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July 1, 2023  
**Reluctant Evangelist**

Readings for today: Jonah 1-4      (audio reading)

There may not be a more reluctant and yet more successful evangelist than Jonah. Called by God to preach repentance in the capital city of his mortal enemies, he runs in the opposite direction. (The picture above is from the ancient seaport of Joppa.) In order to bend him to His will, God sends a storm to turn him back. In the midst of the fierce storm, after the sailors have implored their gods for help and done all they can to lighten the load, Jonah is given the opportunity to share his faith with them. Their response? Worship. Sacrifice. Vows. And God stills the waters and calms the seas.

After being vomited up onto dry land by the giant fish, Jonah goes to Nineveh and preaches repentance. What was their response? Worship. Fasting and prayer. Saving faith. And God relented from the disaster He was going to bring onto the city. Was Jonah happy? Not at all. He was enraged. He lost his temper. He yelled at God. “God! I knew it - when I was back home, I knew this was going to happen! That’s why I ran off to Tarshish! I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness! So God, if you won’t kill them, kill me! I’m better off dead!” (Jonah 4:2-3 MSG) Can you imagine the hatred that would drive this kind of response?

Reading Jonah causes us to ponder our own reluctance to evangelize. What is it that keeps us from sharing our faith? Fear? Insecurity? Disobedience? Bias? Prejudice? Hatred? What is it that keeps us from sharing the good news with those who need it so desperately? Most of the people I know are afraid to share because they don’t feel they have enough knowledge of the Bible or the faith. But how much is enough? Isn’t it enough simply to share what God has done for you? What He means to you? Still others are afraid of how the other person might respond. They fear rejection. They fear dismissal. They are afraid of the tension it might create in the relationship. But if we are able to let go of any agendas or need to control others or force our perspective on those around us, are we not then free simply to share how Jesus changed our lives? How His presence fills us with incredible joy and peace and strength? Still others don’t share because of their anger or bitterness or hatred for the other person. Most of the time these feelings are grounded in painful experiences they suffered at the hands of those around them that cause them to withhold. They don’t want those who’ve caused so much pain to come to saving faith. I can understand this perspective. I’ve felt it myself. So did Jonah. And yet God wants all to be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. Even our enemies.

So what answers does Jonah provide? Not much. Even at the end of the book, Jonah is still frustrated and angry and wanting to die. The book ends with a question. A question that remains to be answered by every “Jonah”, every reluctant evangelist, who has come after him. What if God offers mercy instead of judgment to those who are lost? What if God offers forgiveness rather than punishment to those who’ve committed great crimes? What if God takes more pleasure in the repentance of the wicked than He does their destruction? Are we willing to trust Him by sharing our faith?

Readings for tomorrow: None

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July 3, 2023  
Testing God

Readings for today: Amos 1-5      (audio reading)

Violence. Slavery. Rage. Greed. Desecration. These are just a few of the sins of the pagan nations that prompt God's judgment. Rejection. Disobedience. Deceit. Sexual immorality. Mistreatment of the poor. These are just a few of the sins of God's people which God clearly will not overlook. It doesn't matter that Israel and Judah have enjoyed a special relationship with Him for centuries. All the history of God's mighty acts of deliverance on their behalf provides no safety blanket when it comes to sin. Humanity, especially the people of God, have tested God's patience. They have pressed Him too far. As The Message puts it, "I'm hard-pressed - to the breaking point. I'm like a wagon piled high and overloaded, creaking and groaning." (Amos 2:13 MSG)

It's hard for us to imagine God's patience being tested. We tend to think of Him as immutable - unchanging - or impassible - unaffected by emotions. And while these things are true on a certain level, they tend to reflect more Greek philosophy than Biblical theology. The God who reveals Himself in the Bible - and especially through the prophetic books of the Old Testament - is a God who is deeply moved by the actions of His people. He is a God who exists in intimate relationship with them and His heart breaks over and over again at their sin. One can hear the pathos of God throughout our reading today from Amos.

"Out of all the families on the earth, I picked you!" (Amos 3:2a MSG)

"Do two people walk hand in hand if they aren't going to the same place?" (Amos 3:3a MSG)

"In the same way that a shepherd trying to save a lamb from a lion manages to recover just a pair of legs or the scrap of an ear, so will little be saved of the Israelites..." (Amos 3:12 MSG)

Amos presents God's judgment as a kindness. An action by God to bring His people to repentance and back into right relationship with Him. "I'm the One who emptied your pantries...but you never got hungry for Me...I'm the One who stopped the rains...but you never got thirsty for Me...I hit your crops with disease...but you continued to ignore Me...I revisited you with the old Egyptian plagues...but you didn't notice Me...I hit you with earthquake and fire...but you never looked My way...All this I have done to you, Israel, and this is why I have done it." (Amos 4:6-12 MSG) What is it about us that causes such resistance to God and His ways? What is it about us that causes us to fight God every step of the way? Why do we bring such judgment on ourselves rather than turn and embrace Him?

Two reasons. First, we forget God. We forget who it is we are actually dealing with. God is not an idol of our own making. He is no abstract thought or philosophical idea or ethical system of our own creation. "Look who's here: Mountain-shaper! Wind-Maker! He laid out the whole plot before Adam. He brings everything out of nothing, like dawn out of darkness. He strides across the alpine ridges. His name is God, God-of-the-Angel-Armies." (Amos 4:13 MSG) Second, we forget where we live. We live in God's universe. We live under God's rules, like it or not. We live in the world God made. Despite what we may think, we are NOT the masters of our domain. We are NOT the captains of our destinies. We have little, if any, real power or authority. All that we have is given to us by a Will much bigger and greater than our own. "Do you realize where you are? You're in a cosmos star-flung with constellations by God, a world God wakes up each morning and puts to bed each night. God dips water from the

ocean and gives land a drink. God, God-revealed, does all this. And He can destroy it as easily as make it. He can turn this vast wonder into total waste.” (Amos 5:7b-9 MSG)

Now think about your own life. Are you aware of where you are and under whose authority you live? Do you cultivate a deeper awareness of God’s presence in your life? Do you marvel at all He has made the gift it is to live in the universe He has made? Do you intentionally seek to grow your understanding of God’s greatness and glory? Do you intentionally slow down to see the beauty and wonder of a flower or watch a bird in flight or stand to take in waves of grain that grow in the field? Do you ever look up at the night sky and catch your breath in awe at the stars God knows by name? These are the kinds of everyday practices that draw us deeper into relationship with God and set our hearts on the path back to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Amos 6-9

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July 4, 2023  
**The End of Judgment**

Readings for today: Amos 6-9      (audio reading)

Reading from the Message today was like reading something straight out of the headlines of the New York Times or Wall Street Journal. Amos' prophetic words powerfully describe what's happening in our nation today. Listen to them again from Amos 6:3-6...

“Woe to you who are rushing headlong to disaster! Catastrophe is just around the corner! Woe to those who live in luxury and expect everyone else to serve them! Woe to those who live only for today, indifferent to the fate of others! Woe to the playboys, the playgirls, who think life is a party held just for them! Woe to those addicted to feeling good—life without pain! those obsessed with looking good—life without wrinkles! They could not care less about their country going to ruin.”

Greed. Exploitation. Indifference. Indulgence. Unrestrained hedonism. The constant pursuit of the dopamine rush. Obsession with appearance and the fountain of eternal youth. These same sinful attitudes infect our culture today and they represent a clear and present danger to the future of our country. God will not be mocked. He will hand us over to the lusts of our hearts and allow us to suffer the natural consequences of the choices we make. We might as well be “holding a horse race in a field of rocks” or “plowing the sea with oxen.” (Amos 6:12 MSG) We have forgotten God. Even worse, we have specifically rebelled against His will and created design. It won't end well.

So what are God's people to do? What are we to do when we read Amos 7 and the series of visions God gives His prophet, foretelling the destruction of Israel? What are we to do when we see the cutting locust on the horizon? The firestorm that's on it's way? The plumb line God is holding over our nation? We do what Amos did. We pray. We intercede. We call on God to remember His love for His people. We call on God to remember His love for the world. Most of all, we call on God to remember the judgment He poured out on Jesus Christ who died not just for our sins but for the sins of the world. (1 John 2:2) Amos cried out to God. Three times he interceded for the people of Israel. Jacob is so small. Jacob is so weak. He cannot stand the coming judgment. Twice God relented. The third time He brings judgment and it is terrible but leaves Amos with a promise.

“But also on that Judgment Day I will restore David's house that has fallen to pieces. I'll repair the holes in the roof, replace the broken windows, fix it up like new. David's people will be strong again and seize what's left of enemy Edom, plus everyone else under my sovereign judgment.” God's Decree. He will do this. “Yes indeed, it won't be long now.” God's Decree. “Things are going to happen so fast your head will swim, one thing fast on the heels of the other. You won't be able to keep up. Everything will be happening at once—and everywhere you look, blessings! Blessings like wine pouring off the mountains and hills. I'll make everything right again for my people Israel: “They'll rebuild their ruined cities. They'll plant vineyards and drink good wine. They'll work their gardens and eat fresh vegetables. And I'll plant them, plant them on their own land. They'll never again be uprooted from the land I've given them.” God, your God, says so.” (Amos 9:11-15 MSG)

God's judgment is never the last word. It is always a means to the much greater end of restoration, redemption, salvation. God longs for the nations of the earth to turn to Him. God loves every nation on earth. Every people group on earth. Every tribe and tongue and language. This includes our own. The most important thing we can do as God's people, called to live and serve for such a time as this in our nation's history, is pray for our country. Pray for our leaders. Pray for the hearts of our neighbors. Ask God to intervene and bring us to repentance for we, like Jacob, are small and timid and weak and cannot stand the coming judgment.

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 1-5

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July 5, 2023  
**The Pain of Unfaithfulness**

Readings for today: Hosea 1-5      (audio reading)

I've been a pastor for over twenty years and have spent countless hours counseling people through all sorts of painful circumstances and tragic life events. Death. Terminal illness. Addiction. Abuse. Criminal activity. The breakdown of marriages and families. Honestly, I've just about seen it all. One of the worst, in my experience, is helping couples deal with the pain of marital unfaithfulness. There is nothing quite like it. The betrayal of the most intimate relationship one can have in this life cuts a relationship to the heart. The breakdown of trust makes recovery almost impossible. And while with God all things are possible, the burden is too much to bear for most couples and they end up splitting over the affair most of the time.

This is one of the many reasons to read and meditate on the Book of Hosea. In fact, I'd encourage you to read it in the Message version so you catch the full weight of what God is saying to His people through His prophet. Hosea is called to an impossibly shameful life. He is called to marry a prostitute. He is called to give his children horrible names. He is called to live his life publicly in front of Israel with the hope that what he endures will be seen as an analogous to what God is enduring through His covenant with His people. Imagine the pain Hosea has to endure. Imagine the heartbreak he experiences on a daily basis. Imagine the suffering he undergoes as he seeks to serve God with all his heart. Don't let anyone ever tell you again that "God won't give you more than you can handle." Hosea absolutely begs to differ!

And yet, all is not lost in this story. Throughout there are signs of God's great faithfulness even in the face of our great unfaithfulness. Though we abandon God to chase after idols. Though we worship so many other things other than Him. Though we give our heart and our resources to other gods, God will not let us go. He continues to pursue us no matter how many different lovers we take. He continues to search for us on the slave blocks of this life. And when He finds us, He redeems us and brings us back home. Not only that but God promises there is a day coming where "in the very place where they were once named Nobody, they will be named God's Somebody. Everybody in Judah and everybody in Israel will be assembled as one people. They'll choose a single leader. There'll be no stopping them - a great day in Jezreel! Rename your brothers 'God's Somebody!' Rename your sisters 'All Mercy!' (Hosea 1:10-2:1)

Make no mistake, our unfaithfulness to God is painful to Him. It is heartbreaking on levels we cannot begin to understand. The story of the Bible is the greatest love story of all time. It's also the greatest tragedy of all time. It's the story of God's pursuit of a people who reject Him and mock Him and ignore Him and abandon Him. But He never gives up on us. No matter how much pain He endures. No matter how much He suffers. No matter how much heartbreak He must undergo. He will never stop until He wins back the deepest affections of our hearts. That's truly the message of the cross. "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 ESV)

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 6-9

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July 6, 2023  
Turning to God

Readings for today: Hosea 6-9      (audio reading)

I'm convinced there comes a time - or maybe multiple times - in a person's life where they realize their resources are played out. All their strength and wisdom and wealth and power simply are not enough to meet the demands of the moment. I think of a friend of mine who passed away a few years ago. He was the very definition of a "self-made" man. He came from a challenging background. His family was dysfunctional and abusive on so many levels. He worked hard to build a company from the ground up. He was extremely successful and ended up selling it for millions. He traveled the world and had all kinds of "once in a lifetime" experiences. He met all kinds of amazing people along the way. And yet, he had broken relationships with both his kids. Sadly, the patterns of abuse from his family were perpetuated through him. He was a high functioning alcoholic who often verbally assaulted those around him. As he lay dying from complications from the multiple health issues derived from his hedonistic lifestyle, I had the opportunity to share Christ with him. To talk to him about how the life he had worked so hard to build had come crashing down around him and though he lived in a huge home with all the material possessions one could ever want, his resources were simply not enough to save him.

How many of us have come to the same place in our own lives? I remember getting to this place in college when the life I had so carefully constructed came down around me. The facade I projected to the world of self-confidence was really a cover for deep insecurity. All my achievements up to that point were attempts to distract people from what was really happening inside. I was a mess. As smart as I was and as strong as I was and as successful as I was, I was losing ground in a hurry. My life headed on the fast track to nowhere. That's when I met Christ and turned to Him. In our passage today, Hosea looks forward to the day when Israel will return to the Lord. Listen to his words again from Hosea 6:1-3 MSG...

"Come on, let's go back to God. He hurt us, but he'll heal us. He hit us hard, but he'll put us right again. In a couple of days we'll feel better. By the third day he'll have made us brand-new, Alive and on our feet, fit to face him. We're ready to study God, eager for God-knowledge. As sure as dawn breaks, so sure is his daily arrival. He comes as rain comes, as spring rain refreshing the ground."

Come on, let's go back to God. Such beautiful words. They represent the very definition of "repentance." All of us have wandered and gone astray. All of us seek our own way. All of us do what is right in our own eyes. And where does it lead us? Into cul-de-sacs of pain and heartbreak. When we place "Self" on the throne of our lives, we find our appetites insatiable. Our desires uncontrollable. Our passions unquenchable. The result is oppression. Bondage. Slavery. God wants to set us free from "Self" but the only way that happens is if we turn to Him. We must dethrone "Self" and enthrone God if we want to experience the freedom and peace and joy He promises. This is why the Father sent His only Son. To show us the way back home to Him. He didn't want to leave us wandering in the darkness. He didn't want to abandon us to our fates. He refused to rely on random chance or wishful thinking to reclaim His wayward children. Like a good shepherd, He pursued us and pursues us until He finds us and embraces us. Stop running. Stop hiding. Turn to God today.

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 10-14

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July 7, 2023  
**God Knows Best**

Readings for today: Hosea 10-14      (audio reading)

I was talking to one of my children the other day about their future. They are in their mid-twenties and just moved to a new city. They are starting their first real job as a teacher and are looking to make a career of it. They are a bit anxious as you can imagine. They are feeling the pressure to make the right decisions. They wonder how life is going to turn out. I get it. I remember when I was in their position. All the feelings I had when I was getting started came rushing back. Then a few days later I was hanging out with a college buddy. We are both in our fifties now and for the first time in our lives, we can see the horizon of our careers. I happen to be a pastor. He happens to be a business owner. We've both been blessed beyond measure. We have great marriages. Great kids. Great jobs. We derive a lot of meaning and joy from what we do. At the same time, we've also faced significant challenges in our lives. Life has not always been up and to the right. It's been filled with both success and failure and through it all, we've both tried our best to serve the Lord. As we hung out in his pool overlooking a beautiful valley in the hills of California outside Los Angeles, we talked about how we got to where we are today. What was the secret?

Honestly, there isn't one. We simply did our best to follow the words given by the prophet Hosea when he says, "If you want to live well, make sure you understand all of this. If you know what's good for you, you'll learn this inside and out. God's paths get you where you want to go. Right-living people walk them easily; wrong-living people are always tripping and stumbling." (Hosea 14:9 MSG) To be clear, I'm not talking about a "health and wealth" gospel here. These words are just as true for the rich as they are for the poor. Just as true for the powerful as they are for the powerless. Just as true for those who seem to sail through life as they are for those who seem to suffer at every turn. The truth Hosea expresses here is not dependent on circumstances. It's not dependent on the size of one's bank account or the number of degrees on the wall or the neighborhood where one lives or the power and influence one accumulates. It's simply a reflection of the reality that God's ways are better than our ways and His thoughts better than our thoughts. If we seek Him with our whole heart, we will get to where He wants us to go. If we seek Self or any other idol in place of God, we will find ourselves stumbling and stumbling along the way.

God knows best. Such a simple and yet profound truth. If we believe what the Bible reveals about God then we know we can trust Him. He is our Heavenly Father who will not give His children stones when they ask for bread or snakes when they ask for fish. He is merciful and gracious, full of steadfast love and faithfulness. He is Love who lays down His life for us. This is who God is. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, and all-good. All the time. So when this God instructs us, advises us, and gives us commands to follow; we would do well to obey Him because He knows what's best for us. Not just what's best for us in this world but for all eternity. Not just what's best for us in the moment but over the course of a lifetime. He knows where we are going and He knows the best path to get us there. Trust Him. Believe Him. Surrender to Him. Let Him take the wheel of your life and guide you along the way!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 1-4

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July 8, 2023  
A Political Faith

Readings for today: Isaiah 1-4      (audio reading)

“The vision that Isaiah son of Amoz saw regarding Judah and Jerusalem during the times of the kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.” (Isaiah 1:1)

The book of Isaiah begins with a political statement. Everything he says from this point forward (66 chapters!) must be viewed through a distinctly political lens. Uzziah. Jotham. Ahaz. Hezekiah. We know their stories. We’ve just read through their histories in the Kings and Chronicles. We know Uzziah reigned for over fifty years and for the most part remained faithful to God. However, at the end of his life he grew proud and brazenly entered the Temple to offer sacrifices. We know his son, Jotham, reigned for sixteen years and also remained faithful to the Lord but failed to address the nation’s ongoing idolatry on the high places. We know Ahaz reigned for sixteen years and was an evil, faithless king. The entire kingdom suffered under his rule. We know Hezekiah returned to the ways of the Lord, experienced the miracle of healing, but also grew prideful and set his descendants up for disaster when he 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. He sees it all and then offers this Word from the Lord. It is honest. Real. Raw. No holds barred. He confronts. He speaks the truth. He calls out his own people. “Shame! Misguided God-dropouts, staggering under their guilt-baggage, Villainous gang, band of vandals— My people have walked out on me, their God, turned their backs on The Holy of Israel, walked off and never looked back.” (Isaiah 1:4 MSG) “Listen to my Message, you Sodom-schooled leaders. Receive God’s revelation, you Gomorrah-schooled people.” (Isaiah 1:10 MSG) “Jerusalem’s on its last legs. Judah is soon down for the count. Everything people say and do is at cross-purposes with God, a slap in my face.” (Isaiah 3:8 MSG)

At the same time, he offers hope. He calls them to repentance. He begs them to return to the Lord to find grace and healing and mercy. “Go home and wash up. Clean up your act. Sweep your lives clean of your evildoings so I don’t have to look at them any longer. Say no to wrong. Learn to do good. Work for justice. Help the down-and-out. Stand up for the homeless. Go to bat for the defenseless. “Come. Sit down. Let’s argue this out.” This is God’s Message: “If your sins are blood-red, they’ll be snow-white. If they’re red like crimson, they’ll be like wool.” (Isaiah 1:16-18 MSG) He directs their attention to the glorious day of the Lord when all flesh shall witness the appearance of our God. “There’s a day coming when the mountain of God’s House Will be The Mountain— solid, towering over all mountains. All nations will river toward it, people from all over set out for it. They’ll say, “Come, let’s climb God’s Mountain, go to the House of the God of Jacob. He’ll show us the way he works so we can live the way we’re made.” Zion’s the source of the revelation. God’s Message comes from Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 2:2-3 MSG) He calls them back to faithfulness. Back to loyalty. Back to a right relationship with God. “And that’s when God’s Branch will sprout green and lush. The produce of the country will give Israel’s survivors something to be proud of again. Oh, they’ll hold their heads high! Everyone left behind in Zion, all the discards and rejects in Jerusalem, will be reclassified as “holy”—alive and therefore precious. God will give Zion’s women a good bath. He’ll scrub the bloodstained city of its violence and

brutality, purge the place with a firestorm of judgment. Then God will bring back the ancient pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night and mark Mount Zion and everyone in it with his glorious presence, his immense, protective presence, shade from the burning sun and shelter from the driving rain.” (Isaiah 4:2-6 MSG)

Once 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 degradation we see all around us? And yet, 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: None

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July 10, 2023  
The Narrow Way

Readings for today: Isaiah 5-8      (audio reading)

Recently, I've been reading a book by a rabbi named Abraham Joshua Heschel. Rabbi Heschel was one of the foremost rabbi's of the 20th century. Internationally known as a scholar, author, activist, and theologian. He was the professor of ethics and mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary in American and combined both disciplines to create a way of thinking about God and life and humanity that is deeply compelling. In one of the chapters of his famous book, *God in Search of Man*, he charts out the narrow way of what it means to know and follow God in this world.

What is the secret to righteous living according to Heschel? "A truth so universal: God is One. A thought so consoling: He is with us in distress. A responsibility so overwhelming: His name can be desecrated. A map of time: from creation to redemption. Guideposts along the way: the Sabbath Day. An offering: contrition of the heart. A utopia: would that all people were prophets. The insight: humanity lives by faithfulness: his home in time and his substance in deeds. A standard so bold: ye shall be holy. A commandment so daring: love thy neighbor as thyself. A fact so sublime: human and divine pathos can be in accord. And a gift so undeserved: grace and the ability to repent."

Contrast this way with what both the secular and religious worlds have to offer. The secular lives by the creed offered in Isaiah 5:20, "Doom to you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness in place of light and light in place of darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter." Progress looks like regress. Advancement looks like retreat. Transcendence has been traded for degradation. We've exchanged our heavenly aspirations for earthly desires and have crashed harder than cryptocurrency. The same is true for the religious. It's simply the flip side of the coin. Rather than embrace the incomprehensible mysteries of God, we prefer the straight jacket of our theological systems of belief. Rather than embrace the wideness of the love of God, we narrow the field to those who think like us, believe like us, look like us, act like us. Rather than embrace the radical grace of God, we exhaust ourselves trying to earn our salvation through our own effort and wisdom and strength.

God's ways are not our ways. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. His wisdom seems like foolishness to us. A virgin shall conceive a son? You shall call His name Immanuel? God will come to dwell with us? All of us are like Ahaz if we're totally honest. We refuse to believe the words of the prophet because they simply do not fit human logic and defies human categories of understanding. And yet, isn't that the point? God is not like us. God exists on a higher plane. He is infinite and we are finite. He is omniscient and we are limited by what we can know from human experience. He is not bound by the laws of the universe He created nor is He trapped by paradox. This is why prophets like Isaiah fall on their faces before God when they see Him face to face. They simply cannot process all that He is and reveals Himself to be. Thankfully, God is merciful and gracious to us. Rather than striking us down for our sin, He wipes away our guilt and shame with the touch of a coal from His altar. And then He sends us out to proclaim His gospel to the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 9-12

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July 11, 2023  
Messianic Prophecy

Readings for today: Isaiah 9-12      (audio reading)

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.” (Isaiah 9:6-7)

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:1-9)

“In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.” (Isaiah 11:10)

Imagine living in the southern kingdom of Judah and watching in fear as the empire of Assyria rolls through Israel, destroying everything in its path. The people are scattered. The land is plundered. The leaders are killed. Nothing is left. All hope is lost. And you know you're next. It must have been a scary time. A time of national crisis. A time when the people cried out to God.

And God answers. Through the prophet Isaiah, He points His people to a glorious future. Though they walk in darkness, they will see a great light. Though they've been scattered to the four winds, they will be gathered back home. Though they have suffered and struggled, God will redeem them just as He once did when they were in Egypt. In short, God will bring salvation! Deliverance! He will usher in a new age under the reign of His Messiah.

A child shall be born. A son shall be given. Though the House of David has been cut down to a stump, a tender shoot shall emerge. The root of Jesse will stand as a signal for all people. The Messiah will be given all authority. His rule and reign shall be marked by peace and justice and righteousness. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, giving Him wisdom, understanding, counsel, and might. He will lift up the poor and comfort the meek. His faithfulness shall know no end. He will put an end to all crying and suffering and pain. All wars and conflict will cease. Wolf and lamb. Leopard and goat. Calf and lion. Cow and bear. Toddler and cobra. All shall dwell together in peace in the Messiah's kingdom. The Lord of Hosts will do this! He will make this happen! He will bring about salvation!

What a glorious promise! I love how the people respond in Isaiah 12. "You will say in that day: "I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation." With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: "Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted. "Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth. Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." (Isaiah 12:1-6)

Here's the thing...God has fulfilled His promise! Jesus Christ is the Messiah! The child was born! The Son was given! All authority in heaven and on earth entrusted to His hands! He gathered a people to Himself! Jew and Gentile. Slave and free. Rich and poor. Male and female. He tore down the dividing walls of hostility that existed between us and made peace with us and between us by the blood of the cross. You and I no longer have to walk in darkness. We have seen the great light! We no longer have to go thirsty for we draw our water from the wells of salvation! We can live and walk in light of God's Kingdom! As we submit our lives to His Lordship, He brings peace. He brings justice. He brings reconciliation. He covers us with His righteousness. He is faithful to forgive. He is mighty to save. He grants us wisdom and knowledge and understanding. This is the promise of God fulfilled in our lives today!

Once again our world is in turmoil. Once again there is plague and sickness and death and violence and rage all around. Once again our nation faces a crisis. Will we cry out to God? Will we sing? Will we praise? Will we look to God for our salvation?

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 1-4

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July 12, 2023  
Jesus' Way is Better

Readings for today: Micah 1-4      (audio reading)

Everyday I try to read the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. I read Time Magazine and skim the headlines from CNN, FoxNews, and the BBC. I scroll through social media feeds on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. My goal in all this is not to punish myself or to get down or discouraged though I have to process those feelings constantly. No, the goal is to get in touch with real people and their real hopes and dreams, fears and anxieties, pain and suffering. I want to know and understand what's driving our world to ruin and why we choose this path over and over again. As I've pondered these questions and many more, the only conclusion I can come to is the one arrived at by an ancient prophet as he surveyed the world around him.

"All the other people live however they wish, picking and choosing their gods. But we live honoring God, and we're loyal to our God forever and ever." (Micah 4:5 MSG) Micah clearly perceives the contrast between living for God and living for gods. He understands the true cost of idolatry. The death and destruction and despair it invites. He sees the helplessness and hopelessness of a people who live however they wish and who make up their own gods to justify their self-destructive decisions. I see it all the time myself. Every decision every person makes in their life for good or for ill seems rational to them in the moment. Human beings don't make irrational decisions by and large. We make decisions that we believe are best for us even when we are self-deceived. The people Micah is called to prophesy to have chosen to go their own way. Do what is right in their own eyes. They try to make sense of their world by picking and choosing the pagan gods they will follow. Not much has changed. People in our world make similar decisions. They follow similar desires. They try to make sense of their world by picking and choosing the pagan gods of money, sex, power, addiction, you name it. And where does it all lead? To destruction. To self-inflicted pain and suffering. Isolation and loneliness. Heartache and heartbreak.

Thankfully God will not abandon His people. Not in Micah's day. Not in our day. There is a time coming, according to Micah, when all things will be made new. The world will be set right. Every tear will be wiped away. Peace will break out. Justice will become the rule rather than the exception. Listen to how he describes it from Micah 4:1-4, 6-8, "But when all is said and done, God's Temple on the mountain, firmly fixed, will dominate all mountains, towering above surrounding hills. People will stream to it and many nations set out for it, saying, 'Come, let's climb God's mountain. Let's go to the Temple of Jacob's God. He will teach us how to live. We'll know how to live God's way.' True teaching will issue from Zion, God's revelation from Jerusalem. He'll establish justice in the rabble of nations and settle disputes in faraway places. They'll trade in their swords for shovels, their spears for rakes and hoes. Nations will quit fighting each other, quit learning how to kill one another. Each man will sit under his own shade tree, each woman in safety will tend her own garden. God-of-the-Angel-Armies says so, and he means what he says...On that great day," God says, "I will round up all the hurt and homeless, everyone I have bruised or banished. I will transform the battered into a company of the elite. I will make a strong nation out of the long lost, A showcase exhibit of God's rule in action, as I rule from Mount Zion, from here to eternity. 'And you stragglers around Jerusalem, eking out a living in shantytowns: The glory that once was will be again. Jerusalem's daughter will be the kingdom center.'"

The glory that once was will be again. There was a time when human beings lived in glory. We walked in glory. We loved in glory. At the dawn of creation, when God saw everything and it was good,

humanity tilled a garden. We were naked and unashamed. We lived in complete freedom, complete peace, and complete transparency before the Lord and before each other. The echo of this existence still haunts us to this day. We all have a longing deep inside to return to Eden. To recapture the glory that was once our own. God's promise is that we will see that day again if we turn to Him. And He reveals the fulfillment of that promise in the Person of His Son Jesus Christ. The One in whom the fullness of God's glory dwells. And when we place our faith in Jesus, the Spirit comes to reside in us, filling us with His glory once again. This is why the Apostle Paul says, "God has chosen to make known to His saints the glorious riches of this mystery which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Col. 1:27)

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 5-7

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July 13, 2023  
The Cry for Justice

Readings for today: Micah 5-7      (audio reading)

“But He’s already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It’s quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, And don’t take yourself too seriously— take God seriously.” (Micah 6:8 MSG)

There may not be a better verse for our time. Our nation is crying out for justice. Our world stands in desperate need of compassion and 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 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 or take life. Every dollar we spend has a chance to help or 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? Google a few of the studies on the negative impact of social media on mental health. 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. And what about churches? What do they do with the dollars they receive? How many of them actually take those dollars and deploy them locally and globally to make a difference for the gospel? According to surveys by groups like Christianity Today, most churches only give around 5% to missions outside their doors. 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 want God’s Kingdom without the King. Look at some of 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 the human heart is deeply corrupt so even our best intentions get derailed by selfishness and greed. The best policy formations create opportunities for the less scrupulous among us who take advantage of loopholes to abuse the system. We just can’t win for losing which is why we must turn to God. Only He can reform the human heart. Only He can reform the broken human systems of our world.

Thankfully, that's just what God promises to do! If we humbly walk before God. If we commit ourselves to love kindness and mercy. If we passionately pursue justice. God will hear us and forgive us and heal our land. Listen to how Micah ends his prophecy... "Where is the god who can compare with you— wiping the slate clean of guilt, turning a blind eye, a deaf ear, to the past sins of your purged and precious people? You don't nurse your anger and don't stay angry long, for mercy is your specialty. That's what you love most. And compassion is on its way to us. You'll stamp out our wrongdoing. You'll sink our sins to the bottom of the ocean. You'll stay true to your word to Father Jacob and continue the compassion you showed Grandfather Abraham— Everything you promised our ancestors from a long time ago." (Micah 7:18-20 MSG) How amazing is our God? His love is steadfast! His faithfulness never ends! His mercies are new every morning! He is our only hope in this world and the world to come.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 16-17, 2 Chronicles 28

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July 14, 2023  
**Compromise**

Readings for today: 2 Kings 16-17, 2 Chronicles 28      (audio reading)

Compromise comes in many forms. Sometimes it's pragmatic. We compromise with those opposed to us because we know it will bring peace or some other greater good. Sometimes it's political. Part of the problem we're having in our nation today is the inability of our elected officials to come together and compromise to solve our problems. Sometimes it's moral. We compromise our ethical standards to fulfill some sinful, selfish desire. Usually at great cost. Sometimes it's religious and this is where it really gets dangerous because now we're messing with the holiness of God.

Ahaz is under all kinds of pressure. He is being attacked on multiple fronts by his enemies. They are chipping away at his territory and one of them even successfully besieges Jerusalem. In desperation, he reaches out to the most powerful empire in the region - Assyria - and bribes them with gold from the Temple treasury to get them to intervene on his side. They sweep in and achieve a great victory and in the aftermath, Ahaz goes to meet with Tiglath-Pileser who makes a great impression on him. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery and Ahaz comes back to Jerusalem with the goal of shifting the allegiances of his people from Yahweh to the gods of the Assyrians. So he builds a massive altar patterned after the one he saw in Damascus. Creates a whole new liturgy complete with burnt offerings for his people to participate in. He strips the Temple of its former furnishings - the furnishings designed by God - so that all reminders of Yahweh's presence are now removed. And his hope is that by worshipping the gods of the Assyrians, he too will become rich and powerful just like Tiglath-Pileser.

It all sounds so strange and foreign to us until we start to reflect on how often we make the same mistake. A cursory glance at church history reveals how often we compromise biblical truth for the sake of cultural influence. Rather than hold fast to the gospel, we compromise just a little so we can make Christianity a little more palatable to our neighbors. It never works. I think about the number of churches who have radically shifted worship styles over the years in a never-ending search for relevance. Sure, they gather a crowd. Some may even come to saving faith. But discipleship is often a mile-wide and an inch deep. (And this has nothing to do with church size by the way. I've seen large and small churches make this mistake.) I think about the movement in church architecture years ago to remove the cross from sanctuaries and worship centers because of the offense it may cause. Thankfully, that movement was fairly short-lived but it's yet another example of how we can compromise too much if we are not careful and thoughtful and prayerful. Does this mean we should never change? Of course not. God tells us frequently throughout the Scriptures that He is always doing a new thing. Putting new wine in new wineskins. So we have to be attentive to the Spirit. But the Spirit will never contradict Himself. He will not compromise His Word. He will never stop pointing us to Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 13-17

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July 15, 2023  
A Kingdom of Love

Readings for today: Isaiah 13-17      (audio reading)

“Tell us what to do! Help us out! Protect us, hide us! Give the refugees of Moab sanctuary with you. Be a safe place for those on the run from the killing fields. When this is all over, Judah answers, the tyrant toppled, the killing at an end, all signs of these cruelties long gone; a new government of love will be established in the venerable David tradition. A ruler you can depend upon will head this government, a ruler passionate for justice, a ruler quick to set things right.” (Isaiah 16:3-5)

Human beings are fearful creatures. We struggle with anxiety. We do not like feeling insecure. As such, we find ourselves coping in different ways. The great Viennese schools of psychotherapy - all founded by Jewish psychotherapists - suggested human beings deal with fear in one of three ways. Sigmund Freud argued for the “pleasure principle.” Human beings are oriented towards pleasure whether it be sex or drugs or some other activity that helps us escape our fears. The problem is we all know pleasure is fleeting at best and there tends to be a crash when we come down from our “high.” Alfred Adler argued for power. Human beings are oriented towards power in an effort to control their environment so they don’t have to be afraid. After all, if you can eliminate “threats” then perhaps you can eliminate fear. The problem is we all know such a pursuit is futile. History is littered with strong men and dictators and the power-hungry who eventually find themselves overcome by the same forces they unleashed. Viktor Frankl argued for meaning. Human beings are ultimately oriented towards meaning and if one can lay hold of some vision greater than themselves, one can endure just about anything. Forged in the fires of death camps like Auschwitz where all pleasure and power were stripped away, Frankl realized he needed something more. Something deeper to hold onto if he were going to survive without giving into despair or going insane. And while I appreciate Frankl’s approach the most, I think there is yet another approach to consider. The way of yet another Jewish “psychotherapist” - Jesus Himself. It is the way of love.

The words from Isaiah today are powerful. They present a vision that is foreign to us. Alien to the human experience. In our experience, thrones and dominions and kingdoms are founded on power. Authority. Control. It doesn’t matter whether one is talking about monarchies, dictatorships, socialist republics, or democracies. All human governmental institutions are established in power. They are maintained through power. They often come to an end because some other power rises up against them. This is the way of the world and it has been like this since the beginning. Furthermore, those in power tend to become corrupt. They begin using their power to pursue their own selfish ends. They chase pleasure. How else can one explain the rampant financial and sexual and criminal abuses that we so often see from our political leaders? Certainly not all of them succumb to such temptations but it must be hard to resist when so many are trying to curry favor. And, of course, the ones who do find the strength to resist are often successful only because they cling to a higher purpose. A greater meaning to their lives that gives them the strength to overcome.

Isaiah identifies that “higher purpose” for his people. It is love. When a throne is established in God’s love, justice and mercy naturally flow. When a kingdom is founded on God’s love, it becomes a light to the world. A beacon of peace and righteousness and goodness that shines for all to see. This was the whole point of the nation of Israel. To show the world a different way. To be a light to the nations around them. To be a country built on the foundation of righteousness and justice where steadfast love and faithfulness undergirded how they lived. In such a nation, outcasts would find refuge. Enemies would become friends. Widows and orphans would find care. The poor would be lifted up. Oppression

would cease. Destruction would end. Peace would reign. This is a picture of the Kingdom of God and it is what we pray for when we pray the Lord's Prayer together.

Jesus affirms this Kingdom. He came to establish this Kingdom on earth through His life, death, and resurrection. Jesus is love. He is the love of God incarnate. He is the love of God made flesh and blood. And as He lays down His life for us, He defines love for us. It's not a feeling. It's not an attraction. It's not selfish or arrogant or boastful or impatient or unkind. It is self-sacrificing. Self-denying. It always puts the needs of others before itself. It always focuses on the welfare of others before it's own. It is costly. It is a high-risk endeavor. It never loses hope. Never gives into despair. It always endures. It always perseveres. It never fails because Jesus never fails.

Ultimately, a passage like the one we read today points us forward to Jesus. He is the One who gives counsel. Who grants justice. Who shelters the outcast and the fugitive. He is the One who puts an end to all oppression and destruction and brings peace. He establishes His throne from the cross, the place where perfect love and justice meet. He sits on His throne with faithfulness and is always swift to do righteousness and justice. As followers of Christ, we acknowledge Jesus is our King. We acknowledge Jesus as Lord. We acknowledge His authority over our lives. As such, we who are called by His name must align ourselves with His Kingdom. We must seek to incarnate His values in our lives. We must reject the ways of this world. The will to power. The will to pleasure. Even the will to meaning and instead find - in Christ - the will to love.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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**July 17, 2023**  
**The Great Day**

Readings for today: Isaiah 18-22      (audio reading)

“On that Day...” Over and over we read this refrain in Isaiah. It refers to the Day when God will bring an end to all idolatry and injustice. He will break the power of tyrants and oppressors. He will lift up the poor and powerless and seat them at His table alongside the rich and powerful. He will level the playing field. He will assemble all the nations before Him. He will rule over the earth with mercy and grace and compassion. The world will heal. The nations will bow before Him in wonder and awe. There will be no more crying, no more suffering, no more pain. Evil and sin will be vanquished along with death. It’s a beautiful Day and one we all long for down deep inside.

Until that Great Day, we have been given a Great Commission. We’ve been called as God’s people to proclaim this Great News to the nations. And this is not just a New Testament command! Consider these words from today’s reading in Isaiah, “On that Day, more than one city in Egypt will learn to speak the language of faith and promise to follow God-of-the-Angel-Armies. One of these cities will be honored with the title “City of the Sun.” On that Day, there will be a place of worship to God in the center of Egypt and a monument to God at its border. It will show how the God-of-the-Angel-Armies has helped the Egyptians. When they cry out in prayer to God because of oppressors, he’ll send them help, a savior who will keep them safe and take care of them. God will openly show himself to the Egyptians and they’ll get to know him on that Day. They’ll worship him seriously with sacrifices and burnt offerings. They’ll make vows and keep them. God will wound Egypt, first hit and then heal. Egypt will come back to God, and God will listen to their prayers and heal them, heal them from head to toe. On that Day, there will be a highway all the way from Egypt to Assyria: Assyrians will have free range in Egypt and Egyptians in Assyria. No longer rivals, they’ll worship together, Egyptians and Assyrians! On that Day, Israel will take its place alongside Egypt and Assyria, sharing the blessing from the center. God-of-the-Angel-Armies, who blessed Israel, will generously bless them all: “Blessed be Egypt, my people! . . . Blessed be Assyria, work of my hands! . . . Blessed be Israel, my heritage!” (Isaiah 19:18-25 MSG) Can you imagine it? Israel’s greatest enemies gathering with her to worship and bring praise to God! It’s an incredible vision. Assyria and Egypt learning the language of faith. Crying out to God in prayer. Erecting monuments to God in their lands. Taking vows to God and keeping them. Building a highway from Assyria to Egypt so all people can gather together for worship. All the nations of the earth experiencing God’s blessing. This is God’s heart on display and it remains His heart to this day.

God is on a mission, friends. He is on a mission to gather the nations of the earth before His throne in worship. Every tribe. Every tongue. Every ethnicity. Every generation. All will appear before Him. All will bow the knee to Him. All will proclaim Him as Lord and give Him praise. John Piper once said, “Mission exists because worship does not.” Until the Great Day of God comes, God’s mission remains. To proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth. To proclaim the good news to every nation on earth. And God entrusts this mission to His church. To the people called by His name, set apart for His purposes, and empowered by His Spirit. It is not God’s church that has a mission but God’s mission that has a church. (Newbigin) Like Israel before her, the church is called to be a vessel for the good news. A light to the nations and salt to the earth. May we never rest until every person in every village in every nation on the face of the earth hears about Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 23-26

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July 18, 2023  
Honor/Shame

Readings for today: Isaiah 23-26      (audio reading)

I've been reading a lot about honor/shame cultures over the last few years. I'm trying to learn as much as I can since I spend a great deal of time in Africa each year. It's not only helped me understand the cross-cultural ministry context better, it's also helping me understand God better. Consider this passage I ran across 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. What was the great sin of Tyre and Sidon? Two of the great commercial trading centers in the ancient near east? 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. 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. "Danger ahead! God's about to ravish the earth and leave it in ruins, Rip everything out by the roots and send everyone scurrying: priests and laypeople alike, owners and workers alike, celebrities and nobodies alike, buyers and sellers alike, bankers and beggars alike, the haves and have-nots alike. The landscape will be a moonscape, totally wasted. And why? Because God says so. He's issued the orders." (Isaiah 24:1-3 MSG) 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. "But there are some who will break into glad song. Out of the west they'll shout of God's majesty. Yes, from the east God's glory will ascend. Every island of the sea will broadcast God's fame, the fame of the God of Israel. From the four winds and the seven seas we hear the singing: "All praise to the Righteous One!" (Isaiah 24:14 MSG)

Human beings were made for one glorious purpose...to bring honor to their Creator. To enjoy God and to worship Him alone 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! Amen." (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: 2 Kings 18:1-8, 2 Chronicles 29-31, Psalm 48

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July 19, 2023  
**The Power of Worship**

Readings for today: 2 Kings 18:1-8, 2 Chronicles 29-31, Psalm 48      (audio reading)

There is nothing like true worship. Worship that is Spirit-filled, Christ-centered, and focused solely on God. There is nothing like gathering with God's people in worship. There is something powerful that takes place when we get together to worship and offer ourselves as living sacrifices back to God. We're moved to tears. We dance and laugh and rejoice. Our vision of the world and those around us is stretched and expanded. Our relationships deepen as we focus more on others than we do ourselves. Our hearts are opened in ways we could not have imagined. We come face to face with who we are and the reality of our sin and at the same time, are overwhelmed by the grace of God. We get in touch with the deepest love we can possibly experience...the love of God. We are reminded of our core identity...our identity in Christ. We are filled to overflowing by the presence of God through His Spirit. It's amazing and awe-inspiring and it's why we fall to our knees in humble adoration.

I love the picture of true worship from our reading in Scripture today. It's a powerful reminder that every generation is an opportunity for revival. No matter how dark things have been, God is always at work drawing His people back to Himself. As evil as Ahaz was, his son Hezekiah is cut from a different cloth. He moves in the opposite direction of his father. He steps out in faith. Cleanses the Temple. Restores the Levites. Leads God's people in true worship. I love how the author of 2 Kings describes him, "Hezekiah put his whole trust in the God of Israel. There was no king quite like him, either before or after. He held fast to God—never loosened his grip—and obeyed to the letter everything God had commanded Moses. And God, for his part, held fast to him through all his adventures." (2 Kings 18:5-6 MSG) And how did the author of 2 Kings know this about Hezekiah? What clued him in? It was the vision Hezekiah cast as he began his reign. A vision not for military might or the expansion of the empire or an economic boom but a vision for the restoration of worship in Judah and Israel. "I have decided to make a covenant with the God of Israel and turn history around so that God will no longer be angry with us. Children, don't drag your feet in this! God has chosen you to take your place before him to serve in conducting and leading worship—this is your life work; make sure you do it and do it well." (2 Chronicles 29:10-11 MSG)

I have made a covenant with God to turn history around...what an audacious dream! What a heavenly vision! Only God could accomplish what Hezekiah proposed and that's exactly what happens! Hezekiah places himself and his people and the future of his empire in God's hands and God responds by pouring out His blessings. It reminds me of something a great friend of mine likes to say, "If you take care of the things God cares about, God will take care of the things you care about." And what does God care most about? His glory. The worship of His people. Gathering the lost and least of these so that they too can hear and receive and believe the good news. That's why Hezekiah sends out evangelists throughout the land to call God's people back for Passover. He wants the whole nation to stand before the throne of God in worship and adoration and praise. Is this our heart as well? Is this our heart for our families, friends, neighbors, and co-workers? Is this our heart even for the strangers we meet on the street or the enemies we may have made along the way in life? Take some time today and ask the Spirit fill you with His love for His people. Both the lost and found. The broken and the whole. The hurting and the healed. Then step out in faith and invite them to join you for worship!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 27-30

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**July 20, 2023**  
**The True Vine**

Readings for today: Isaiah 27-30      (audio reading)

“I am the vine and you are the branches.” That’s the first thought that came to mind when I read our passage for today. Take a step back and one can easily see how Jesus draws on the imagery of the Old Testament when He teaches His disciples. He’s not just making it up. He’s taking them back to their history. Back to the sacred words of the prophets. Infusing new and fresh meaning in ancient words of revelation.

In the midst of all the fire and judgment, Isaiah looks forward to a day when God will plant a fine vineyard. He will tend it Himself, refusing to trust the work to another. He will watch over it, refusing to trust her safety to another. He will protect it and provide for it. He will cultivate it and nurture it. Even when weeds spring up, God will simply pull them up and burn them so the vine stays healthy and strong. This vine will cling to God. She will find her life in God. She will hold onto God all her days. Listen to how the Message version describes it,

“At that same time, a fine vineyard will appear. There’s something to sing about! I, God, tend it. I keep it well-watered. I keep careful watch over it so that no one can damage it. I’m not angry. I care. Even if it gives me thistles and thornbushes, I’ll just pull them out and burn them up. Let that vine cling to me for safety, let it find a good and whole life with me, let it hold on for a good and whole life.” The days are coming when Jacob shall put down roots, Israel blossom and grow fresh branches, and fill the world with its fruit.” (Isaiah 27:2-6 MSG)

Why does Isaiah use the image of a vineyard? And why will Jesus lift this image up when He could have chosen so many others? I think it has to do with the last sentence, verse six from the above passage. Vineyards are planted for one purpose...to produce fruit. They are cultivated to produce the finest of grapes which, in turn, produces the finest of wines. The goal of the vineyard is not to keep the fruit to itself. The goal of the owner of the vineyard is not to keep all the grapes to himself. No, the goal is to fill the world with what the vineyard produces. Fill the earth with beautiful grapes and fine wines so that all might taste and see how good is the vineyard of God. Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.” In other words, if you cling to Me, if you find your whole life in Me, if you hold onto Me alone for a good and whole life; you will bear much fruit. You will fill your home, your neighborhood, your place of work, your school, your city, your nation, and even the world with your fruit. Cling to the True Vine, friends. Cling to Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 31-35

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July 21, 2023  
Escape Routes

Readings for today: Isaiah 31-35      (audio reading)

Last summer I spent some time in Jordan. While I was there, we went to a Greek Orthodox Church with a famous mosaic on the floor. It's a map of the trade routes of the ancient Middle East. Part of the map was destroyed by earthquakes that have hit this region. Other parts were carried off by pilgrims over the centuries. Most of the map remains and it essentially shows the King's Highway from the Sea of Galilee through the Dead Sea down into the Red Sea. It highlights significant cities along the way like Hebron, Jericho, Bethlehem, and especially Jerusalem which is where almost all caravans in the ancient world were headed. It also highlights the many Byzantine churches that had been built in the region, giving travelers a road map that would help them find places for food and rest and especially water along the way. It's truly an amazing sight and one of the many reasons Christians should take the time to visit Jordan.

I thought of the map when I read today's text. I've always wondered why Israel would ever be tempted to flee to Egypt. Why go back to the nation that enslaved them? Why go back and seek help from a regime that had brutally oppressed them for hundreds of years? Why place your life at risk by undertaking a hard journey through the desert wilderness? Well, when one looks at the map, it becomes relatively clear. Caravans often made their way up from Egypt to Syria along the King's Highway. This was a well-traveled road filled with all kinds of people from all kinds of different tribes and nations. When the other nations were defeated or faced a grave threat, they fled north or south depending on where the threat was coming from. In short, Israel was simply following in the same footsteps as the nations around them. Flying to Egypt to escape the Assyrian invasion would have made perfect sense to an ancient person living in the Middle East at the time.

But God wanted something different. God wanted His people to trust in Him. God wanted His people to look to the Holy One of Israel for their salvation rather than the pharaohs of Egypt. God wanted His people to consult Him before making any decisions rather than trust in the common wisdom of the day. The Egyptians are just men. They are not gods. Their horses are flesh not spirit. Their military might is nothing compared to the might of God. The only one who can save Israel from the wrath of the Assyrian army is the Lord of hosts.

"Assyrians will fall dead, killed by a sword-thrust but not by a soldier, laid low by a sword not swung by a mortal. Assyrians will run from that sword, run for their lives, and their prize young men made slaves. Terrorized, that rock-solid people will fall to pieces, their leaders scatter hysterically." God's Decree on Assyria. His fire blazes in Zion, his furnace burns hot in Jerusalem." (Isaiah 31:8-9 MSG)

What was true for God's people back then remains true for God's people today. Only God can deliver us from the struggles and trials we face. Only God can protect us from the evil one who prowls about looking to devour and destroy. Only God can deliver us from sin and death and it is to Him we must turn. We must learn to seek God again. Not just on our own but when we are together. Worship. Bible studies. Small groups. Leadership meetings. All present opportunities to seek the Lord as a community of believers. And the promise of God is sure. If we seek God with all our hearts, He will make Himself known to us. We will experience Him in a powerful way. And He will give us the strength to stand firm when the storms of life come.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 36-37, 2 Kings 18:9-37, 2 Kings 19, 2 Chronicles 32:1-23, Psalm 76

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July 22, 2023  
Empty Threats

Readings for today: Isaiah 36-37, 2 Kings 18:9-37, 2 Kings 19, 2 Chronicles 32:1-23, Psalm 76  
(audio reading)

Last summer, I was blessed to visit the ancient city of Amman. At the center of the city is the citadel whose history traces back to the Bronze Age (3300-1200BC). Over the years, archaeologists have uncovered a ton of information about the city, including the fact that it has been conquered several times. The Persians, Greeks, Nabateans, Romans, Byzantines, Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids, Ayyubids, Mamelukes, and Ottomans all had their day. Every time a new empire would sweep in, they would often raze the city to the ground and rebuild on top of it. They would establish their dominance by repurposing important, often sacred structures like churches, as storage rooms or stables or trash dumps. It's fascinating to walk through the ancient streets and think about all the different tribes and nations that called this place their home.

It also gives you a sense of the threat Hezekiah was facing when the Assyrian army invaded. They had just wiped out Israel to the north. Now they were moving south with designs to end up in Egypt. Assyria seemed unstoppable. They had crushed nation after nation. Forcibly uprooting the populace and sending them into exile. Their war machine was brutal. They left nothing but complete destruction in their wake. They believed they were following a sacred call. Destroying god after god to demonstrate the supremacy of their own god, Nisroch. Not only that but Judah was weak. She could barely seat an army of a couple of thousand. She had no chance against an army that was almost 100 times her size. Resistance seemed futile. Their fate sealed. All hope lost. But Hezekiah turned to the Lord. He called on God to hear the mockery of the Assyrians. He called on God for deliverance and salvation. He called on God to make His name known by destroying the most powerful nation on earth at the time. And God hears Hezekiah's prayers. God responds to Hezekiah's cries. He sends His avenging angel to strike down the Assyrians. He sent Sennacherib back home in disgrace where he is assassinated by his own children.

The Lord makes all human threats empty. No empire - no matter how mighty and strong - can defeat Him. No weapon that is fashioned against Him shall stand. No king or emperor can aspire to ascend His throne. God will brook no rivals. God will allow no pretenders. God will not be mocked. Not by any human being, great or small. Listen to how God Himself describes it in Isaiah 37:23-29, "Who do you think you've been mocking and reviling all these years? Who do you think you've been jeering and treating with such utter contempt all these years? The Holy of Israel! You've used your servants to mock the Master. You've bragged, 'With my fleet of chariots I've gone to the highest mountain ranges, penetrated the far reaches of Lebanon, Chopped down its giant cedars, its finest cypresses. I conquered its highest peak, explored its deepest forest. I dug wells and drank my fill. I emptied the famous rivers of Egypt with one kick of my foot.'" "Haven't you gotten the news that I've been behind this all along? This is a longstanding plan of mine and I'm just now making it happen, using you to devastate strong cities, turning them into piles of rubble and leaving their citizens helpless, bewildered, and confused, drooping like unwatered plants, stunted like withered seedlings. 'I know all about your pretentious poses, your self-important comings and goings, and, yes, the tantrums you throw against me. Because of all your wild raging against me, your unbridled arrogance that I keep hearing of, I'll put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth. I'll show you who's boss. I'll turn you around and take you back to where you came from.'"

Friends, greater is He that lives in you than is in the world. With God at your side, you can stand against a legion. You can leap over a wall. The next time you feel anxious or afraid. The next time you feel isolated and alone. The next time you start to doubt the provision and protection and power and promise of God, read Psalms 18. Claim David's words as your own. Let them fill you with peace and a deep sense of security. God is on your side!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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July 24, 2023  
**The Hope of the Resurrection**

Readings for today: Isaiah 38-39, 2 Kings 20:1-21, 2 Chronicles 32:24-33 (audio reading)

One of the things that's difficult to keep in mind when we read the Bible is that we are looking at things through the lens of resurrection. We know the end of the story. We know the Person to whom all prophecies point. We know the fulfillment of the salvation story. We know Jesus Christ, the Living Word of God, took on flesh and dwelt among us. We know He suffered, died, and was buried for our sins. We know He was raised bodily and physically on the third day to new life to defeat the powers of sin and death and the devil once and for all and to open the way to the heavenly dimension of life. We know all these things. Hezekiah did not. Isaiah did not. All the Old Testament saints did not. For them, death represented the end. They had no hope of heaven. They had no well-developed theology of the afterlife. That comes much later in their history.

I think about the people I know who do not believe. They too have no hope of heaven. They too have no expectation of an eternal life with God in glory. They have no hope of reunion with those they love or seeing Christ face to face. I found myself thinking about them this morning as I read. Grieving for them. Praying for them. Hezekiah's words about his own death reflect their utter lack of hope in the face of death..."In the very prime of life I have to leave. Whatever time I have left is spent in death's waiting room. No more glimpses of God in the land of the living, No more meetings with my neighbors, no more rubbing shoulders with friends. This body I inhabit is taken down and packed away like a camper's tent. Like a weaver, I've rolled up the carpet of my life as God cuts me free of the loom And at day's end sweeps up the scraps and pieces. I cry for help until morning. Like a lion, God pummels and pounds me, relentlessly finishing me off. I squawk like a doomed hen, moan like a dove. My eyes ache from looking up for help: "Master, I'm in trouble! Get me out of this!" But what's the use? God himself gave me the word. He's done it to me. I can't sleep— I'm that upset, that troubled. O Master, these are the conditions in which people live, and yes, in these very conditions my spirit is still alive— fully recovered with a fresh infusion of life! It seems it was good for me to go through all those troubles. Throughout them all you held tight to my lifeline. You never let me tumble over the edge into nothing. But my sins you let go of, threw them over your shoulder—good riddance! The dead don't thank you, and choirs don't sing praises from the morgue. Those buried six feet under don't witness to your faithful ways. It's the living—live men, live women—who thank you, just as I'm doing right now. Parents give their children full reports on your faithful ways." (Isaiah 38:9-19 MSG)

The dead don't thank you. Choirs don't sing from morgues. The buried don't bear witness. One can almost hear King Solomon from Ecclesiastes saying, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." Such is life without Christ. Yes, you may enjoy the days you've been given on this earth. You may find great success and some measure of joy. You may find love with your family and enjoy great friendships. You may make your mark on society and history but to what end? It is Job who describes human life as "sparks that fly upwards from a campfire." We are given such brief moments in this world. Thankfully, God has created us for so much more! He has given us the opportunity to spend eternity with Him in a new heavens and new earth! He has given us a foretaste of that glorious dimension to life in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Strangely enough, Hezekiah foreshadows this when he says in Isaiah 38:20, "God saves and will save me. As fiddles and mandolins strike up the tunes, we'll sing! Oh we'll sing, sing, for the rest of our lives in the Sanctuary of God." Hezekiah was talking about the fifteen additional years he'd been given but the Spirit of God speaking through Hezekiah was promising something even deeper. Something more enduring. A life of praise that will last forever in the presence of God.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 40-42, Psalm 46

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July 25, 2023  
The Faithfulness of God

Readings for today: Isaiah 40-42, Psalm 46      (audio reading)

One of my favorite memories is of the first time we took our son Josiah to the beach. We were living in Mobile, AL and we took a short day trip to Dauphin Island. Josiah had just turned two and we were excited to introduce him to the Gulf of Mexico. We parked. Grabbed all our stuff. Chloe ran on ahead. Kristi and I were walking with Josiah. When we got to the beach, he started to run towards the water. I was pumped for him, thinking this was shaping up to be a great day. After getting about halfway, his little legs suddenly dug in. He stopped so fast he almost left skid marks in the sand! He stretched out his little arms and starting shouting at the waves. “You stop! You stop!” They didn’t obey. He got more frustrated, kept yelling, started crying, and finally sat down. His little two year old brain just couldn’t make sense of the movement of the waves and he was scared. Watching all this go by, I quickly dumped all our stuff and went to Josiah’s side. He looked up at me, his dad, with big eyes full of tears. Pointed to the waves and said, “Don’t stop, daddy. Don’t stop.” I picked him up in my arms to calm him down. Then I set him back down on the beach, grabbed his hand, and we walked to the water together.

Today’s reading is awesome. The picture of God taking us by the hand and leading us, guiding us, showing us the way is tender and special. Isaiah speaks of a God who comforts. A God who forgives. A God who gathers His people in His arms like a shepherd gathers little lambs. Let the power of these words wash over you as you reflect and pray today...

“Comfort, oh comfort my people,” says your God. “Speak softly and tenderly to Jerusalem, but also make it very clear That she has served her sentence, that her sin is taken care of—forgiven! She’s been punished enough and more than enough, and now it’s over and done with.” (Isaiah 40:1-2 MSG)

“Like a shepherd, he will care for his flock, gathering the lambs in his arms, Hugging them as he carries them, leading the nursing ewes to good pasture.” (Isaiah 40:11 MSG)

“Don’t you know anything? Haven’t you been listening? God doesn’t come and go. God lasts. He’s Creator of all you can see or imagine. He doesn’t get tired out, doesn’t pause to catch his breath. And he knows everything, inside and out. He energizes those who get tired, gives fresh strength to dropouts.” (Isaiah 40:28-29 MSG)

“There’s no need to fear for I’m your God. I’ll give you strength. I’ll help you. I’ll hold you steady, keep a firm grip on you.” (Isaiah 41:10 MSG)

“Because I, your God, have a firm grip on you and I’m not letting go. I’m telling you, ‘Don’t panic. I’m right here to help you.’ “Do you feel like a lowly worm, Jacob? Don’t be afraid. Feel like a fragile insect, Israel? I’ll help you. I, God, want to reassure you.” (Isaiah 41:13-14 MSG)

“God’s Message, the God who created the cosmos, stretched out the skies, laid out the earth and all that grows from it, Who breathes life into earth’s people, makes them alive with his own life: “I am God. I have called you to live right and well. I have taken responsibility for you, kept you safe.” (Isaiah 42:5-6 MSG)



There is a lot in life that makes us afraid. Crisis. Uncertainty. Unexpected experiences. Illness. Disease. Job loss. Aging. Growing up. These things are like waves crashing on the shores of our lives. We cannot stop them anymore than Josiah could stop the wave action in the gulf. What we can do is let God take us by the hand. Lead us to the water's edge. And help us find safety, security, and peace in His presence. When we do, we discover the very things we fear become opportunities for significant spiritual growth. Our greatest trials become the source of our greatest victories. Our greatest struggles become our greatest strengths. Playing in the surf of life is where the action is and with God at our side, we have nothing to fear. Whatever you may be facing today, know God is with you! He is at your side! If you reach out, He will take you by the hand!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 43-45, Psalm 80

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**July 26, 2023**  
**Bearing Burdens**

Readings for today: Isaiah 43-45, Psalm 80 (audio reading)

Recently, I've been feeling the weight of some heavy burdens. Some significant life changes. My oldest child has moved across the country. My father is experiencing a precipitous decline in health. In addition, I've come alongside some dear friends to help through some serious marital issues. I've taken on an additional national leadership responsibility with my denomination. I am heading to South Sudan with my youngest daughter in a couple of weeks for some intense church planter training. All of this is on top of the normal weight of pastoral ministry I carry. I don't share this to gain sympathy but simply to describe the kind of seasonal pressures I know we all go through in life. It's impossible to plan for and we often find ourselves coming quickly to the end of our resources when we enter such seasons. Perhaps that's why I loved the words from Isaiah 43 so much this morning...

"Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you. I've called your name. You're mine. When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you. When you're in rough waters, you will not go down. When you're between a rock and a hard place, it won't be a dead end— Because I am God, your personal God, The Holy of Israel, your Savior. I paid a huge price for you: all of Egypt, with rich Cush and Seba thrown in! That's how much you mean to me! That's how much I love you! I'd sell off the whole world to get you back, trade the creation just for you." (Isaiah 43:1-4 MSG)

It reminds me of Jesus' words from Matthew 11 where He invites all those who are weary and heavy-laden to come to Him. To yoke ourselves to Him. To be led by Him. God is so faithful. In the darkest times, He is our light. In the hardest times, He is our strength. When we are afraid, He is our courage. When we are depressed, He is the lifter of our head. No matter how challenging and overwhelming our circumstances may get, He won't ever let us go. He is with us. He is for us. He will not let us be crushed by the weight nor drown in the flood.

God is personal. We can't take that for granted. He is personally involved in our lives. Personally invested in the people we are becoming. Just as He paid a huge price for Israel, so He paid a huge price for each one of us. He gave His own life in exchange for our own. We are no longer our own. We were bought with a price. An inestimable price of infinite worth. That's how much we mean to God! That's how much God loves us! He sold off so much more than the world to get us back. He traded for more than creation to save us. He gave up His own Son. He laid down His own life. On the cross, Jesus stretched His arms wide, laying hold of both heaven and earth, and laid claim to every single human soul that has ever lived and/or will live. The image Him hanging there still leaves me breathless after all these years. And it's why, when I fix my eyes on Him, my burdens become easy and my yoke light for I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that He is with me.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 46-49, Psalm 135

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July 27, 2023  
Lean on God

Readings for today: Isaiah 46-49, Psalm 135 (audio reading)

Today's reading is a great follow up from yesterday. It clearly outlines the choice we have to make when it comes to who will bear the burdens of our lives. If we trust in false gods, we end up carrying them. If we trust in the true God, He ends up carrying us. Either we load ourselves down with idols... idols that are false, idols that are dead, idols that cannot save...or we let God bear us up on eagle's wings. I love how Isaiah puts it in chapter forty-six, "The god Bel falls down, god Nebo slumps. The no-god hunks of wood are loaded on mules and have to be hauled off, wearing out the poor mules—Dead weight, burdens who can't bear burdens, hauled off to captivity. Listen to me, family of Jacob, everyone that's left of the family of Israel. I've been carrying you on my back from the day you were born, And I'll keep on carrying you when you're old. I'll be there, bearing you when you're old and gray. I've done it and will keep on doing it, carrying you on my back, saving you." (Isaiah 46:1-4 MSG) The picture Isaiah paints here is of foreign nations carrying their gods around from place to place. They put their gods on carts borne by beasts of burden. They are heavy loads. The oxen have to strain to keep going. And all of it is for naught because the idols are dead and empty. The end result is defeat. Exile. Captivity. Contrast this with the Living God of Israel. No idol can depict him which means there is no statue or totem to carry. Israel's faith was so strange and unique that many of their Ancient Near East neighbors considered them atheists! All because they didn't appear to have a god! And yet Israel's God is real. Alive. Active. He bears them up from birth even to their old age. They didn't make him, He made them. They didn't bear him, He bore them. They didn't carry him, He carries them. They didn't save him, He saves them.

You and I are faced with the same choice everyday. Sure, our idols are not as obvious. At least, that's what we tell ourselves. Most of us don't have statues or totems or anything like that. Instead, we have bank accounts. Homes. Careers. Relationships. These are the things we place our trust in rather than the Living God. We place our faith in ourselves. We worship ourselves. All our energy and resources are directed towards making sure our needs, our wants, our desires are fulfilled. We are told we deserve this. We are told we've earned this. We are told we want this. We would be nothing without it. Life is not worth living unless you have it all. Such lies place burdens on our shoulders too heavy to bear. They wear us down. They sap us of our strength. All of us know the rat race we're on is killing us. We simply cannot maintain the pace. So what's the answer?

Turn to God. Let Him bear the burden of your life. Trust the One who shaped and formed you in your mother's womb. Trust the One who gave you breath and life at your birth. Trust the One who endowed you with your gifts and talents and abilities. Trust the One who knows every hair on your head. If you'll let Him, He will lift you up. If you'll lean on Him, He will give you strength. If you trust Him, He will never let you down. He has made you. He has borne you. He has carried you. He will save you. This is His promise.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 50-53

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July 28, 2023  
Suffering Servant

Readings for today: Isaiah 50-53      (audio reading)

Today, I took a look back at some previous devotionals I have written over the years on these particular passages. The one that resonates the most with me still after all these years is the time I spent with Bishop John Rucyahana in Rwanda. Bishop John is a dear friend who writes and speaks powerfully on the subject of the genocide that horrified a watching world in 1994. He wrestles deeply with the question, “Where was God as over one million people were being slaughtered?” And he comes out the other side with this answer, “Where was God when a million innocent people were being butchered? Where was God when priests and pastors helped massacre the people in their churches? I’ll tell you where God was. He was alongside the victims lying on the cold stone floor of the cathedral. He was comforting a dying child. He was crying at the altar. But He was also saving lives. Many were saved by miracles. God does not flee when evil takes over a nation...God is the giver of eternal life, and He can bring great good out of any situation. He raises the dead; He can also raise the broken. He can restore their hearts and minds and lift their spirits to renewed life. In my country God is doing this today by the thousands. There is so much pain here, so many real tears, and so much guilt that our ministry is like preaching hope from the top of a pile of bones. From atop a mountain of mutilated bodies, we are stretching a hand upward to proclaim a message of transformation and recovery.” (The Bishop of Rwanda ) It’s a powerful message he continues to preach even to this day.

I cannot fathom the journey so many in Rwanda have endured. The horror. The pain. The suffering. It’s immense. Indescribable. Beyond words. And yet, I would argue the forgiveness and reconciliation they have found is equally, if not more, profound. When I was there, I remember asking a woman if she was ethnic Tutsi or Hutu. “Neither” was her reply. “Here we are all Rwandan.” She went on to describe some of the hell she and her family had been through and the freedom they had found through forgiveness. Only Jesus could provide such grace. Only Jesus could give them such strength. How can I be so sure? Because Jesus knows the depths of human suffering. He experienced the absolute worst this world has to offer. He knows evil intimately and through his death defeats it once and for all. Listen to how the ancient prophet Isaiah describes the suffering of Jesus, some hundreds of years before His death and resurrection.

“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed...He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth...Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand...Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.” (Isaiah 53:3-5, 7, 10, 12)

The same God who bore the sins of many. The same God who makes intercession for the transgressors. The same God who loved His enemies so much He died for them is the same God who is alive and active in Rwanda, bringing about reconciliation through forgiveness. Preaching hope from atop a pile

of His own bones. From atop His own mutilated body, He is stretching a hand upward to proclaim a message of transformation and grace. It's truly incredible and it is available to all who would place their trust in Him. Friends, if God can bring about reconciliation between the victims and perpetrators of genocide in Rwanda can He not accomplish the same in our lives as well? Can He not bring together husband and wife on the verge of divorce? Can He not bring back together children and parents who've been estranged? Can He not help Democrats and Republicans find common ground? Can He not heal the racial tensions in our own country? These are just a few of the problems we face that only the gospel can solve.

What is required? Repentance. Confession. Truth-telling. Courage. Faith. Humility. Most of all, a deep and abiding and enduring trust in the power of the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 54-58

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July 29, 2023  
**Seek. Surrender. Celebrate.**

Readings for today: Isaiah 54-58      (audio reading)

There are three basic movements to the Christian faith. Three fundamental principles that undergird who we are as believers in Jesus Christ. Christians are a people who seek hard after God, willingly and gladly surrender to His will, and live in the fullness of joy as they celebrate all He has done. We see this dynamic played out in today's passage from Isaiah 55.

"Seek God while he's here to be found, pray to him while he's close at hand. Let the wicked abandon their way of life and the evil their way of thinking. Let them come back to God, who is merciful, come back to our God, who is lavish with forgiveness." (Isaiah 55:6-7 MSG) The Christian faith arises from a deep sense of spiritual hunger. A desire for spiritual food that will satisfy. This hunger - created by the Holy Spirit - prompts a person to seek God. To seek the only one who can fill the hold each of us has in our hearts. Thankfully, He is near. He delights in being found. He doesn't play cosmic hide and seek. As we draw near to Him, He draws near to us. The result is transformative. The wicked abandon their way of life. The evil abandon their way of thinking. The sinner repents and returns to God who is merciful and quick to forgive.

"I don't think the way you think. The way you work isn't the way I work." God's Decree. "For as the sky soars high above earth, so the way I work surpasses the way you work, and the way I think is beyond the way you think. Just as rain and snow descend from the skies and don't go back until they've watered the earth, Doing their work of making things grow and blossom, producing seed for farmers and food for the hungry, So will the words that come out of my mouth not come back empty-handed. They'll do the work I sent them to do, they'll complete the assignment I gave them." (Isaiah 55:8-11 MSG) Having received the mercy and forgiveness of God, the Holy Spirit now begins to open our eyes and minds to the vastness of God. The holiness of God. The beauty of God. The majesty of God. These things bring us to our knees in surrender. We acknowledge God's greatness and goodness. His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts. Our finite minds cannot contain, much less explain, His infinity. Having caught a glimpse and being overwhelmed in awe, we are drawn into His work as servants. People who willingly and gladly give all they have to serve a cause much greater than themselves.

"So you'll go out in joy, you'll be led into a whole and complete life. The mountains and hills will lead the parade, bursting with song. All the trees of the forest will join the procession, exuberant with applause. No more thistles, but giant sequoias, no more thornbushes, but stately pines— Monuments to me, to God, living and lasting evidence of God." (Isaiah 55:12-13 MSG) As we give ourselves to God, He gives Himself to us. As He is the source of greatest joy in the universe, we are now able to draw on that well every day of our lives, in every circumstance of our lives. We walk in joy. We walk in peace. We are given new eyes to see the world around us as it bursts into song in praise of it's Creator. We join the singing because we cannot help ourselves and our lives become living monuments to God.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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July 31, 2023  
Paradise Lost

Readings for today: Isaiah 59-63      (audio reading)

“Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.” So says Satan in John Milton’s classic book, *Paradise Lost*. I can’t tell you the number of people I’ve met over the years who sadly have taken this sentiment to heart. They live life according to their own rules. They believe they are the captains of their own fates. The masters of their own destinies. Their primary goal is the pursuit of their own happiness. They aren’t bad people. In fact, they are quite normal people. They get married. They have families. They love their kids. They work hard. But life is oriented inward rather than outward. Ultimately, they seek to serve themselves rather than God or those around them so if/when the life they’ve built stops working for them, they move on. They get divorced. They leave their families. They quit their jobs. They cut off friendships. Anything that gets in the way of their happiness is considered toxic, phobic, unhealthy, you name it. Sadly, they never do find what they are looking for. I know. I’ve met many of them on their deathbeds. Talked to them as they neared the end of their lives and they express so many regrets. Or, even worse, some of them don’t have any regrets at all for all the pain they’ve left in their wake.

In today’s reading, Isaiah describes a similar situation in Israel. Rather than living for God and trusting His will for their lives, the people of God largely lived for themselves with devastating consequences. “We long for light but sink into darkness, long for brightness but stumble through the night. Like the blind, we inch along a wall, groping eyeless in the dark. We shuffle our way in broad daylight, like the dead, but somehow walking. We’re no better off than bears, groaning, and no worse off than doves, moaning. We look for justice—not a sign of it; for salvation—not so much as a hint. Our wrongdoings pile up before you, God, our sins stand up and accuse us. Our wrongdoings stare us down; we know in detail what we’ve done: Mocking and denying God, not following our God, spreading false rumors, whipping up revolt, pregnant with lies, muttering malice. Justice is beaten back, Righteousness is banished to the sidelines, Truth staggers down the street, Honesty is nowhere to be found, Good is missing in action. Anyone renouncing evil is beaten and robbed.” (Isaiah 59:10-15a MSG) Isaiah paints a terrible picture, doesn’t he? There exists in the heart of every person who has ever lived a deep longing for justice and peace and righteousness and goodness but these things seem forever out of reach. And the reason they are out of reach is not because of God. His arm has not grown short. His ears have not grown deaf. The problem is not with God, it is with us and the sinful orientation of our hearts that always presses us to seek our own good above those around us. Selfishness lies at the root of all evil. Our desires are simply insatiable. Our will is not strong enough to resist. Thankfully, God sees all this and takes pity on us.

“God looked and saw evil looming on the horizon— so much evil and no sign of Justice. He couldn’t believe what he saw: not a soul around to correct this awful situation. So he did it himself, took on the work of Salvation, fueled by his own Righteousness. He dressed in Righteousness, put it on like a suit of armor, with Salvation on his head like a helmet, Put on Judgment like an overcoat, and threw a cloak of Passion across his shoulders. He’ll make everyone pay for what they’ve done: fury for his foes, just deserts for his enemies. Even the far-off islands will get paid off in full. In the west they’ll fear the name of God, in the east they’ll fear the glory of God, For he’ll arrive like a river in flood stage, whipped to a torrent by the wind of God. “I’ll arrive in Zion as Redeemer, to those in Jacob who leave their sins.” God’s Decree.” (Isaiah 59:15b-20 MSG) This is God’s promise to all who believe. What we cannot achieve for ourselves, God will do for us. What we cannot earn for ourselves, God will freely give to us. What we cannot even seek for ourselves, God will seek out for us. He will find us. He will

gather us. He will wipe away every tear. He will heal every hurt. He will right every wrong. He will make all things new. Including me. Including you. We will be given a new heart and a new spirit. Our desires will be reoriented towards God and those around us. Our minds filled with the wisdom and knowledge of God who will make our paths straight.

So let me challenge you to reject the lie of this world. The lie that says it's better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven. The lie that says it's better to serve yourself than those around you. The lie that says it's better to chase your own happiness rather than seek to make others happy. The lie that says you don't need to bow the knee to anyone or anything. The lie that says you're in charge. You're the boss. You're the master. Open your eyes and see these lies for what they are and honestly take stock of the impact of these lies on those you love. Cast them aside and instead believe the Truth. Place your trust in the truth of God as it is revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ. His way is better. His way leads to eternal and abundant life.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 64-66

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