, as long as this charge is related to my faith, my writings, my comments, and my teachings, it is merely a lie and temptation of demons. I categorically deny it. I will serve my sentence, but I will not serve the law. I will be executed, but I will not plead guilty. Pray that the Lord would use me, that I might take the gospel to them. Moreover, I must point out that persecution against the Lord's church and against all Chinese people who believe in Jesus Christ is the most wicked and the most horrendous evil of Chinese society. This is not only a sin against Christians. It is also a sin against all non-Christians. For the government is brutally and ruthlessly threatening them and hindering them from coming to Jesus. There is no greater wickedness in the world than this. If this regime is one day overthrown by God, it will be for no other reason than God's righteous punishment and revenge for this evil. For on earth, there has only ever been a thousand-year church. There has never been a thousand-year government. There is only eternal faith. There is no eternal power. Those who lock me up will one day be locked up by angels. Those who interrogate me will finally be questioned and judged by Christ. When I think of this, the Lord fills me with a natural compassion and grief toward those who are attempting to and actively imprisoning me. Pray that the Lord would use me, that he would grant me patience and wisdom, that I might take the gospel to them. Separate me from my wife and children, ruin my reputation, destroy my life and my family — the authorities are capable of doing all of these things. However, no one in this world can force me to renounce my faith; no one can make me change my life; and no one can raise me from the dead." ~ Pastor Wang Yi

Friends, if you believe and receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, you are no longer your own. You have a new identity. A new citizenship in a Kingdom that never ends. Your life is hid with Christ on high. This world ceases to have any power over you. You are truly free to live and to love and to serve the lost, the least, even your enemies in the name of Christ. Set your mind and heart on things above and let your conduct be salt and light to those who walk in darkness.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 37-38, 1 Peter 4

December 1, 2021

Can Dry Bones Live?

Readings for today: Ezekiel 37-38, 1 Peter 4

Ezekiel 37 and the valley of dry bones is one of my favorite stories in all the Bible. I love how God uses Ezekiel to literally raise the dead to new life. In a sense, every time I get up to preach this is my prayer. That God would awaken hearts that have become dry. Stale. Still. Dead. And bring new life through the preaching of His Word and the movement of His Spirit.

Of course, the power to raise the dead to new life doesn't come from me. And this is of great comfort! Ezekiel was simply called to prophesy. To speak the words God gave him. This was his act of faith. To declare the goodness and glory of God to a valley full of scattered bones. We never know what season we will be born into. Some are born into seasons of revival where the church is vibrant and growing and seeking the Lord with all its heart. Some are born into seasons where the church is dying and struggling and enslaved to fear and sin. Ezekiel was called to be a prophet in exile. At a time in Israel's life where it seemed all hope had been lost. Their beautiful city had been destroyed. Their Temple raised to the ground. Their land conquered and occupied by foreign invaders. All the promises of God seemed to have come to an end. But in the midst of this national catastrophe, God brings a word of hope through His prophet. Ezekiel prophecies to the dry bones of Israel and a great "rattling" is heard. The scattered bones come together. Muscles and tissue and sinews form. The bodies rise. A great multitude as far as the eye could see. So Ezekiel prophecies again and the Spirit of God begins to blow. The dead bodies come alive! And why does God perform such a miracle? What is His primary aim and goal? Listen to what He tells Ezekiel. "And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord." (Ezekiel 37:13-14)

Now consider our own spiritual condition. The church in Europe and America is dying. For too long, it has tolerated sin. Think of the scandals that have rocked Roman Catholic Church in recent years or the number of influential Protestant pastors whose moral failings have been exposed. Think of the number of churches who have lost sight of their mission as they arguments over musical style or the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. Think of the number of churches who have exchanged the truth of the gospel for the lies of our culture. Think of the number of churches who are closing their doors every day in communities across our country. It is heartbreaking. It can seem hopeless. I close my eyes and it's almost like I can picture the valley filling up with the bones of these formerly great congregations.

Now let's make it personal. As a pastor, I meet so many Christians who are struggling. Suffering. Dying spiritually. Their connection to God is tenuous at best. They've made choices and those choices have taken them far from God. They no longer spend time in His Word. No longer spend time with Him in prayer. No longer gather to worship with His people. Their everyday lives are filled with sinful pursuits they don't even recognize because they do not give God a second thought. Their hearts are not broken by the things that break God's heart. Instead, they spend their lives chasing their own happiness. Fulfilling their own wants and desires. They jump from church to church, never really putting down roots. Never really building authentic community because to do so would require them to die to themselves. It would require them to forgive past hurts. Look past the sins of others. Endure the heartache and pain that is part and parcel of the journey of building deep friendships. The end result of all this is spiritual death. This way of life ends in a valley of dry bones. But thankfully, even there, there is hope! For God can meet us in our valleys just as surely as He met Ezekiel! God can raise us to new

life in these valleys just as surely as He did the people of Israel! With God, hope is never completely lost!

So where does life find you this morning? Are you traveling towards a valley filled with dry bones? Can you feel your spiritual life growing stale and your heart towards God growing cold? Examine your life! Take stock! What sin are you holding onto that is dragging you down? Has God given you new life? Raised you up yet again? Breathed His Spirit into your soul? Awesome! Now who do you need to tell? Over whose life do you need to “prophesy” so that they too might live?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 39-40, 1 Peter 5

December 3, 2021

The Lord's Return

Readings for today: Ezekiel 41-42, 2 Peter 1

I know it may feel like a slog to read through passages like the ones we're in right now in Ezekiel. Basically, we're getting an overview of the blueprints of the new Temple. It's all measurements and dimensions and cubits. It can be hard to understand much less picture in your mind's eye. Why should we care? Well, take a step back. Ezekiel has received a vision of the Lord's return! All this work from the initial vision in chapter forty to the coming of the Lord in chapter forty-three is about the restoration of God's people! It's a glorious promise and it must have filled Ezekiel's heart with hope.

It's hard for us to imagine all the emotions Ezekiel must have felt when he saw the Lord returning to the Temple. The only thing close to it might be watching the memorial being built after the Towers fell in New York City. To visit Ground Zero or see the lights shining on a clear night reminds all of us to never forget what happened on that terrible day. I know I still remember sitting in my car waiting to make a left turn onto Alexander Road from Canal Pointe Blvd as I headed into Princeton for school that morning. Classes were cancelled. Work was suspended. We all watched in horror as the events unfolded. My wife Kristi remembers being at school when the news came down and scrambling to figure out if any of the parents of her kids had been trapped in the towers as they fell. One of my good friends was mobilized as a National Guardsman and spent the next year serving as a chaplain at the site where they took the remains of those who had been killed so they could be identified. The experience was so traumatic for him that he ended up in therapy himself for an additional year. Another friend of mine was serving as the senior pastor of 5th Avenue Presbyterian Church at the time and when the towers fell, he donned his clerical robe, threw open the doors of his sanctuary, and ran out into the streets to usher people into safety. Living in such close proximity to New York meant we knew people personally who experienced the loss of loved ones. Lisa Beamer, whose husband Todd lost his life heroically in the charge to retake Flight 93, went to church literally a few miles away. As terrible as that day was for so many, it is equally if not more powerful to watch our nation memorialize those who fell. Millions visit the memorial and museum each year to pay their respects. It is a powerful witness and testimony to the resilient heart of the American people.

Now multiply 9/11 many times over. Imagine not only the Towers going down but planes flying into the Capitol building in Washington DC or the White House. Imagine tanks rolling down the highways of our country. Imagine bombs being dropped on every major city. Imagine armies burning and destroying everything in their path. Imagine America in ruins. Imagine living in exile in some foreign nation for decades, wondering if you will ever return home. Now imagine a prophet coming to you and laying out the exact dimensions of a new Capitol being built. A new White House. A new Supreme Court building. Imagine that prophet rolling out the blueprints of every national monument and showing them to you. Imagine him telling you a time is coming soon when you will return and America will be reborn. Can you imagine your excitement and joy? The feeling of national pride that would swell in your heart?

"Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory. And the vision I saw was just like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and just like the vision that I had seen by the Chebar canal. And I fell on my face. As the glory of the Lord entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the temple." (Ezekiel 43:1-5) It is

impossible to overstate the joy Ezekiel must have felt as he sees this vision the of the Lord's return. As painful as it was for him to see the Lord leaving the Temple in his earlier visions, it is now equally exciting to witness the Lord's return. God had not forgotten His people! God had not abandoned His promises! God would prove faithful! No wonder he fell on his face!

Life is often hard. There are moments, even seasons, where we feel like everything has come crashing down around us. COVID kills millions. Governments lock down to protect their people. Economies crash. Jobs are lost. Homes go into foreclosure. Relationships break down in divorce. Opioid abuse skyrockets. Someone we love dies. There is so much in this world that brings us pain and heartbreak. It can even feel at times like the Lord has abandoned us. Ridden off on his chariot somewhere far away, never to return. Don't believe the lie! God is faithful! He is true! He is steadfast in His love! He will never forsake or abandon you! He is with you! His glory is your sanctuary and your rearguard! If you walk by faith. If you trust in Him. If you surrender to His will and His ways. He will provide for you. He will restore the years the locusts have eaten. He will rebuild the ruins of your life. He will bring forth new growth and new life from the barren ground. This is His promise and He will never fail!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 43-44, 2 Peter 2

December 4, 2021

Living the Christian Life

Readings for today: Ezekiel 43-44, 2 Peter 2

I am often asked what it means to be a Christian. Is it raising a hand and praying a prayer? Is it participating in confirmation as a young person? Does it have to do with church attendance? Is it an intellectual assent to an idea? Living a particularly moral life? What does it mean to actually be a Christian? I think Peter's words from yesterday sum it up quite well...

"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (2 Peter 1:3-8)

First and foremost, being a Christian involves faith. Faith is having complete confidence that God is able to deliver on His promises. And God has promised that every Christian will be filled with His divine power, be a partaker of His divine nature, and given everything that pertains to life and godliness. In short, we will lack nothing when it comes to living for God. Our hearts will burn with a desire to know Him more. We will love being in worship. Love spending time in prayer. Love studying God's Word. We will love serving those whom God loves. The least and the lost in our world.

Second, being a Christian means actively seeking to align your life with Christ. Submit all you say and do to His Lordship. It means walking in faithful obedience to His Law not because you have to but because you long to. Once we've been saved by grace, we walk in grace. Peter says it clearly. The true Christian will seek to supplement their saving faith with virtue and knowledge and self-control and steadfastness and godliness and brotherly affection. As these things increase in your life, you will bear much fruit for the Kingdom. This requires a diligence and intentionality that often escapes us. The temptations of this world are strong and distract us. We find our hearts pulled in a lot of different directions and too many of us settle for the lowest bar rather than push ourselves to greater heights for the glory of Christ.

Third, Peter offers a sober warning as well. Refusing to follow Christ is serious business. "For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell...if God did not spare the ancient world...when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; if God by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes condemned them to extinction...then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment..." Therefore, we need to take heed lest we, in our pride and arrogance and willful ignorance, refuse to tremble before the glorious ones. We do not want to be counted as "irrational animals", "unsteady souls", "accursed children", "waterless springs", or "mists driven by the storm." (Assorted verses from 2 Peter 2)

Friends, as we draw near to Christmas, we are reminded of the significance of our celebration. Nothing less than salvation is at stake in what God has done in Jesus Christ. Devoting our lives to Him is essential if we are to escape the righteous wrath and judgment of God and gain entrance into God's

Kingdom. As we journey through this season of Advent, I encourage you to take Peter's words to heart, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 1:10-11)

Readings for tomorrow: None

December 6, 2021

Living Water

Readings for today: Ezekiel 45-48, 2 Peter 3, 1 John 1

If you go to the 9/11 memorial today, you will see a memorial pool. Specifically designed by an architect who watched the second plane hit the South Tower from a rooftop on the Lower East Side, he found comfort in the days that followed by the waters of the Hudson River. He also found inspiration. Rejecting any notion of rebuilding on the smoldering ruins, he imagined a scene where a deep void was continually being filled by water. A powerful representation of grief and loss, the memorial pool is a perfect reflection of his vision. As each individual stream flows over the edge of the pool, they join together at the bottom to become one. Constantly emptying. Constantly refilling. Those who visit sense healing in those waters. Hope in those waters. Even while acknowledging the reality of the void.

Ezekiel sees a similar vision. Water flowing from the Temple of God. It begins as a trickle but soon becomes a mighty river, flowing southeast out of Jerusalem towards the Dead Sea. The region around the Sea is a wasteland. A desert. A void. A place where nothing grows. And yet, as the river reaches the sea, this amazing miracle takes place! Trees begin to grow on either side. Their fruit providing food and sustenance to all. Their leaves never wither or fade. The water itself teems with life. Fish of every kind find a home there. As the waters reach the Sea, they bring it from death to life. The saltwater turns fresh and it begins to produce a hundredfold. Yes, there are still reminders of the former days. Still reminders of the death that once reigned here. The marshes and swamps retain their salty character but those simply serve as witnesses to the miracle of resurrection that has taken place!

For the Christian, we recognize the prophetic nature of Ezekiel's vision. Many centuries later, the Apostle Peter will actually stand on the steps of the Temple and preach the gospel for the first time. The Holy Spirit moved powerfully through his words and 3000 gave their lives to Jesus Christ. Along the very stairs where Peter most likely preached are the ceremonial mikvehs where Jewish believers would wash before going into worship. The 3000 who were saved were probably baptized in those very waters! What began as a trickle soon became a mighty river as the Spirit moved in the hearts of those early believers. From 20,000 at the end of the 1st century to over 20 million some two hundred years later to over 3 billion today; the Living Water just gets deeper and wider as it flows!

God is still on the move, friends! Even after all these centuries, lives are still being changed by the gospel! It moves out into the wasteland of our world. Into the darkest places where death reigns. And it brings life. Hope. Joy. Peace. Churches sprout up along its banks, bearing the fruit of the Spirit to sustain the nations. As they seek Christ themselves, they find their leaves never wither. The world itself is renewed. Restored. Redeemed. Where O Death is now thy sting? Where O Death is now thy victory? The Living Water that Christ offers us fills the void! It becomes a spring of water welling up continually in our souls. Healing our hurts. Easing our pain. Comforting our grief. Sustaining us until the day when Christ will come again to wipe away every tear and make all things new.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 1-2, 1 John 2

December 7, 2021

Faithful

Readings for today: Daniel 1-2, 1 John 2

Daniel is one of my favorites. He is a man sold out to God. No matter what life throws at him, he always remains faithful. As a teenager, he was carted off into exile in Babylon. A traumatic, painful experience. Once he arrived in Babylon, he was identified as a young man of promise and removed from his family. Sequestered in the king's household, he began training as a "wise man." Someone who would counsel the king on the most important matters. Someone who would serve the empire and seek to expand its influence and power. One can easily imagine the internal struggle Daniel must have felt. How does he serve God faithfully while counseling some of the great tyrants in history? How does he speak God's truth to a pagan power? How does he maintain his integrity even as he offers wisdom to kings whose egos are often out of control?

The challenges start early. As part of his training, he is presented with unclean food to eat. Right off the bat, he has a choice to make. Will he trust God or will he compromise his convictions? Here it is critical to note how Daniel responds. It will become the pattern for the rest of his life. "But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king." Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see." (Daniel 1:8-13) First and foremost, Daniel resolves to remain faithful to God's Law. He will not eat unclean food. At the same time, he recognizes his convictions put the chief eunuch in a tough position. If Daniel and his friends refuse to eat and start to suffer physically, the eunuch is going to be punished so Daniel comes up with a plan. Essentially, let us do it God's way for ten days and then compare us with the rest of the group. If we don't measure up, we'll do it your way. It's a brilliant approach. Daniel remains faithful to God and he is able to share with the eunuch the reason for his hope. His obvious humility and respect for the people in authority over him - even when they are unbelievers - garners him a great deal of respect in return and raises his standing in the eyes of those he would seek to influence.

Fast forward a few years. Daniel has taken his place among the wise men of Babylon. A decree goes out that all of them are to be killed because no one can interpret the king's dream. "Because of this the king was angry and very furious, and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed. So the decree went out, and the wise men were about to be killed; and they sought Daniel and his companions, to kill them. Then Daniel replied with prudence and discretion to Arioch, the captain of the king's guard, who had gone out to kill the wise men of Babylon." (Daniel 2:12-14) Once again, Daniel demonstrates humility and respect. He asks for an audience with the king. He trusts God to reveal the mystery in prayer. And when given his audience, he testifies to the greatness and power of God and the king humbles himself before him.

A few more years pass. The king grows so insecure he decides to build a monument to himself and demand everyone fall down in worship before it. It's the height of arrogance. Daniel doesn't appear in this story but his colleagues do. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego follow his example. Confronted

with a situation which would force them to break the second commandment, they refuse to bow down in worship and instead remain faithful. The king is furious but the men answer him with grace and truth. "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Daniel 3:16-18) They are thrown into a furnace of fire. The king and his courtiers watch, waiting for them to be consumed. An incredible miracle happens as God Himself appears and delivers them from death. The result is again the humbling of the king. "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God." (Daniel 3:28)

More years pass. More dreams and visions. The king actually goes insane for a period of time. Mysterious handwriting appears on a wall. Nebuchadnezzar gives way to Belshazzar who gives way to Darius. Political power shifts and once again Daniel finds himself put to the test. Now an old man, he has lived his life with great integrity. His political opponents try to dig up dirt on him but can't find any so they attack his faith. The core of who he is. They make it illegal to pray for thirty days. This is old hat for Daniel so he does what he always does. He continued his regular practice of prayer. When arrested, he humbly submitted to the king's injustice, trusting God with his fate. When God delivered him from the lions, Daniel answered the king with humility and respect, giving him the reason for his lifelong hope. "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm." (Daniel 6:21-22)

Daniel is an amazing example of faith to us all. In the way he lives his life, he shows us how to humbly and respectfully engage our increasingly non-Christian world in a faithful way. We do not have to relinquish our faith in Christ to serve in politics or business or education or any other field for that matter. However, holding onto Christ in our hearts means being prepared to give an answer for the hope we have in Him. People will ask. They may wonder why we do the things we do or refuse to act in ways that are dishonest or morally compromised. We may be attacked for our faith at times. Through it all, we are not to respond with violence or anger or fight for our "rights" but instead stand firm with humility and respect. We are not to resort to the underhanded ways of this world to accomplish the will of God. We must not use the ways of this world to achieve the purposes of God. Instead, we must let go and let God act as He chooses. Use us as He pleases. We must place our lives and our future in His hands.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 3-4, 1 John 3

December 8, 2021

Another in the Fire

Readings for today: Daniel 3-4, 1 John 3

As I said yesterday, I love the book of Daniel. I think it's an important book for us to read in this particular cultural moment here in America. Our culture is rapidly cutting ties with it's Judeo-Christian heritage. This has created a moral vacuum that all kinds of secular, humanist theories have rushed in to fill. Formerly shared understandings about gender, sexuality, marriage, and family are all being upended or cast aside. Even professions like medicine, law, accounting, and science are now viewed as fluid and mutable for lack of a common moral framework. And while some important good has emerged like a deeper awareness of systemic injustice especially as it relates to economics and ethnicity, we no longer seem to have the moral resources to find a solution. Every proposal is viewed with deep suspicion because it comes embedded within power structures that are by definition corrupt. The result is chaos. Riots. Violent protests. Anarchy. So what's a Christian to do? How should a Christian respond? What does it look like to live in a thoroughly pagan world where "might makes right" and those in power will go to any lengths to stay in power?

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced similar challenges. They served at the whim of a megalomaniacal emperor who demanded the worship of his people. Nebuchadnezzar is one of history's greatest tyrants. He was initially pagan to the core. Believed himself to be a god. He had a statue of himself built of gold that was 90 feet high. He set it up in a broad plain where everyone could see it. He had scores of musicians ready to call people to worship. At the sound of their instruments, everyone was instructed to fall on their faces before the idol. Those who refused would be burned alive. So how did the three men respond?

First and foremost, they kept faith. They refused to break the First and Second Commandments. They refused to offer any god but Yahweh their devotion and worship. They would not bow down to any graven image or idol. Second, they humbly accepted the consequences of their choices. When Nebuchadnezzar confronts them and threatens them with death, their response is telling…"If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Daniel 3:17-18) They feel no need to fight back. No need to resist. No need to even object. They fully trust God. They place their lives in His hands. Third, they apparently take no credit for the miracle that takes place. When Nebuchadnezzar sees the fourth figure in the furnace and observes that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are not harmed by the flames, he asks them to come out of the furnace. We don't know what they actually said to Nebuchadnezzar but the king's own words surely communicate what he must have heard, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way." Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon." (Daniel 3:28-30)

What a courageous example for us to follow! When faced with the challenges of our current cultural moment, we must resist the temptation to break faith. We too must stand strong in the Lord, trusting Him with our lives. We must accept that keeping faith will result in very real consequences. We may lose jobs or livelihoods. We may lose opportunities or be unjustly treated. We may be personally

attacked or denied certain rights. Who knows? Maybe we'll even eventually face prison for the crime of belief as many of our brothers and sisters do around the world. Rather than compromise or run or even resist, we must embrace the cost of discipleship. We must place our lives in God's hands and trust Him for provision and protection, whether in this life or the next.

A few years back, a great worship tune came out called, "Another in the Fire." I encourage you to give it a listen as you prayerfully reflect on today's reading.

https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=zmNc0L7Ac5c

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 5-6, 1 John 4

December 10, 2021

Strange Visions

Readings for today: Daniel 7-8, 1 John 5

What the book of Daniel is perhaps most famous for are the visions Daniel sees in the night. So much ink has been spilt trying to interpret the meaning of these dreams. Are they historical? Referring to past events and past kingdoms that have come and gone? Do they tell the future? Of a time when the great Enemy will rise and attack God's people? Are they both? Can we learn from what has happened in the past and look for those same signs to take place in the future? And what does it all mean for the Christian in 21st century America? How does it all relate to our daily lives?

I think we often miss the forest for the trees when it comes to reading Scripture. We get so wrapped up in the details. So lost in the weeds. And we lose sight of the overarching message God has for us. Daniel and his people are in exile. They have experienced national trauma on a level we simply cannot grasp or imagine. Their pain and suffering is real and terrible. Their hopes and dreams have been crushed out of existence. Ground under the heel of a merciless pagan empire. Everything they once held dear has been destroyed. These are the circumstances in which God has placed Daniel. He has been a counselor to pagan kings. He has served foreign rulers. He has done all he can to embrace the call God placed on His people back in Jeremiah to "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (Jeremiah 29:7) And he has prospered. He has been given power and authority. He has access and influence. He has wealth and privilege. He is considered one of the greatest wise men the empire has ever produced. But one thing continues to set Daniel apart...his great faith.

Daniel never loses sight of God. Never loses hope in a future restoration where God will act to deliver His people once again. Daniel trusts God. Daniel is faithful to God. At great personal risk, Daniel has demonstrated this faith over and over again. Lions. Fiery furnaces. Under threat of torture and death. Daniel has seen it all and done it all and not only survived but thrived. And now God is again visiting him with visions and dreams. He is showing him the future. Kings and empires will rise and fall. The pain and suffering they inflict will be great. The fear they will engender will cause many to flee. Safety and comfort will be in short supply. But over it all, there is this promise…God is in control! God is on the move! God is bringing human history to a predetermined end with Christ taking His seat in glory and His kingdom shall never end.

"As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened...I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." (Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14) Forget the four great beasts. Forget the visions of lions and eagles and bears. Rams and goats thundering towards one another across the earth. Forget the terrifying beast with ten horns or the little horn with the big mouth. The focus of Daniel's vision is on the One called the Ancient of Days. The One who reigns and rules over it all. Pure as driven snow. Engulfed in holy fire. Tens of thousands at his beck and call. He judges the earth. He judges kings and rulers. He holds all dominion and power in His hand. And He calls to the Son of Man. Out of the clouds of heaven comes

the Christ and He is given all authority on heaven and on earth. All peoples and nations and tribes and tongues shall serve him. His kingdom shall never end. This is the main point of the vision Daniel receives. God letting his beloved prophet know He is not done. There is still hope. There will come a day when Christ shall come and all things shall be set right and made new.

And what happens to us on that great day? Listen to how Daniel describes it, “And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.'” (Daniel 7:27) We get to share in this glory! We get to share in this victory! When Christ comes again in glory, we will be given dominion and power and authority to reign and rule at His side and under His Lordship! There will be no more sin. No more evil. No more crying. No more pain. No more suffering. No more fear. For God Himself will be our God and we shall be His people! This is the great hope of the gospel! The great hope sealed by Christ’s death and resurrection! An empty tomb bears witness! Millions upon millions throughout history all stand to give their testimony! Christ has died! Christ has risen! Christ will come again!

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 9-10, 2 John 1

December 11, 2021

Systemic Sin

Readings for today: Daniel 9-10, 2 John 1

The 16th century poet and priest, John Donne, once wrote these famous words…

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never sent to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

It's a powerful reminder that we are intricately connected. We are part of a larger whole. What I do or do not do impacts those around me. I create ripple effects that I am largely oblivious to but are nonetheless very real. Daniel understood this, of course. And his prayer in chapter nine of our reading today reflects the Biblical truth that we are both individually as well as corporately responsible for sin. He uses the first person plural pronoun throughout. He says things like, "We have sinned and done wrong", "We have not listened to your servants", "All Israel has transgressed your law", and "We have not obeyed your voice." Daniel clearly understands he is part of a larger whole. Part of a larger community of people who are being held accountable for generational sin. He is being punished for things his forefathers did and it is righteous. It is just. It is good. He also doesn't pretend like he's perfect or somehow any different than those who came before him. He confesses his own sin and the ways he has contributed to their current predicament. He is as much to blame as any and acknowledges his own need for God's grace and mercy even as he prays for his people.

This is a hard truth for us to grasp. Especially if one lives in America. We have been raised on the myth that every man or woman is indeed an island. That one's success or failure in life is directly tied to the amount of effort one puts in. And while individual effort is absolutely essential for success, it is not the only factor in play. In fact, it may not even be the biggest factor! Certainly the start one gets in life makes a difference. One's physical and mental health. The stability of one's family of origin. Educational opportunities. Access to resources, especially financial resources, is key. Opportunities to advance in one's career. The elimination of any barriers that might otherwise impede upward mobility. The list goes on and on. Layer in the impact of local, state, and federal laws, social policy, community resources, etc. and I think you get the point. None of us is an island. None of us finds success purely on our own. All of us are part of something larger than ourselves that directly contributes or inhibits our ability to succeed.

Now there are some on the progressive left who want to eliminate personal responsibility altogether. They argue we are NOT responsible for own actions but are simply products of the environment that produces us. So we should not be held accountable. If we are unable to succeed in life, it's because the system is stacked against us. Expectations are thereby lowered. Equity of outcomes must be mandated and enforced. Standards must be eliminated because they are products of oppression. On the flip side, there are some on the conservative right who want to pretend like systemic oppression doesn't exist. They argue everyone is solely responsible for their own actions and all environmental challenges are essentially the same. They resist any attempt at reform. They refuse to acknowledge the structure barriers that do exist. They close their eyes to the many ways standards, outcomes, and standards are culturally bound and influenced. Christians must reject these false binaries. We must embrace the truth of Scripture that we are both personally and corporately responsible for our sin. Like Daniel, we must confess our personal and corporate guilt and ask for God's forgiveness. Furthermore, we must hold

both people and systems accountable. We must work for personal transformation and corporate reformation. We must work for personal holiness and communal/social justice. We must ask the Holy Spirit to help us see the ripples we create with the lives that we lead and do all we can to make sure we are spreading ripples of righteousness and peace.

Ultimately, this goes back to the most ancient of questions…"Am I my brother's keeper?" Am I responsible for my brother or sister and their well-being? Do I have a share in the lives of those around me? Am I aware of the impact I make with the words I say or do not say? The things I do or not do? Have I grasped the full effect of every dollar I spend? Every minute I waste? Every breath I take? The Lord's answer is clear. You are your brother's keeper. You are responsible for your sister. You are part of a larger whole. You are part of His family. You are part of His Body. You are a royal priesthood. A holy nation. A people for God's own possession. And the great news of the gospel is that just as sin and death and guilt and shame entered the world through one man, so did righteousness and grace and peace through the one man, Jesus Christ! He died for all sin. Personal and corporate. Individual and communal. He is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the entire world! Thanks be to God!

Readings for tomorrow: None

December 13, 2021

Spiritual Adultery

Readings for today: Daniel 11-12, Hosea 1-4, 3 John 1, Jude

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 5-6, Revelation 1

December 15, 2021

2nd Advent

Readings for today: Hosea 7-10, Revelation 2

One of the things I love most about reading through the Bible in a Year is getting to December and starting the Book of Revelation. Reading about the 2nd Advent of Christ while we celebrate the 1st Advent seems very appropriate. Even as we celebrate the joy of Jesus' birth, we find our hearts naturally turning towards the Day when He will come again. The great Day of Judgment when the living and the dead are raised. On that Day, heaven and earth come together in consummate glory and the reign of God is established once and for all.

When will it happen? How will it happen? No one really knows and the Book of Revelation is notoriously difficult to decipher and understand. So here are some basic ground rules as you wade into the final book of the Bible. First, it is written by John while in prison on the island of Patmos. In order to get this letter out to the churches, John had to write it in code. The Roman authorities would have screened every piece of communication coming in and out of the prison so John had to be careful. Second, the writing is apocalyptic which is a very specific genre known to many in the ancient world. The fantastic images and visions are hallmarks of this type of literature. Third, the churches John is writing to are under persecution. They are facing the prospect of torture and death on a daily basis. This book is meant to encourage and equip them so they can endure the rough days ahead. Fourth, many different Christians approach this book from many different interpretive angles. There is no one way to read this book and we want to make sure to extend liberty and charity to one another as we go. Wherever you land on the "End Times" theological spectrum, what's most important is that we all agree Jesus will come again.

So let me begin this home stretch with one of my favorite verses..."I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." (Revelation 1:8) God spoke the first Word in creation and God will have the last Word in consummation. He who began all things, will bring them to a close according to His will and good pleasure. God is. This is all we know. This is really all we can say. God stands outside the time and space continuum He created and will remain there looking in until He determines the time is right for His return. As John said in His Gospel, God revealed Himself to the world but the world did not recognize Him. He revealed Himself to His people, His family, and they rejected Him. When He comes again, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. He will leave no doubt. "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen." (Revelation 1:7)

These are important words to reflect on as we begin as are the Spirit's warnings to the seven churches. They provide a good spiritual barometer to help us discern how ready we truly are for Christ's return. Have we abandoned our first love? Are we facing persecution for our faith? What idols do we cling to? What sexual immorality do we engage in? Do we tolerate sin? Are we ambivalent towards the gospel? Is our faith lukewarm at best?

These are important matters for prayer as we close out one year and head into another. What spiritual resolutions will you make in 2022 to grow your relationship with Christ and His church? What commitments will you take on as you seek to serve Christ and make His name known?

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 11-14, Revelation 3

December 16, 2021

Radical Love of God

Readings for today: Hosea 11-14, Revelation 3

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Joel 1-3, Revelation 4

December 17, 2021

Revival

Readings for today: Joel 1-3, Revelation 4

Joel is my favorite “minor prophet” of the Old Testament. Perhaps because I have witnessed firsthand the aftermath of a locust plague. I have been in areas suffering from tremendous drought. Seen the impact of famine. Talked with people whose “seeds shrivel under the clods” and whose “beasts groan” as they search in vain for food. I have prayed for them in their desperation. Cried out to God on their behalf. Fasted, wept, and mourned with them. I have also rejoiced with them when the rains finally came. When their crops flourished in the fields. Their herds grew sleek and fat. I have seen God restore the years the locusts had eaten and it is glorious.

Joel is talking about more than seedtime and harvest, of course. What he really is referring to is spiritual renewal and revival. Israel was languishing. She was struggling both physically and spiritually. The dry and barren wastelands that once were filled with so much life were simply an outward representation of what was taking place in their hearts. They had departed from God. They had left their source of life and were suffering as a result. Joel calls for revival. He calls for God’s people to return to the Lord with their whole hearts. He longs for the day when their spiritual life as a people will be renewed. We see some of the same dynamics in play today. There is a lot of talk in the American church about revival. A lot of prayers ascend asking God to bring renewal. To pour out His Spirit. To bless our nation. To awaken the slumbering hearts of God’s people across our great land. Why then does revival not come? Why does our culture continue it’s rapid descent into chaos? Why is there such a rise in hate and anger and rage? Why is God not answering our prayers?

According to Joel, the answer is quite clear. Repentance always precedes revival. We have not yet come to the end of ourselves. We have not yet exhausted our strength. We still believe on some level that it is up to us and our programs and our resources to bring this revival about. If we could just elect the right person. Just put the right programs in place. Just attend church more often. Just engage with more emotion in worship. We will seemingly do anything and everything to avoid falling on our faces, helpless before the Lord. We will do all we can to avoid acknowledging our failures, putting on sackcloth and ashes. We simply refuse to bow the knee, confess our sins both personal and corporate, and cry out to God. And this is why revival has not and will not come to the American church. We are too puffed up. Too prideful. Too divided. Too rich. Too comfortable. To consumer-driven. We spend more time complaining and arguing about worship styles like music than we do in heartfelt prayer. We spend far too much time guarding our hearts because we’ve been wounded rather than forgiving those who hurt us. We have such little faith and are not willing to put the time and effort into deepening our spiritual lives. I know these are broad generalizations but study after study confirms they are true.

Joel speaks prophetically to the American church. To our church. To my church. To my own heart.

“Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.” (Joel 1:13-14)

“Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who

knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God?” (Joel 2:12-14)

“Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, "Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?” (Joel 2:15-17)

These are challenging words. Joel is unafraid to get in our face. They leave us no room for equivocation. We either accept them or reject them and the consequences of our decision is clear. Reject them to our own peril or accept them and receive God’s promise.

“Be glad, O children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given the early rain for your vindication; he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the latter rain, as before. "The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you.” (Joel 2:23-25)

“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.” (Joel 2:28)

Friends, the answer we keep avoiding is simply this...surrender. Relinquishment. Submission. To God’s will and God’s ways and most importantly, God’s love. Until we do this, we will not see revival come. Repentance is the precondition to revival. Surrender is the precondition to the pouring out of God’s Spirit. We cannot receive from God until we open our hearts and unclench our fists. And this is a process. It’s not something that happens easily. It is a daily decision we make to place ourselves before the Lord. Believe Him for who He is and what He has to say. Bow the knee and obey His commands.

Readings for tomorrow: Amos 1-3, Revelation 5

December 18, 2021

God's Justice

Readings for today: Amos 1-3, Revelation 5

We all want justice. We want those who do evil to get what they deserve. We want those who commit the crime to do the time. No one is above the law. No one should get a pass. It doesn't matter if they are a President or a member of the US Congress. A lawyer or a doctor. A pastor or a priest. Everyone is subject to the governing authorities and all should be held accountable for their actions. We believe this passionately. It's driving so many of our political debates right now. It's the underlying issue at stake in our conversations around race and poverty. Justice is all we seem to talk about these days.

But what about God's justice? What happens when God judges the nations of the earth? How do we feel when we read about God's judgment on Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, the Ammonites, and Moab for the violence and suffering they caused? What do we think when God applies the "eye for an eye" standard against those who transgress His Law? More often than not, we start to backpedal. We start making excuses. We reject God's justice as too harsh and unforgiving. We recoil at the awful and terrible suffering He inflicts. We begin to question His character and ask why He does not show mercy. Why do we have such a problem with God's justice?

I think it's because down deep - in the dark and secret places of our hearts that we don't want to talk about - we all know we are guilty. We all know we are sinful. We all know we make mistakes. We all know we've committed crimes against God and against our fellow human beings every single day. And while we seemingly have no problem crying out for justice against others, we certainly don't want that same standard applied to us. We don't think twice about attacking someone on social media but never want those same guns turned on us. We quickly impugn another person's character, question their motives, and assume the absolute worst of their intentions but we definitely want to be given a break. Shown a little grace. Given a little mercy. In short, we are so quick to judge others but so unwilling to judge ourselves.

The same was true for Israel. They were the people of God. They enjoyed a special relationship with their Creator. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth…" (Amos 3:2) God had chosen them from among the nations of the earth. He had shown them favor. Showered them with blessing. Given them His Law. And God's desire was that they would become a light to the pagan nations that surrounded them. They would serve as His instrument of salvation in the world. But Israel rejected God's Word. They rebelled against God's Law. They betrayed God at every turn. So God lays down His judgment on His own people. It is terrible and swift and complete. They would not escape God's justice.

What was true for the people of Israel was true for the churches of Revelation. What was true for the churches of Revelation remains true for us today. We all stand under God's judgment. We are all subject to God's justice. All of us are guilty. All of us stand condemned. Left on our own with no advocate to speak for us before the Father, all of us would suffer the same fate as the pagan nations that surrounded Israel or the Nicolaitans whom God hated. This is why we need Jesus. The Righteous One who took our place. Stood as our substitute. Took the punishment we deserved. Satisfied the demands of God's justice. Turned aside God's wrath. It is only through faith in Christ that we escape the wrath to come. This is the true message of Christmas. God loving the world so much He sends His only Son to suffer on our behalf. God desiring none to perish so He takes the sin of the world on His own

shoulders. God unwilling to watch the creature made in His image continue their descent into darkness, evil, and pain so He plunges into the depths to rescue. To save. Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Amos 4-9, Revelation 6-7

December 20, 2021

Let Justice Roll Down

Readings for today: Amos 4-9, Revelation 6-7

“For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1 Peter 4:17)

Judgment always begins with God’s people. The people called by God’s name are held to a higher standard. Having been delivered and set free from slavery to sin and death. Having been set apart as God’s treasured possession. Having been chosen as the object of God’s special devotion and love. God expects His people to be a light to the nations. Salt for the earth. A nation of priests interceding constantly on behalf of an unbelieving world. He expects His people to set an example for the nations. He expects them to conduct themselves in accordance with His will and His ways so as to show the nations what life looks like in His kingdom. When they fall short. When they sin. When they follow the ways of this world and take up the tools of oppression, violence, and injustice; God steps in. God will not be mocked nor will He allow His name to be defamed.

Amos is prophesying to the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. This was the golden age for the northern kingdom. Jeroboam II was the most powerful northern king, amassing great wealth and expanding their territory as far as it had ever gone. But there was something rotten at the heart of the kingdom. Injustice. Cruelty. Oppression. Violence. These were the hallmarks of his reign and God was watching. The righteous were sold for silver. The poor for a pair of sandals. Drunkenness. Sexual immorality. Idolatry all were rampant. God had given them multiple opportunities to repent. He had withheld the rain. Sent blight and mildew. Warfare on their borders. But still they didn’t return to the Lord.

Their main transgression was their mistreatment of the poor. “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy...” (Amos 4:1) “Therefore because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him...” (Amos 5:11) “Hear this, you who trample on the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, “When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and sell the chaff of the wheat?” (Amos 8:4-6) Throughout the Scriptures, especially the prophets, God makes it clear that He judges nations primarily based on their treatment of the poor and afflicted. The less fortunate. Those who have the odds stacked against them. Nations that mistreat or refuse to care for the least of these are judged harshly. Those who show compassion and care are blessed.

America claims a Christian heritage. We sing songs asking for God’s blessing on our nation. We talk about a divine calling and how God has shown His favor on us. This can only be true insofar as we walk in obedience to God and serve as a light to the nations. A beacon of compassion and grace and hope for the world. This is why it is essential, for example, to solve crises like the one we face on our southern border in a humane and compassionate way. It’s why we must work for comprehensive immigration reform so that refugees and those seeking asylum can find refuge and safety. It’s why we must not separate children from parents and parents from children. It’s why we cannot accept unfettered or unregulated capitalism. It will grind the poor to dust, leaving them at the mercy of an ultra-Darwinian “rich get richer and poor get poorer” economic model. This is why we cannot accept the political status quo. The brinkmanship that exists between the extremes of both political parties.

The anger. The outrage. The hatred. The rancor. It's literally causing chaos and real lives are being hurt or even lost. This is not a Republican or Democrat issue. There's plenty of blame to go around. This is a gospel issue. A Kingdom of God issue. And we are fooling ourselves if we think we won't have to answer to a higher justice should we fail.

The closing words from Amos 5 are sobering. God says to His people, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:21-24) In essence, God is saying, "My people are saying all the right things. Going through all the right motions. They worship. They praise. They give. But they do not love me with all their hearts. They are not seeking to walk in My ways. Until they do, I will not hear their prayers. I will not accept their offerings. I will not receive their worship. I will not bless their land." May we have the courage to repent. Confess. Seek God's face. Turn from our wicked ways. And re-commit ourselves to the Kingdom of God.

Readings for tomorrow: Obadiah, Jonah 1-3, Revelation 8

December 22, 2021

Dying to Self

Readings for today: Jonah 4, Micah 1-2, Revelation 9

Jonah is a great book. Especially when read in it's historical context. The northern kingdom of Israel has just been destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. They've been scattered to the four winds. Forcibly resettled in new lands. Their way of life gone forever. And now we read of God's prophetic attempt to call those same Assyrians to repentance. Wait a minute?! The Assyrians? Seriously? The same people who terrorized and brutalized God's people? To say Jonah is a reluctant prophet is an understatement. He must have had a tremendously frustrating career. His own people refused to follow the Lord. They kept repeating the same mistakes over and over again. They were unfaithful. They were idolatrous. As a result, God sends the Assyrians to punish them. To drive them to their knees in humility and repentance. When that doesn't work, those same Assyrians become the instrument of God's righteous judgment on His own people. One can only imagine the hatred a man like Jonah would harbor for such people. They are Gentiles. Unbelievers. Unclean. Unworthy of God's grace. But then he receives the call to go and preach the gospel to them. What the heck?!

Jonah is a timely book for us to read as well. Our world is full of hatred and enmity. Social media gives full vent to our anger and rage. Judging others seems to be the order of the day and grace is in short supply. If someone disagrees with you, they are almost sub-human. Worthy only of contempt. They deserve to be unfriended, unfollowed, and publicly shamed. If someone questions you, they become a target. Attacked. Torn down. Their character assassinated. If someone doesn't affirm you, they get cut out of your life almost immediately. It is sad and disheartening and ultimately self-destructive.

Perhaps this is why Jesus calls us to love our enemies. Love humanizes. Love requires grace and forgiveness. Love requires listening and humility. Ultimately, love is selfless. It requires us to die to self in order to live for someone else. It forces us to take a good hard look at ourselves, our motives, our intentions, and lay them aside before engaging others. It celebrates diversity and assumes the best of others. It honors difference and dignifies those who disagree. It is deeply practical. And it should set Christians apart from the rest of the world.

Unfortunately, too many Christians seem to have forgotten this command. They explain it away. Rationalize it. Reject it. And the result is only more pain as the vicious cycle continues. Every Christian should ponder and pray over the closing words of Jonah..."When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:8-11) We need to ask ourselves if we do well to be so angry? So enraged? We need to ask ourselves if we pity those who are like us more than those who are different? Pity those who agree with us more than those who disagree? Pity our friends more than our enemies? Should God not pity Democrats and Republicans? Liberals and conservatives? Whites and blacks? Asians and Latinos? Aboriginal people as well as immigrants? Should God not pity Americans as well as Mexicans? Israelis as well as Palestinians? North as well as South Koreans? Rich as well as poor? Privileged as well as under-privileged? The list is infinite but thankfully so is God's grace.

The way to life is the way of love. And the way of love is the way of sacrifice. We must die so others might live. We must lay down our lives so that others may thrive. We must give our lives away so that others might rise. Friends and enemies alike. Worthy and unworthy alike. This is what it means to follow Jesus. This is what it looks like to have the heart of God.

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 3, Revelation 10

December 23, 2021

The Mystery of God

Readings for today: Micah 3, Revelation 10

Yesterday I ran across a quote from an old preacher who said, “The miracle of Christ coming into the world is God’s guarantee that all His promises will be fulfilled.” I thought about that quote this morning as I read these words from the Book of Revelation. “And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.” (Revelation 10:5-7)

The image is powerful. A mighty angel standing astride the world. One foot on the sea. One foot on the land. Not one square inch of creation is allowed to stand apart. The ripple effect of what he has to say will impact the world. He opens his mouth and his voice thunders. Seven times the earth shakes at the sound of his words. What does the angel say? What do his words portend? We are not given that knowledge. John is not allowed to even write them down. We only know that the angel who delivered them swore by God’s great name that a day would come when the trumpet would sound and all would be revealed and the mystery of God fulfilled.

So what is the mystery of God? Is it a specific timeline of the last days? Is it the name of the Anti-Christ? Is it a roadmap of the future revealed to those who can string together obscure clues found throughout the Scriptures? Despite all the hype you might hear from different preachers who claim a special knowledge of God’s mystery not available to most people, it’s actually none of those things. How do I know? Because it’s referenced several times throughout the New Testament. In Colossians 2:2, the Apostle Paul is praying for the local church and local believers and he says, I want them to “reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery which is Christ.” In Ephesians 3:6-10, Paul describes the mystery as the “unsearchable riches of Christ” which are now proclaimed to the Gentiles. To the Corinthians, he says, “We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God” which is Christ and Him crucified and he describes himself as a “servant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God.” Building on Paul’s testimony, the church throughout her history has proclaimed the “central mystery of our faith” in liturgical worship gatherings…“Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”

Friends, the fundamental mystery foretold by the prophets of old, testified to by the apostles of the New Testament, and proclaimed by the church throughout the last two thousand years is Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else. Christ has come. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ has ascended. Christ will come again. He is the heart of our faith. He is what makes our faith unique. He is hidden wisdom and knowledge of God. He is the power of God veiled in human flesh for all to see. He is the incarnate deity come to dwell with man. He is both the guarantee and fulfillment of the plan of God. In Christ, all the promises of God are Yes and Amen. This is what we celebrate on Christmas Eve every year. He is not a puzzle to put together. He is not a problem to solve. He is not a philosophy to study and understand. We cannot get our minds around Emmanuel. We can only bow before Him in wonder and awe and worship.

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 4-5, Revelation 11

December 24, 2021

Our Heavenly Father

Readings for today: Micah 4-5, Revelation 11

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

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

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

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

Now imagine you aren't talking about millions of people but billions. God has declared His love and adopted into His family children from every tribe, tongue and nation. No longer focused on national Israel, God has created a new Israel. A spiritual Israel. Having raised up children for Himself from the stones as John the Baptist once said. This new Israel is made up of Jew and Gentile alike. Founded on the Twelve Tribes and Twelve Apostles. Governed by the Sermon on the Mount. Guided by the Great Commission. Jesus is Her Lord. Her Messiah. Her King.

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 6-7, Revelation 12

December 25, 2021

Biblical Justice

Readings for today: Micah 6-7, Revelation 12

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

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

We have a choice, you see. Either we will do justice or God will. Either we will follow God’s ways and walk in obedience to God’s commands and live the lives He has created and called us to live or He will judge us for our sins. Friends, our sin impacts the world around us. It may be the people we live with. It may be the neighbors next door. The classmates at school. Co-workers at the office. Even people on the other side of the globe. Every word we say has a chance to give life or take life. Every dollar we spend has a chance to help or to hurt. Every vote we cast is a chance to bring God’s Kingdom a little closer or drive it further away. Every minute of every day is an opportunity to make an eternal difference in this world. Don’t buy it? Check out the studies on the impact of social media on mental health. (https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/blog/centre-mental-health-blog/anxiety-loneliness-fear-missing-out-social-media) Now scroll through your posts from the last week. Are your contributions life-giving or life-stealing? Take a look at your budget or your online check register. Where are your dollars primarily going? Yes, we all have bills to pay. But what about the disposable income? Who’s getting the lion’s share? Most American Christians are giving less now than they did during the Great Depression! (https://www.sharefaith.com/blog/2015/12/facts-christians-tithing) And what about churches? What do they do with the dollars they receive? How many of them actually take those dollars and deploy them into the world to make a difference for the gospel? According to a survey by Christianity Today, most churches only give around 5% to missions outside their doors. (https://www.pnwumc.org/news/how-churches-spend-their-money) Consider your voting record. Do you carefully consider the policy platform of the candidates you vote for or do you simply vote down the party line? Are you an advocate for policies that reflect God’s justice and mercy? Remember, God has entrusted the “dominion” of this world into our hands as human beings. He expects us to pursue justice in alignment with His will so that all creation can flourish under His divine love and care.

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Nahum 1-3, Habakkuk 1-2, Revelation 13-14

December 27, 2021

666

Readings for today: Nahum 1-3, Habakkuk 1-2, Revelation 13-14

“This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.” (Revelation 13:18)

Like a lot of the numbers in the book of Revelation (24 elders, 7 seals, 144,000, 7 heads, 10 horns, etc.), the number 666 has been the subject of quite a bit of controversy. Many attempts have been made through the centuries to identify the person associated with this number. Using the ancient system of gematria where numbers are substituted for letters in the alphabet, interpreters have suggested Nero, Kaiser Wilhelm and Hitler as possibilities. More than 100 names were proposed between 1560 and 1830 in Britain. Popes. Emperors. Other despotic rulers. All of them fall short. None of them fits exactly. So maybe the person is yet to be revealed? Those who take a futurist look at Revelation argue as much.

As someone who takes an “Amillennial” perspective on Revelation, I believe the number to be symbolic. It is actually the number of “sinful incompletion.” A parody of the perfect number - “777” - which is often used to refer to the Trinity. Satan is not very creative. At best, he seeks to mimic everything God is or does in our world. But his ways are always corrupt and therefore always fall short. John is pointing this out by identifying Satan’s work in this world with the number 666. 666 falls short in literally every digit of 777 just as Satan falls short in every possibly way of the glory of God.

One of the reasons so many Christians have found the book of Revelation so compelling over the centuries is because of it’s transcultural relevance. Rather than identifying the Beast with one particular person in history, John uses him as an “archetype” to identify the Satanic systems of our world. Governments. Economies. Military powers. Social systems. All of them are corrupted by sin. All of them are influenced by Satan. All of them fall short of the perfection of God’s Kingdom. All of them bear the “mark of the beast” in this respect and must be rejected in favor of holding fast to Christ. John is encouraging these seven churches who are suffering under the “principalities and powers” of this world to place their hope in the world to come. To place their hope in the One who will rescue them from this present darkness when He coms again to make all things new. At that time, all systems marked by the beast will be destroyed and God will inaugurate His reign and rule over all the earth. 666 will give way to 777 as "the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." (Revelation 11:15)

We still live in a world influenced by Satan. All one has to do is turn on the news to see his corruption on display. Backbreaking poverty. Unjust systems that oppress. Terminal disease. Tragic death. Natural disasters. Violence manifesting itself all over the globe. We live in a scary, sinful world and part of our problem is we don’t take it seriously enough. Thankfully, God does. And there will come a day when every tear will be wiped away. Grief and pain will be no more. The former things of this “666” world will pass away as the “777” world comes.

Readings for tomorrow: Habakkuk 3, Zephaniah 1-3, Haggai 1-2, Revelation 15-16

December 28, 2021

The Call to Humility

Readings for today: Habakkuk 3, Zephaniah 1-3, Haggai 1-2, Revelation 15-16

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 1-6, Revelation 17-18

December 29, 2021

Yahweh Remembers

Readings for today: Zechariah 1-6, Revelation 17-18

Zechariah literally means “Yahweh Remembers.” And it’s an appropriate name when one considers the main message of the book. Despite all that has happened to Israel, Yahweh has not forgotten her. He has not forgotten her in her exile. Not abandoned her to destruction. Not left her for another people. He is still her God and she is still His people. Zechariah most likely returned from exile with his grandfather Iddo and father Berechiah. He came from a lineage of priests and in addition to this leadership mantle, was called by God to serve as a prophet alongside the much older Haggai. Whereas Haggai’s prophetic message had a convicting tone, Zechariah’s was more encouraging.

“Therefore say to them, Thus declares the Lord of hosts: Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts...” (Zechariah 1:3)

“And the Lord answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. So the angel who talked with me said to me, 'Cry out, Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion.” (Zechariah 1:13-14)

“Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Cry out again, Thus says the Lord of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.” (Zechariah 1:16-17)

“Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and livestock in it. And I will be to her a wall of fire all around, declares the Lord, and I will be the glory in her midst.” (Zechariah 2:4-5)

“Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, declares the Lord. And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. And the Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem." (Zechariah 2:10-12)

“And the angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him he said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments...Thus says the Lord of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here.” (Zechariah 3:4, 7)

“Then he said to me, "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain. And he shall bring forward the top stone amid shouts of 'Grace, grace to it!” (Zechariah 4:6-7)

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, "Behold, the man whose name is the Branch: for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne. And there shall be a priest on his throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.” (Zechariah 6:12-13)

These are among the most glorious promises Israel has ever received. They speak of honor and blessing and restoration. They refer to the rebuilding of the Temple. The restoration of the priesthood. The glory of the worship that will once again fill the Lord's house. God is raising up political leaders like Zerubbabel and religious leaders like Joshua to guide and direct God's people to carry out the work God has planned for them. They will again be a light to the nations and will bless the people of the earth. Every obstacle that might rise in their path, God Himself will lay low. Most of all, God's name will once again receive the glory it deserves.

It is easy at times to feel forgotten. It is easy at times to believe God has somehow abandoned us. When we experience pain and hardship. Suffering and struggle. Trials and temptation. It is easy to lose sight of God in the midst of it all. Zechariah reminds us God never forgets. God never abandons or forsakes us. He never leave us on our own. He is always with us. He will complete the work He began in us. He bring to pass the plans He has for us. He never fails. He is always faithful. No matter what you may be facing today, God is with you. The Lord of hosts is on your side. Trust Him. Believe Him. Lean on Him for strength. Remember what He said to Zerubbabel. Not by might. Not by power. But by My Spirit, says the Lord!

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 7-9, Revelation 19

December 30, 2021

New Year's Resolutions

Readings for today: Zechariah 7-9, Revelation 19

What are your resolutions for the coming year? The promises you are making yourself? Is it to eat better? Exercise more regularly? Is it to stop drinking? Stop smoking? Conquer some other addiction in your life? Is it to dream bigger? Start a new business? Launch out on a new career? Is it to try something new? Learn something you never thought you could? Is it to make more time for those you love? Slow down? Simplify? All of these are good. All of them have their place. But what would happen if we challenged ourselves to go deeper? To make our New Year's Resolutions really count?

Listen to these words from the prophet Zechariah…"Thus says the Lord of hosts, render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart." (Zechariah 8:9-10) What would it look like in the coming year if we took these words to heart? How much would our lives change if we clung to the truth over all the lies? Plucked up the courage to be kind and merciful in a world of anger, bitterness, and hate? What if we cared for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, and the poor rather than spending so much time and energy and resources on ourselves? What if we refused to give in to the temptation to tear others down, take revenge, or devise any other kind of evil in our hearts? Imagine for a moment every single Christian in the world committing themselves to these two verses for 2022. Imagine 3 billion people or more truly seeking to live these words out on a daily basis. Do you not think the world would change?

Of course, we have to deal with the reality that we all struggle to keep our resolutions. Studies show four out of five people end up breaking the commitments they make for the new year. Fully one-third barely make it past the first month. Why? Because we are often trying to accomplish these goals through sheer will-power alone. We try to make these changes without help. Without accountability. Without relying on anyone's strength but our own. This is where we always fall short. So where do we go to find the strength we need? I'm glad you asked! ;-) I love the words of the Psalmist, "Don't put your confidence in powerful people (including yourself!); there is no help for you there. When they breathe their last, they return to the earth, and all their plans die with them. But joyful are those who have the God of Israel as their helper, whose hope is in the Lord their God." (Psalms 146:3-5) Friends, God alone can give you the strength to change. He alone can give you the courage to keep your resolutions in the coming year. But they must be aligned with His will. They must be submitted to His way. And we must humbly surrender our lives into His hands.

What does that look like practically? How does that work itself out in our day to day? You've heard me say it before but I will definitely say it again (and again and again and again)…

1) Spend time with God every day. Intentionally place yourself before Him and ask God to help you look at your life and the world around you through His eyes. (In fact, you can sign up with us to read through the Bible again next year! Love to have you join us for yet another run through!)

2) Gather with a local church family in corporate worship each week. Put it on your schedule right now. Before all the activities and opportunities begin to crowd God out. God promises to meet His people wherever two or three or more are gathered in His name.

3) Find a small group of friends to intentionally pursue Jesus with. Pursue relationships of authenticity and transparency and accountability. Deep spiritual friendships don't happen by accident. They require intentionality and sacrifice.

4) Find a place to serve. Inside the church. Outside the church. Both. Find a way to get involved in God's mission to reach the lost and to teach others all He has commanded us as believers. We were created to carry God's image to the ends of the earth. Get in touch with why you were made.

Recently in some devotional reading, I ran across this great quote from 20th century Christian missionary and statesman, Frank Laubach… "If anybody were to ask me how to find God I should say at once, hunt out the deepest need you can find and forget all about your own comfort while you try to meet that need. Talk to God about it and He will meet you there. You will know it." I believe this with all my heart because I have seen and experienced it with my own eyes. When I have gotten engaged in God's mission in the world, I have found Him waiting for me there. My faith grows. My heart breaks. My eyes fill with tears. And I realize God is changing me. Giving me His heart of compassion. His heart of love. His heart of mercy. And I am overwhelmed with deep thankfulness. This thankfulness spills over into my everyday life. I become a better husband and father. A wiser pastor. A more faithful friend.

If you are wondering what you can do in the coming year to "make God your helper", let me encourage the following four spiritual practices…

Don't try to do 2022 on your own! Don't fall for the lie that somehow you are strong enough or bold enough or talented enough or stubborn enough. Surrender to the Lord and He will become your helper. He will be your strength and your courage. He will lift you up and carry you though!

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 10-14, Malachi 1-4, Revelation 20-22

December 31, 2021

Come, Lord Jesus!

Readings for today: Zechariah 10-14, Malachi 1-4, Revelation 20-22

Come, Lord Jesus!" Echoing Paul's famous phrase from 1 Corinthians 16:22 - "Maranatha" - John finishes his Revelation with what has become the heartcry of Christians for centuries. Come, Lord Jesus. Come soon. The vision John received has reached its climax. The new heavens and new earth have come. New Jerusalem has descended out of heaven. God in her midst. The gates are open continually for the nations of the earth to receive their blessing. The leaves of the trees that grow beside the river of God are for their healing. God has wiped away every tear. God has done away with every evil. There is no more crying or suffering or pain. God has made good on every promise. The Alpha has issued the final "Omega." What was once broken is now whole. What was ruined has now been restored. The incomplete has been brought to completion. It is truly finished. All things made new.

The delay of the "parousia" (2nd coming of Jesus) has plagued Christians for centuries. Why does Jesus not return? What is He waiting for? Many Christians have believed He was coming back in their lifetimes. As they looked around at the evil and suffering in their world, they could not imagine things getting worse. Many believed they were seeing the four horsemen of Revelation storming all over the earth bringing war, disease, famine, and death. Such has been the lot of humanity since Cain first slew Abel all those years ago. The Apostles were no different. John, Paul, Peter, along with most of the Christians of the first century, believed Jesus was returning in their lifetimes. It colors some of their advice to the local churches they were writing to. Scholars suggest you can even see Paul grappling with this delay, especially in his correspondence with the Corinthians and Thessalonians.

Why hasn't Jesus returned? Our atheist friends suggest it's because God doesn't exist. The "Father" Jesus so faithfully believed in is a myth. Jesus, as good as He was, made a mistake. Others suggest it's because the work of the church isn't finished. The Great Commission has yet to come to completion. We haven't preached the gospel to every tribe, tongue, and nation so not everyone has had a chance to hear the good news. Still others believe it's because the events of Revelation have yet to come to pass. The anti-Christ has yet to be revealed and as bad as things may be, they will get much worse before the end. To be honest, I have no idea why Jesus hasn't returned and can only assume it's because His plan for this world has yet to reach it's fulfillment. Time doesn't pass for God like it does for us. While we are stuck in "chronological" time. Time as it ticks by. God exists in "Kairos" time. Time outside of time. Special time. Anointed time. The appropriate time. And only God knows where we stand according to His eternal clock.

What we can know for sure is that Jesus promised He would come. No less than three separate times, He affirms this to John in the last chapter of Revelation.

"And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." (Rev. 22:7)

"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (Rev. 22:12-13)

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." (Rev. 22:20)

And what should our response be? To come to Jesus. “The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.” (Revelation 22:17) Don’t miss this! The movement goes both ways. God comes to us, we come to Him. God returns to us, we return to Him. God draws near to us, we draw near to Him. This is the pattern God has set since the first chapters of Genesis and it repeats itself here at the end of Revelation. This is God’s great desire. It is the primary message He’s been preaching through the entire Bible. It is the Word He longs for us to hear and receive and respond to by faith. So trust Him, friends! Accept His invitation! Believe in His name and receive the salvation He offers you by grace!