

09 September 2024

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September 1, 2024
(No devotionals on Sunday)

Readings for today: Matthew 19-20, Psalms 90 [\(audio reading\)](#)

September 2, 2024

Owners vs. Stewards

Readings for today: Matthew 21-22, Psalms 91 [\(audio reading\)](#)

I raised my kids to be independent thinkers. Strong-willed young women and a young man who can make their way in the world. I love how each of them is finding their place and it is a privilege to walk the journey with them. One of the many lessons I've tried to teach them is the difference between stewardship and ownership. When we grow up, we don't own much. Everything from food to clothing to a roof over our heads is provided. Our job is to be good stewards. Clean our rooms. Follow the house rules. Take care of what we've been given. Then we get older. We graduate from high school. Become legally responsible. We start to become owners. We get a job. We pay the bills. We buy things like our own cars or cell phones. As a parent, I no longer have much authority over how my child takes care of their home or how much money they spend on gas or the number of apps they download on their phone.

All four Gospels tell the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple and this creates all kinds of confusion and chaos. When Jesus drives out the money-changers and turns over the tables of the loan sharks, the Jewish religious leaders ask Him an important question. "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?" (Matthew 21:23 CSB) In other words, who gave you the right to disrupt the Passover? Who told you to bring in the blind and the lame and begin healing? Will you not put a stop to the praises of the children? Jesus' reply could not be more clear, My house shall be called a house of prayer but you make it a den of robbers. Jesus is claiming rightful ownership of the Temple. He is making it clear to the religious leaders that their stewardship of the sacred places has come to an end. The rightful owner is now on the scene and He will do with His house as He wills. And what is His will? His house shall be a place of prayer. A hospital for healing. A sanctuary for praise.

Imagine how you would feel if someone lived in your home and trashed the place. I have a good friend who owns a rental house in the Denver area. Several years ago, a tenant used his house to grow weed and cook meth. After going to court to get his tenant evicted, my friend had to gut the house and start over. It cost him thousands of dollars not to mention the time and effort he had to put in to get his house back in working order so it could be rented again. Now put yourself in Jesus' sandals. The people you've entrusted your home to have trashed the place. They have turned it into a den of robbers. Exploiting the pilgrims who come for Passover each year. They make hefty profits by price gouging the people, especially the poor. So He makes a whip of cords and drives them out. He turns over the tables and throws them out. Do you understand now why Jesus is so upset? Zeal for His own home has consumed Him and He will do whatever it takes to restore His house to its former glory.

Now let me give you an even more radical take. Jesus doesn't just assert His authority over His house, He asserts it over all of creation with the fig tree. Not only that but He tells His disciples that if they have faith and embrace the Kingdom life, they will be able to operate with His authority in the world. They will be able to do to the fig tree what Jesus did! Why? They are no longer tenants in God's Kingdom but sons and daughters! In a sense, we've been given an "ownership" stake in all of creation and God expects us to exercise dominion and authority and responsibility in His name and for His glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 23-24, Psalms 92

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September 3, 2024
The Essential Nature of Humility

Readings for today: [Matthew 23-24, Psalms 92](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

Humility is an “essential” in the Christian life. Literally, one cannot follow Jesus without developing this character trait. Frankly, it’s Jesus’ main beef with the Pharisees and scribes and other religious leaders of his day. He didn’t criticize their theology so much as their focus on the minutiae of the Law rather than the purpose the Law was designed to serve. The religious authorities majored in the minors. They specialized in regulating all kinds of behavior. They had the best of intentions. They had honest concerns about ritual purity and that’s no small thing. Especially in the ancient world. But over time they became prideful. Their goal was to serve the Law rather than allow the Law to serve humanity. Remember their attacks on Jesus over Sabbath-keeping? The religious leaders had all kinds of regulations governing how many steps one could take on the Sabbath or how much effort a person could put in before something became “work” and they forgot the purpose Sabbath-keeping was to serve which was blessing. By keeping the Sabbath, humanity would be blessed. They would experience more joy and more peace and more life and more love but the strict regulations robbed the people of these blessings. When Jesus healed on the Sabbath - bringing joy and peace and life and love to the person on the receiving end - the religious leaders went crazy. And that’s Jesus reminds them that “Sabbath is made for man not man for the Sabbath.”

Matthew 23 is a series of discourses where Jesus contrasts the pride and arrogance of the religious leaders with the humility of the ordinary, everyday Israelite. He clearly demonstrates the difference between serving the Law and serving humanity. He calls the religious leaders, in no uncertain terms, to repent and humble themselves. Sadly, there is little evidence any of them ever did in Jesus’ lifetime. In fact, they redouble their efforts to have him arrest, tried, tortured, and killed. This chapter is worth reflecting on especially if you’ve been a Christian for a long time. It seems the longer we follow Jesus, the more tempted we are major on the minors ourselves. Focus on the non-essentials instead of the essentials. It’s why so many believers switch churches over small things, finer points of theology while neglecting the higher call to unity and community. We seem so quick to give up on each other, especially if we don’t agree on everything or feel let down or get disappointed. We don’t put each other first. We don’t assume the best of each other. We don’t seek the mind and heart of Christ. It’s heartbreaking.

Humility is defined by Jesus who was by His very nature God and yet didn’t consider His status as God something to be held onto. He didn’t consider His perfection more important than relating to us in our imperfection. He didn’t consider His purity more important than meeting us in the midst of our impurity. He didn’t consider His power and authority and rights as the Son of God worth holding onto if it created a barrier between us and Him. No, Jesus let all of those things go. He emptied Himself in order to become our servant. He humbled Himself to death on a cross. He deliberately and intentionally chose to decrease so that we might increase. And if we truly want to follow Jesus, we must do the same for each other and the world around us. We must serve rather than be served. We must proclaim a gospel that is truly good news not bad news. We must seek to call people to life and light and love and joy and blessing rather than curse them or shame them or condemn them for not measuring up. I don’t know about you but when my time comes and I stand before the Lord, I do not want to hear “Woe to you” but instead “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 25-26, Psalms 93

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September 4, 2024
The Great Wedding Day

Readings for today: Matthew 25-26, Psalms 93 (audio reading)

I've been married almost thirty years but I can still remember my wedding like it was yesterday. No matter where you go in the world today, weddings are special, even sacred occasions. They are accompanied by all kinds of rituals and particular traditions. There are special traditions for the bride, special traditions for the groom, special traditions involving the family. When I got married, one of the things I had to do was meet with my future father-in-law to ask his blessing. It was an incredibly intimidating experience for me as a young man and he asked a lot of hard questions about how I would care for his daughter and provide for her. He knew I was planning on being a pastor and he was a very successful businessman at the time, making a lot of money. I had to tell him I wouldn't be able to provide the kind of life he would want for his daughter but I promised she'd be happy. Then came the planning. There was a lot of it and it got very expensive very quickly but again, that's the expectation in our country when it comes to weddings. You spare no expense. You buy flowers that die within the week. At the time, you hired an expensive photographer because we didn't have iPhones to take good pictures. You might have a videographer as well so you had a video of your wedding that you supposedly will go back and watch. You're expected to provide food and drink and music and a place to dance. You have toasts from the wedding party and parents. You have the dance between the father of the bride and his daughter and the mother of the groom and her son. Then you have the first dance between the bride and groom, the cutting of the cake, and the big send off. Then there's the honeymoon. Another typically expensive affair, hopefully in an exotic locale. Again, all of these are rituals and traditions associated with weddings in our culture today.

What about in Jesus' time? Back in the first century, the timing of a wedding was really up to the bridegroom's father. When he was satisfied that his son had built his prospective bride a home that would uphold the family honor, he would set the date and time for the wedding. He would give permission to his son to then go get his bride and the groom would then gather the wedding party and make big processional to his bride's home. One can only imagine the excitement and joy in the community as they hear the music and dancing and laughter and celebration. One can only imagine the bride's anticipation as she prepares herself for her future husband. A huge feast would be prepared by the groom's family and the whole community would be invited to celebrate. Now a significant part of this ritual involved the bridesmaids or the "virgins" from the parable Jesus tells. They would have been staying with the bride all day long to help her prepare. And among the many jobs they had was to leave her at a certain point, light torches, and go out to meet the bridegroom and his party to escort them to meet the bride. The torches they carried were typically sticks wrapped in oil-soaked rags and they didn't burn forever. So when they were about to go out, the bridesmaids would take new rags, soak them in oil, and wrap them around their torch to keep the fire burning. As you can imagine, the groom's party was often delayed due to all the celebration. Everyone wanted to congratulate him and bless him and pray for him so the torches the bridesmaids carried might go out multiple times over the course of the evening as they waited for the groom to arrive. In the story Jesus tells, half the bridesmaids were foolish. They didn't prepare well. They brought no oil with them so their torches went out while the other half did bring oil and were able to keep their torches burning. This created a sense of panic among those who had no oil. What would they do? Their mistake would bring shame on the bride and the groom and could mess up the whole ritual procession! So they rush off in search of more. But while they were gone, the bridegroom arrived for his bride and escorted her back to his family home where the feast was waiting and the door was shut. No more guests would be admitted. To admit them late after everyone had arrived would take attention away from the bride and groom and insult the host so

they are left outside. And just as aside, these feasts would last for seven straight days so they didn't just miss out on one night but the whole event.

So why does Jesus use the image of a wedding when talking about the Kingdom of heaven? Jesus knows what's waiting for Him over the horizon in Jerusalem and He is trying to prepare His disciples for what's to come. Though they do not know it yet, Jesus is pointing them beyond His death and resurrection to the timing of His second coming, when He, as the bridegroom, returns for His bride, the church. They don't know anything about the church at this point, of course. As far as they know, the Kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of Israel are the same thing. That's what they hear when Jesus talks about the kingdom and that's what they're expecting when they arrive in Jerusalem. They expect Jesus to take over King David's throne, cleanse the Temple and re-establish the worship of the Living God, and overthrow the Romans and all the corrupt religious authorities. But Jesus has a different plan in mind. One that doesn't involve political power or military might but His sacrificial death for all humanity. Though Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and on earth, He refuses to exercise it like a tyrant. He will not give into the devil's temptation to take control of all the kingdoms of this world. No, Jesus submits to the will of His Heavenly Father. And this is why His Father creates the church as a bride adorned for her husband. He wants the world to see how the beauty and glory and majesty of His Son, the bridegroom. He wants the world to wait in eager anticipation, just like the bride waits in eager anticipation, for her wedding day. He wants the nations to join in the celebration as He comes for His bride. He wants the whole world to be part of the feast His Father has prepared.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 27-28, Psalms 94

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September 5, 2024
Betrayal

Readings for today: [Matthew 27-28, Psalms 94](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Mark 1-2, Psalms 95

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September 6, 2024
Baptism

Readings for today: [Mark 1-2, Psalms 95](#)

[\(video intro\)](#)

[\(audio reading\)](#)

A few weeks ago, we had the privilege of baptizing almost thirty people. Some were young. Some were old. Some were in between. As is the custom at our church, we had several who were being baptized for the first time and several who were being reaffirmed in their faith. And because we take both groups to the water, it can be a bit confusing for those watching. What's the difference? Is there even a difference? And where do we find biblical support for our practice? These are great questions and the answer can be found right here at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark.

The baptism of John is not a Christian baptism. That may come as a surprise for some readers. Quite often we assume, because the word "baptism" is used, that John is administering a Christian sacrament just like we do today. Nothing could be further from the truth. Baptism is a Greek word that simply means "immersion." It is also a term that signifies ritual purity. A common practice for the Jewish people was to "baptize" themselves or immerse themselves in a "mikvah" which is a bath used for the purposes of ritual purification. And this is essentially what John is doing. He is using the Jordan River as a mikvah to baptize or immerse people for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Please note these are faithful Jews who have been circumcised and who are participating in the Temple rites outlined in the Old Testament. They make their sacrifices and keep their sacred festivals. So why do they feel the need to go out to John for baptism? What is it that draws them to John's preaching? Why do they respond in such numbers? John is the last of the Old Testament prophets. He is the one messenger Isaiah promised all those years ago. The one called to prepare the way of the Lord and there's something about his preaching that the people find deeply compelling.

At the same time, John himself acknowledges the limits of his ministry. He is simply immersing people with water but there is one coming after him who will immerse them in the Holy Spirit. The baptism of Jesus will carry far more power and far more weight than John's baptism ever could. In fact, John isn't even worthy to untie Jesus' sandals and yet it is John who baptizes Jesus at the launch of His ministry. This, of course, is to fulfill God's plan and make Jesus known to the people. After this, John will decrease as Jesus increases. And his part in God's plan comes to a close with his execution at the hands of Herod.

So back to the questions about baptism. The church has baptized new believers in Jesus Christ since the beginning. Following Jesus' command in the Great Commission, we immerse them in water (or we sprinkle or pour which has the same symbolic effect) and speak the baptismal formula over them. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." We believe the act of baptism to be a sacrament that seals the new believer as Christ's own forever or, as in the case of infants, we baptize, trusting in the promise of God to bring the child to saving faith through the saving faith of their parents and local church community. In addition, the church has also recognized the need to offer some kind of public acknowledgement for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Typically offered to believers who have lapsed back into their previous sinful ways or drifted from God or walked away from the church, these rituals provide an avenue for them to return to the fellowship of the saints and renew their faith in the Lord. In this way, it is very similar to the ritual John was offering at the Jordan River. And this is what we offer at our church to those who wish to publicly reaffirm their faith in Christ. It is not a second baptismal rite. It is not a replacement for a previous baptism. It doesn't take away from the power of the sacrament of baptism. It simply acknowledges the continual need we all have as believers to repent and for the forgiveness of sins.

Readings for tomorrow: Mark 3-4, Psalms 96

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September 7, 2024
F.A.I.T.H. Gardens

Readings for today: [Mark 3-4, Psalms 96](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

Several years ago, I met an amazing man in South Sudan. His name is Taban Patrick. He is a farmer who developed a system (F.A.I.T.H. Gardens = Food Always In The Home) to provide food security and sustainability in a region afflicted by starvation and malnutrition. He plants maize and onions and eggplant and sweet potatoes and a host of other vegetables to replace the cassava plants distributed by the United Nations. He recognizes when cassava isn't cooked to the right standards, it can become toxic and slowly poison his people. He spends his days tearing out cassava by the roots and offering a much healthier, more diverse menu of options that provide not only food for a household but also an income as they take it to market. He's one of my many heroes.

I thought about Taban when I read through our passage for today. Here Jesus talks a LOT about seeds and sowing and farming and harvesting. He talks about what happens to seed when it is cast on the hard path or rocky soil or among the weeds or planted in good soil. He likens it to what happens when we preach the gospel and it falls on the hearts of people. Some hearts are hard. Some are rocky and it's tough to grow deep roots. Some are full of weeds that choke out its life. Some hearts are open and ready to receive. What Jesus is doing here is providing a diagnostic for each individual Christian to discern the condition of their own heart. After all, I am charge of my own soil. No one else is responsible for the condition of my heart. At the same time, my heart is definitely shaped by the community I surround myself with and the schedule I keep and the pace of life I set. If I set an unhealthy pace, my heart will reflect that unhealthy condition and the soil will not be conducive for spiritual growth.

When Taban trains our church planters in sustainable farming techniques, he often talks about the condition of the soil. He researches which crops have the best chance to thrive in which soil. He pays attention to average rainfall and offers suggestions for how to find the best soil possible to give them the best chance for success. Of course, each church planter has to decide what they will do with the information they are given just as each person has to decide what they will do with the gospel they are given. So what have you done? How do you intentionally till the soil of your own heart so it is open to receive the good news? What spiritual practices do you engage in to create healthy and good soil for the seeds of the gospel?

Readings for tomorrow: Mark 5-6, Psalms 97 (No devotionals on Sundays)

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September 8, 2024
(No devotionals on Sunday)

Readings for today: [Mark 5-6, Psalms 97](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

September 9, 2024
Get Behind Me, Satan!

Readings for today: [Mark 7-8, Psalms 98](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

In the temptation narrative from Luke's Gospel, there is a line that has always stood out to me. After Jesus successfully resists the enemy, Luke says Satan departed "until an opportune time." As I've reflected on these words over the years, it seems clear to me that throughout the rest of the Gospels, a careful reader can see moments where Satan has returned to tempt Jesus yet again. Tempt Him to be self-sufficient (turn stones into bread). Tempt Him with self-promotion (throw yourself off the Temple). And finally and most insidiously, tempt Him to achieve all His Father wants for Him but without the cross. Without the suffering. Without the pain. Without the death. "I will give you all the nations of the earth if you will worship me", says Satan.

In today's reading we see the Apostle Peter at his best and his worst. One moment he is declaring Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. And Peter hasn't come to that realization on his own, he has received a revelation from the Father. In that moment, Peter becomes a vessel for the Holy Spirit to speak just as He did at Jesus' baptism and will do on the Mount of Transfiguration. And then the script flips. Jesus starts talking about what the Father has planned for the Christ. He starts talking about suffering and rejection and death. Peter's fears get the best of him and Satan sees an "opportune time." He speaks through Peter to Jesus offering yet again a way to accomplish all the Father has planned without any of the pain. Jesus sees right through him - literally - and confronts him directly. "Get behind me, Satan! You are not thinking about God's concerns but human concerns." (Mark 8:33 CSB)

None of us want to suffer. None of us want to endure hardship or pain. All of us do our best to avoid trials and tribulations. And we certainly don't want to die. But Jesus is clear. If anyone would be His disciple, they must take up a cross. They must deny themselves. They must lose their lives. Only when we embrace this way of life, this way of suffering, this way of self-denial, this way of dying every single day, will we become the people God has created us to be. Only by following the path Jesus lays out for us, will we find the image of God being renewed and restored in us. Only by seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, will we receive the blessings He has stored up for us. All other roads lead to hell. All other paths are dead ends. All other ways are temptations offered to us by Satan. May we say, with Jesus, get behind me!

Readings for tomorrow: Mark 9-10, Psalms 99

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September 10, 2024
Transfigured Spaces

Readings for today: [Mark 9-10, Psalms 99](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

Years ago, I came across the idea of a “thin space.” A place where the veil between this world and the next becomes permeable. All of a sudden, we can see into God’s world from our world. The dimensions of heaven and earth merge and intersect. It is the space of miracles. The space where the divine meets the mundane face to face.

I believe the Bible records such a space when it describes what happens on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus has just given his disciples a promise. Some of them will not taste death until they get to see the Kingdom of God come in power. Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. Once they arrive on the summit, Jesus is “transfigured” before them, meaning He appears to them in all His divine glory. His robes become radiant, taking on an intensity never before seen on earth. Elijah and Moses, the greatest of the Old Testament saints, appear beside Him. They begin to converse. A cloud overshadows them and a voice thunders from the atmosphere surrounding them, “This is my Beloved Son, listen to Him.” They fall on their faces in reverent fear.

It begs the question. Where is heaven? Is it up in the sky somewhere? Perhaps deep into outer space? The famous Russian cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, was asked if he found God when he went to into space. “No”, he replied. “I searched and searched but He was not there.” But heaven is not a physical place residing somewhere out there in the farthest reaches of our universe. It lies in another dimension altogether. “Heaven” and “Earth” are simply different names to two different dimensions of Life. Death is the gateway between them. The dimension of heaven exists all around us all the time. In fact, the very word translated “heaven” in the Scriptures can also mean “atmosphere.” That’s how I prefer to think about it. We are immersed in it even though we cannot see it. God speaks to us from the air surrounding us. The saints who have gone before us are constantly moving in and among us. All of them waiting for the day when God finally brings these two dimensions together once and for all.

And that begs yet another question. When we place our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit. At salvation, the Third Person of the Trinity comes to dwell in our hearts. And this means Christians are walking, talking “thin spaces” (or as I like to think of it - “transfigured spaces”), constantly living at the intersection of heaven and earth. Think about the implications of that for a moment. Aren’t they glorious? If we could live with this awareness all the time, wouldn’t it change things? Change how we work? Change how we relate to friends and family? Change how we interact with the world around us?

Readings for tomorrow: Mark 11-12, Psalms 100

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September 11, 2024
Save us!

Readings for today: [Mark 11-12, Psalms 100](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

Hosanna. It's a beautiful word and a powerful prayer. It's the cry of the people as Jesus rides into Jerusalem. And it's also the culmination of the prayers of so many generations of God's people. Think of all the people of God have suffered throughout the ages. From the nomadic existence of Abraham and Sarah to brutal slavery in Egypt to the wars of conquest in the Promised Land to the ebbs and flows of sin and redemption under the leadership of different kings and judges to the destruction of the northern kingdom and the exile of the southern kingdom. It's an unbelievable story that testifies to the miraculous intervention and preservation of God as He guided and protected His people over the years. And now they find themselves back in the Land but under occupation. They find themselves able to worship at the Temple but under the corrupt leadership of the religious authorities. They find themselves able to practice their faith but God's salvation seems as distant as ever. Then along comes Jesus. He heals. He feeds. He casts out demons. He teaches. He points people to the Kingdom of God in very tangible and practical ways. It's powerful. No wonder they looked to Him for salvation.

"Many people spread their clothes on the road, and others spread leafy branches cut from the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted: Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Mark 11:8-10 CSB) It's hard to get our heads and hearts around what the people in first century Palestine must have felt. The Roman Empire was peaking under the leadership of Caesar Augustus. The religious authorities were firmly entrenched. There were several revolutionary movements underway. It must have felt like they were living in a powder keg that could blow at any time. Jesus was one of those "revolutionaries." All they knew about Him was that He was a worker of miracles and a powerful preacher. They knew He had gained a significant following in the Galilean countryside. Now he was coming into Jerusalem riding on a colt just like the ancient prophets foretold. He was deliberately invoking the echoes of King David and the golden age of the Israelite kingdom. And they must have had such high hopes.

All of us experience those same hopes. We long for Jesus to save us. Save us from our sin. Save us from our pain. Save us from our fears. Save us from our circumstances. And whether we realize it or not, we all cry out on some level, "Hosanna!" We all cry out to Jesus for salvation. But are we willing to receive the salvation He offers in the way He offers it? Through the cross? Through His suffering and death and resurrection? That's what tripped up the people cheering for Him back in the first century. They wanted a king. They wanted someone who would throw out the Romans and depose the religious elite. They wanted someone who would build up the military power of Israel and re-establish her ancient borders and dominate the pagan nations around them once more. This was not the salvation Jesus offered and that's why so many turned on Him. If we aren't careful, we can fall into this same trap. We want Jesus to exercise His authority and restore our nation. We want Him to depose our own corrupt political, social, cultural, and even ecclesiastical leaders. We want Jesus to rebuild our power and influence so we can dominate the world once again. But that's not the salvation Jesus offers.

So why do you cry Hosanna? What kind of salvation are you actually looking for? What would happen if Jesus did actually give you your heart's desire and would that have any kind of eternal significance?

Readings for tomorrow: Mark 13-14, Psalms 101

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September 12, 2024
Tribulation

Readings for today: [Mark 13-14, Psalms 101](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I meet so many believers around the world who believe Jesus will return in their lifetimes. In almost every case, it's because of the trials and tribulation they are either suffering currently or are anticipating suffering based on the growing hostility in their particular culture. Jesus, of course, predicted these things would happen to those who followed Him. He predicted pain and suffering and warfare and betrayal and a host of other things that would take place around the world before His 2nd coming. Honestly, I hope they are right. I would love to be out of a job! I would love to avoid as much pain and suffering as possible.

At the same time, I am enough of a student of history to know God's people have endured unspeakable things. In the early years, they were on the run during the periods of systematic persecution under pagan Roman Emperors. They endured all kinds of hardship and suffering during the chaos of the Dark Ages after the fall of the Roman Empire. They experienced immense pain and grief and loss due to natural disasters, famines, disease, etc. Think of how they must have felt in the 14th century as the Black Plague ravaged Europe for example. Listen again to Jesus' words, "Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he,' and they will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, don't be alarmed; these things must take place, but it is not yet the end. For nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. "But you, be on your guard! They will hand you over to local courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues. You will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a witness to them. And it is necessary that the gospel be preached to all nations." (Mark 13:5-10 CSB)

So what's the point? Why doesn't God just bring an end to all the pain and suffering and injustice and violence on the earth? Why didn't God just put an end to it all after raising His Son from the dead? The answer to this question comes in the last sentence. Verse ten. "It is necessary that the gospel be preached to all nations." This is the mission of the church and God will not return until this mission is complete. God's great desire is that all should be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. God wants people from every tribe, tongue, and nation to be part of the great eschatological worship service before His throne. So rather than speculate on when Jesus might return or worry about how much tribulation we may have to face or how many trials we may have to endure, I believe Jesus is calling us to be humble, wise, discerning, and most of all, passionate about taking the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Readings for tomorrow: Mark 15-16, Psalms 102

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September 13, 2024
Fear and Trembling

Readings for today: [Mark 15-16, Psalms 102](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

There's a part of me that loves the original ending of Mark's Gospel in verse eight. Probably because I've gotten a taste of the emotions the women must have felt when they saw the tomb was empty and heard the good news from the young man about Jesus rising from the dead. I will never forget my first trip to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and getting a chance to enter the empty tomb for myself. Trembling and astonishment are just two of the many emotions I felt in that moment. Tears came to my eyes as I touched the slab where my Lord lay. As my wife and I knelt and prayed together, a deep sense of awe and wonder came over us and we couldn't speak for a while afterwards. We were at a complete loss for words.

The last thing the women expected to find that morning was an empty tomb. In fact, that was their chief worry as they headed out early that morning to finish preparing Jesus' body for burial. "Who will roll away the stone for us?" Who will let us in to see His body? Who will help us finish the final burial rights for our dearly beloved rabbi, teacher, mentor, and friend? When they arrived and saw the stone had been moved, fear must have set in as they contemplated all the options of what this could mean. Did someone steal His body? Are the Roman soldiers desecrating His final resting place? Have the religious authorities done something with Him? Instead, they see a young man dress in a white robe sitting where Jesus once lay. The other Gospel writers tell us he was an angel and His message was startling and unprecedented. Jesus is alive! Jesus will meet you in Galilee! Go and tell the rest of the disciples! I can only imagine their immediate response. Tell them what? Tell them Jesus - who we all saw tortured, crucified, and killed - has been raised from the dead? They had no categories for such a thing. Resurrection was the furthest thing from their thoughts. So they ran from the tomb, overwhelmed by fear and astonishment, completely unable to grasp what had taken place and certainly not able to articulate it to anyone.

Honestly, it's always overwhelming when God shows up. It's never easy or comfortable. It always engenders some measure of fear and trembling when we come face to face with the Holy One of Israel. I've been blessed with several such encounters over the course of my life. Times when the Holy Spirit makes Himself known in a powerful way that absolutely overwhelms all my senses. I am struck blind and deaf and dumb and mute by the experience. It has happened to me overseas and at home. It has happened when I feel like I'm on top of the world and when I've felt like I've been stripped to studs and have nowhere else to turn. Most of the time, it catches me completely by surprise and I almost always walk away trembling from the experience. It's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of Almighty God but it's also good for He is ever faithful and true.

Readings for tomorrow: John 1-2, Psalms 103

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September 14, 2024
Jesus is God

Readings for today: [John 1-2, Psalms 103](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

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

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

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

Friends, to have a relationship with Christ is to have a relationship with the Creator of the universe Himself. To know Christ is to know God in all His fullness. Christ is the perfect image of God. In Him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. There is no God beyond Christ. No God behind Christ. No God outside of Christ. All other gods are idols. All other conceptions of god are false. All other ideas about god are foolish. Everything we can say about God, we can say about Christ. Everything we will learn about God as we read the Old and New Testaments, we can attribute to Christ. He is the Word of God. He is with God. He is God.

Readings for tomorrow: John 3-4, Psalms 104 (No devotionals on Sundays)

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September 15, 2024
(No devotionals on Sunday)

Readings for today: John 3-4, Psalms 104 [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

September 16, 2024
What does Jesus offer?

Readings for today: [John 5-6, Psalms 105](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

The healing of the blind man at Bethesda is an amazing miracle. So is feeding the five thousand. So is walking on water. So are the many, many miracles Jesus performs over the course of His ministry. But what about the “large number” of disabled who also lay by the pool of Bethesda? Did they not long to be healed? What about the multitudes who went hungry every night in Palestine in the first century? Did they not long to be fed? What about the other boats on the water that night in Galilee? Did they too not want to survive the storm? These are important questions. They force us to ponder the purpose for which Jesus came. Was it to heal? Was it to feed? Was it to calm the storms in the world?

Jesus comes to give us eternal life. “Truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not come under judgment but has passed from death to life.” (John 5:24 CSB) This is the work He was charged by His Father to do. It is the work of the Kingdom and the miracles He performed are only signs pointing to that larger reality. They are not ends in themselves. They are not the goal. After all, the man who was healed at Bethesda will get sick again. The five thousand who were fed that day in Galilee will be hungry again. The disciples who endured the storm on the Sea of Galilee will find themselves going through more storms in the years ahead. No, what Jesus has to offer is far more eternal, far more enduring, far more lasting. It is a life that never ends in a Kingdom that never ends celebrating a glory that never ends. The glory of the Father as it is fully revealed in the Son. Those who believe in Jesus receive this gift and their lives begin to transcend the boundaries of this world. The horizons of their lives are now set much higher, much further than any here on earth. And because they live with the Kingdom of Jesus fully in view, the things of this earth just don’t hold the allure they once did.

Imagine being free from the fear of disease. Imagine being free from the fear of hunger. Imagine being free from the fear of any storm that might come your way. This is the freedom Jesus comes to offer. This is the freedom we can have when we place our faith in Him and become part of His people. It’s a freedom we can experience in this life as we love and serve others the way He loves and serves us.

Readings for tomorrow: John 7-8, Psalms 106

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September 17, 2024
No Condemnation

Readings for today: [John 7-8, Psalms 106](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

We've all probably heard the phrase, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." I don't know about you but I have not found it all that helpful. First of all, those who do not believe are not convinced they are "sinners" and tend to resent the moniker. Second, it's really hard to do. Separating one's behavior from one's identity is growing more and more difficult in our world. In fact, there are many who would argue it is impossible. And yet Jesus seemed to do it.

The beginning of John 8 is a famous story. Maybe one of the most famous in all of Scripture. And though it's origin is questionable - it doesn't appear in the earliest and best manuscripts - it just sounds like Jesus so we tend to keep it in. A woman caught in the very act of adultery is brought before Jesus. The Pharisees and teachers of the law are almost gleeful in their condemnation. They can't wait to pick up the first stone. They throw her down before Him, pretty convinced He will have mercy which in turn will allow them to accuse Him of breaking the Law. Of course, anyone familiar with the Law can already see the problems. If they caught this woman in the act, where is the man? According to Leviticus 20:10 both parties deserve the death penalty. Perhaps that's what Jesus is writing in the dust? If they caught her in the act, why have they not carried out her punishment? The Law is clear. Perhaps it's because they don't really care about her crime but are far more concerned with trapping Jesus?

Then Jesus does this extraordinary thing. He puts the onus back on them. "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." He hasn't condemned her nor has He affirmed her. He hasn't condemned the Pharisees nor has He affirmed them. Instead, Jesus brilliantly lobbs the ball back in their court and forces them to make their own decision. The Pharisees put down their stones and slowly walk away. The woman is left all alone, prompting this famous exchange. "Woman, has no one condemned you?" "No one, Lord." "Nor do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

I simply love this about Jesus. He accepts people for who they are but loves them too much to leave them there. He meets us right where we are, takes us by the hand, and leads us to a better place. He accepts us, warts and all, without affirming our sin. To the Pharisee, he says, "Are you really without sin?" To those caught in sin, he says, "I do not condemn you." And to both, he says, "Go and sin no more."

As Christians, there is a lot in this world we simply cannot affirm. Changing attitudes in gender and sexuality. Abortion on demand. Racism and sexual abuse. Deceit and falsehood. Anger and hate. These things are not of God and yet so many embrace them. Defend them. Use them as means to another end. The answer cannot be rejection. Jesus simply will not allow us to walk away from anyone, including our enemies. So we must find a way - as Jesus found a way - to accept people for who they are without affirming their beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors. Thankfully, this is the heart of the gospel. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While we were enemies of God, Christ made peace with us. While we were pushing Him away, Christ embraced us. May the Spirit give us the courage to do the same!

Readings for tomorrow: John 9-10, Psalms 107

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September 18, 2024
Blindness

Readings for today: [John 9-10, Psalms 107](#) (audio reading)

Who is the one who is blind? The one who cannot physically see or the one who cannot spiritually see? In John 9, we have a record of Jesus healing all kinds of blindness. The cultural blindness of the disciples who believed in a closed world of cause and effect. Every physical ailment or illness or disability was a punishment for sin. Either the individual sinned and deserved it or their parents sinned and the judgment was passed down a generation. Then there is the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees who missed the forest for the trees when it came to the ministry of Jesus. Because they couldn't "see" beyond their own legalism, they couldn't rejoice with the man who was healed. Instead, they criticized Jesus for breaking the Sabbath and declared He must not be from God. Finally, there is the physical blindness of the man himself. A man who had not been able to see from birth. Jesus' healing comes in two different stages for him. First, there is the healing of his eyes. Second, there is the healing of his soul. In the first case, it was a combination of mud, a ritual washing, and the power of Jesus who gave him his sight. In the second case, it was the power of faith given to him by the Holy Spirit that brought him salvation.

All of us suffer from blindness on some level. It may be physical. It may be mental or emotional. It may be spiritual. All of us need the healing power of Jesus in our lives to give us back our sight. I have personally witnessed and spoken with those who have been healed from physical blindness. It's incredible to watch them see for the first time in a long time. I have personally witnessed and spoken with those who have been healed mentally or emotionally through prayer, medication, therapy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It's incredible to see their burdens lifted and the freedom they experience. I've personally witnessed and spoken with those who have been healed spiritually through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing better than seeing someone come to saving faith in Jesus Christ!

Where do you find yourself today? What kind of healing do you need in your life? Where do you need Jesus to restore your sight? Pray to Him! Ask Him! He will answer. He will open your eyes in ways you cannot begin to imagine so that you may bear witness to His glory.

Readings for tomorrow: John 11-12, Psalms 108

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September 19, 2024
Life isn't Fair

Readings for today: [John 11-12, Psalms 108](#) [\(video intro\)](#) (audio reading)

“Whoever told you life was fair?” If only I had a nickel for every time I heard this phrase from my father growing up. Typically it came when I was complaining about having to do more work than my two younger brothers. I was the oldest so was always assigned the hardest chores and it didn’t make sense to me. Why didn’t my brothers have to pull their own weight? Why didn’t they have to do as much work as I did? Why couldn’t they help out more especially on the big projects dad always had planned in our backyard? It just didn’t seem fair to me. Looking back, I can see the lesson dad was trying to teach me. Life isn’t fair. The burdens are not equally spread out nor are the resources. Some face unbelievable challenges while others seem to cruise through life. Some work hard and barely get ahead while others work less and strike it rich. None of us have the same gifts. None of us are given the same opportunities. None of us put in the same amount of effort. So fairness clearly isn’t a value God build into the system.

Perhaps that’s what John was getting at when he summed up the fickle nature of human faith in John 12:39-40 CSB, “This is why they were unable to believe, because Isaiah also said: He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so that they would not see with their eyes or understand with their hearts, and turn, and I would heal them.” I know those are not easy words to hear. That doesn’t seem very fair. How is it that God would choose some and not others? How is it that God would open the eyes of some and not others? How is it God would regenerate some hearts and not others? How is it that God would actively blind eyes and harden hearts to the message of the gospel? I will not pretend to probe the mysteries of divine election in this post. Nor will I seek to untangle the Gordian knot of predestination vs. free will. I imagine that debate will last until Jesus’ return. Perhaps even beyond. It is not given to us to understand these things, only to accept them. And this is where our faith is put to the test. Do we believe God is good? Do we believe God is wise? Do we believe God is true? Do we believe God has a plan? Do we believe God is worthy? Do we believe God is righteous? All these things are called into question the very moment we read verses like these and think to ourselves “this doesn’t seem fair.”

It is a dangerous thing to question the nature and character of God. It is a fearful thing for the clay to say to the Potter, why have you made me thus? It is arrogant to demand God give an account to us or answer to our flawed notions of justice or meet our democratic standards of fairness. This is where growing up in America where our leaders must answer to the will of the people hurts us. Our cultural context works against us as we read. God is no democratically elected leader. He is our King. Our Lord. Our Sovereign. He created the universe and all that is in it. We are dust. We are ashes. We are nothing and it is only because God has decided to set His love on us that we are worth anything at all. It is only because God decided to make us in His image that we have dignity and honor. But these things are not our own! They are conveyed to us by God Himself for His own mysterious purposes.

So what if God – desiring to make known His power and reveal His glory – decided to make some vessels for honor and some for dishonor? What if God – desiring to make known His justice and righteousness – raises up some for glory and others for destruction? Does this make God unjust? Does this make God unfair? Does this call into question God’s goodness and righteousness? If we are honest, there can be only one answer. What right do we – created beings one and all – have to question our Creator? As the Apostle Paul says, “What right does the clay have to question the Potter?”

Here is where the rubber meets the road when we talk about surrender. We are called to lay it all in His hands. We give it all to Him. He alone is worthy of all glory and honor and power because He stands outside time and space and creation. He is far removed from any of our human notions of justice and righteousness. He does not answer to His creation. Furthermore, humility demands that we accept the fact that He sees far more than any of us do. He has an eternal perspective we cannot grasp. His wisdom is infinite and His knowledge without end. What seems paradoxical to us is logical to Him. What seems contradictory to us makes perfect sense for Him. What seems impossible to us is well within the bounds of His authority and rule and reign.

Readings for tomorrow: John 13-15, Psalms 109

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September 20, 2024
Following the Example of Jesus

Readings for today: [John 13-15, Psalms 109](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I am always struck by the foot-washing episode in John's Gospel. Jesus taking on the role of a house servant and cleaning the feet of His disciples. He cleans the feet of the men who will abandon Him in the days ahead. The feet of the one who will deny Him three times. The feet of the one who will betray Him. It's an incredible act of humility. And then Jesus takes it one step further. He commands His disciples to follow His example. It's why some Christian denominations consider it a sacrament. They practice it regularly. Others practice it on Maundy Thursday which is the night we celebrate the Last Supper every year. Still others may not practice the act itself but they dedicate themselves to lives of service and sacrifice in recognition of what Jesus modeled for us by taking the servant's role.

Many years ago, I served as a volunteer prison chaplain and led a Bible study on the Book of John. When we got to the foot-washing story, I brought a bucket and some sponges. It was incredible to see the reactions of the inmates. These were men who had become good friends. Men with whom I had shared a lot of life. We knew each other's stories. I knew the crimes they had committed and they knew of my failures as well. We had been vulnerable with each other. Prayed with each other. Wept with each other. But there was something about washing each other's feet that made us deeply uncomfortable. In fact, when I first suggested it, the immediate reaction was "no." As I gently pressed them, tears sprang to their eyes as they nodded their heads. One or two continued to hold out but eventually did give in. Then they washed my feet and I too wept. It was one of the most spiritually intimate experiences of my life.

There is power in emulating Jesus. Power in following in His footsteps. Power in engaging in the same practices He set before us. Listen again to His words and think about what it might mean to put these words into practice in your own life. "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done for you. "Truly I tell you, a servant is not greater than his master, and a messenger is not greater than the one who sent him." (John 13:14-16 CSB) Jesus dedicated His life to serving others. Jesus gave up all His rights and privileges in order to stand in solidarity with the least and lost of our world. Jesus sacrificed His life in order to save sinners. And He calls us, as His disciples, to do the same for each other and for those around us. Whose feet can you wash today?

Readings for tomorrow: John 16-18, Psalms 110

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September 21, 2024
The Holy Spirit

Readings for today: [John 16-18, Psalms 110](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

Today's reading introduces us to the Holy Spirit. What some have called the "forgotten member of the Trinity." Because of the materialistic nature of Western thought and our discomfort with anything supernatural, we often forget the Holy Spirit and the active role He plays in our sanctification and salvation. As Christians, we do not struggle to wrap our minds around the Father. The Creator of heaven and earth. We similarly do not struggle to understand the Son. The Savior of our souls. We do struggle to understand the Spirit. The One who comes to live with us and dwell with us and point us to Christ. And yet, the Spirit is so important! He is the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that though He would ascend back into heaven, we would not be abandoned. Not left stranded in this world. Doomed to wander as orphans and strangers in this world.

The Holy Spirit is sent to accomplish several things. First and foremost, He is the Helper. (John 16:7). His role is to encourage and assist believers in following Christ. How does He do this? "When He comes, He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment:" (John 16:8 CSB) He operates as the "conscience" in the heart of every believer. He lets us know when we wander and stray. He tells us when we fall outside of God's will. He brings us back in confession and repentance. He also leads us to righteousness. He doesn't just show up when we do something wrong, He teaches us what is right and good and holy and pure. He also reminds us all of God's final judgment. An assurance for believers and a terror for unbelievers.

The Holy Spirit also guides us into all truth. He illuminates God's Word so that we may understand God's ways more fully and seek to align our lives with Him. He gives us insight to see God's activity all around us in creation. In the lives of those we love. Even in our own hearts. Sometimes He shows us what's to come. Gives us a foretaste of heaven or a premonition of the future. Finally, and most importantly, "He will glorify Me, for He will take what is Mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is Mine; therefore I said that He will take what is Mine and declare it to you." (John 16:14-15 CSB) The main job of the Holy Spirit is not to draw attention to Himself but to point us to Christ. I think this is one of the reasons He is so often overlooked. He never self-promotes but instead fulfills the will of the Father and the Son to glorify Christ above all things.

Belief in the Holy Spirit is essential for every Christian. Learning to hear His voice. Tap into His wisdom. Follow His will is what leads us to sanctification. He is the One who makes us more into the image of Christ and surrendering to His will in our daily lives is the essence of what it means to be a disciple.

Readings for tomorrow: John 19-21, Psalms 111 (No devotionals on Sundays)

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September 22, 2024
(No devotionals on Sunday)

Readings for today: [John 19-21, Psalms 111](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

September 23, 2024
Rational Faith

Readings for today: [Luke 1, Psalms 112](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I often meet and talk with people who struggle with the concept of faith. Typically, they are more “left-brained” in their thinking. They are more analytical and methodical and scientifically and/or mathematically minded. They want to know what evidence exists for the Christian faith and how one can believe in events that, by definition, defy the laws of physics. They tend to bracket out, a priori, the existence of miracles. And they tend to think of faith and reason as oppositional concepts. I love talking with them. Mainly because these are my people. I too am an analytical thinker. I too want to know the evidence that exists for the Christian faith and if Christianity presents the best explanation of what’s available. I too struggle to accept events that defy the laws of physics, though admittedly my struggle has diminished the more I travel to places like South Sudan, Uganda, and Ethiopia. I too used to think that faith and reason were opposing concepts.

Perhaps that’s why I love Luke’s Gospel so much. He sets out from the opening lines to present a clear and compelling case, based on eye witness testimony, of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He carefully investigates all the claims. He writes in an orderly fashion. His goal is for Theophilus - which literally means “God lover” - to find assurance and certainty and peace of mind when it comes to what he or she believes. Luke certainly helped me find this assurance. His Gospel presents a faith that is rational. A faith that is reasonable. A faith that is not blind but rather the best account of the evidence provided.

Now one can certainly argue about the veracity of miracles but one also has to be honest that they are making an argument from deduction not observation. One can certainly argue over the reliability of eye witness testimony and have questions about whether the story changes in the years between the actual events and when Luke was writing but one must also be honest that eye witness testimony has been found reliable in courts of law for centuries and across cultures. Furthermore, one has to set aside their anachronism and cultural definitions of literacy and grapple with the differences between oral and textual societies. One can certainly challenge Luke’s historical chops but one must not impose 21st century standards on ancient authors but instead ask if Luke’s writings represent a compelling account of ancient biography. All of these are important questions to ask and seek answers to but perhaps most important is what one does with the basic facts of the case. What does one do with the person of Jesus Christ who lived and taught and suffered and died and was crucified and buried and whose tomb was empty three days later? No honest historian disputes these basic, fundamental facts so one has to come up with an hypothesis to explain them and to date, no one has come up with anything better than what Luke presents in his Gospel.

One may choose to reject the rationality of the Christian faith but that doesn’t make it irrational. The Christian faith is a rational approach to real events that happened in real time in human history. It is a clear and compelling way to make sense of the empty tomb and its implications for humanity and the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 2-3, Psalms 113

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September 24, 2024
Songs of Salvation

Readings for today: [Luke 2-3, Psalms 113](#)

[\(video intro\)](#)

[\(audio reading\)](#)

I love to sing. I'll sing just about anything, any style, from any era. I have a deep appreciation for music which I learned from my mother who taught elementary music school music for forty years. Perhaps that's why I love worship so much. I love to sing the great hymns of our faith. I love to sing the praise songs currently being written. I love to sing Gregorian chant, the Psalms, and other meditative, prayerful music. I love the pipe organ. I love praise bands. I love brass and woodwinds and percussion. I love the human voice most of all. I've sung songs in small groups, sanctuaries, cathedrals, even stadiums. I've songs in different languages around the globe. All of it fills my heart and stirs my soul.

One of the features I appreciate most about Luke's Gospel is all the singing that accompanies the birth of Jesus. He records four separate songs from four separate people, all of whom are responding to the birth of the Messiah. Traditionally, these songs are known as "canticles" from the Latin term which means "little songs." They are the Benedictus of Zechariah from Luke 1:68-79, the Magnificat of Mary from Luke 1:46-55, the Gloria in Excelsis Deo of the angels from Luke 2:14, and the Nunc Dimittis of Simeon from Luke 2:29-32. All of them praise God for what He has done. All of them express the wonder and awe at the great plan of God that is being fulfilled. All of them marvel at God's steadfast love and faithfulness towards His people.

There is something about singing that taps into the deep places of our hearts. Something about music that moves our souls. I've sat with people in advanced stages of dementia or Alzheimer's who can still remember the songs they sang when they were little. It's miraculous to listen to them sing the Doxology or Gloria Patri or a hymn like Amazing Grace. It brings incredible comfort to those they love who stand vigil as they pass from this life to the life to come. And I'm quite confident that when they finally reach those heavenly shores, they will be met by the saints who've gone before them with even more singing. They will learn new songs, songs of glory known only to the residents of heaven who worship Jesus face to face. I can't wait for that day and believe with all my heart that our worship here on earth is just the warm up act for the worship service we'll join when we too cross over from the dimension of earth to the dimension of heaven.

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 4-5, Psalms 114

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September 25, 2024
Making Jesus Famous

Readings for today: [Luke 4-5, Psalms 114](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

We live in a world that is rapidly spinning out of control. A tsunami of pain is about to hit our shores, if it hasn't already. Our children are losing any sense of healthy identity. Mental health crises are on the rise. Suicide rates are trending upward. Substance abuse is skyrocketing. Our culture is filled with an increasing amount of rage and anger. Death threats are now common against those with whom we disagree, including two assassination attempts on a former President. It seems like everything is taken to the extreme. It makes for a very hostile and dangerous environment especially for those living in marginalized communities. So what's next? Are we doomed to live the rest of our lives under threat? Constantly drawing our relational boundaries ever tighter in order to protect ourselves and those we love or perhaps withdrawing altogether? Surely there has to be a different way.

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 6-7, Psalms 115

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September 26, 2024
Kingdom Values

Readings for today: [Luke 6-7, Psalms 115](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

God bless you. God bless America. God bless this nation, this land, this people, this tribe, this family. All of us want the blessing of God on our lives. All of us want to experience the blessing of God. All of us want to live in a country that is blessed by God. But how do we get from here to there? How must we live so the blessing will come? What must we value? What must we treasure? What must we prioritize in order to make ourselves “blessable?”

Jesus makes it very clear. Blessed are those who are poor, hungry, grieving, and hated because of the “Son of Man.” That last point is key. It is the critical qualifier that governs everything that comes before it. As Christians, we walk by faith not by sight. We are called to give all we have unto the Lord. We are to dedicate every single dollar, even to the point of impoverishing ourselves, to the work of the Lord. We are called to give regularly and cheerfully and sacrificially. And when we do this, Jesus tells us we are blessed because what we will receive in return is nothing less than the Kingdom of Heaven. We are called to share our food and resources with those around us. To the point where we ourselves may go hungry. And if we do, Jesus says, we will be filled. Fulfilled in ways we cannot begin to imagine. We are called to grieve over the state of the world. Grieve over the lostness of our friends and family and neighbors. Grieve over the injustice and oppression and violence and hatred and rage. Grieve over the rampant sin and immorality. And if we find our hearts breaking, Jesus says we will begin to see beyond the horizons of this world to the world to come and we will rejoice. We should expect persecution. We will be hated. We will be excluded. We will be insulted. We will be slandered. We will be called evil as we seek to follow Jesus. But those are simply signs that we stand in good company. The company of the ancient prophets of Israel. The company of the saints who have gone before us. And we can rejoice and leap for joy on that day even in the midst of all we are suffering for we know the reward waiting for us in heaven will make it all worth it.

So...is this the blessing you seek? Is this the blessing you desire? Are you willing to live a life that is blessable? A life of daily sacrifice? A life of service? A life of humility and compassion and grace and love? A life of radical generosity? A life of radical faith? Or, have you chosen a different way? Do you want to have it both ways? Do you want to be rich in this world while still trying to follow Jesus? Then you have received your comfort already and small comfort it is! Do you want to be full in this world and never in need? Then you will find yourself hungry. Hungry for more out of life. Do you find yourself laughing, without a care in the world? Then you will find yourself grieving as the eternal consequences of your decisions start to set in, both for yourself and those around you. Do you enjoy a good reputation? Do you make it a point never to rock the boat or stand up for the truth of Christ? Then you most likely have compromised in some way and “gone along to get along” and will not find yourself in the company of the prophets and saints who gave everything to pass along the faith you now enjoy. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you where you might repent and make the turn back to Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 8-9, Psalms 116

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September 27, 2024
Confronting Demons

Readings for today: [Luke 8-9, Psalms 116](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

The world of the Bible can seem strange at times. Today's passage is filled with stories of Jesus confronting demonic powers and we aren't sure quite what to make of it. Should we take these stories literally or figuratively? Are these encounters real or just a first century, rudimentary understanding of mental illness? Is Jesus casting out demons or is He healing the mind or is it a bit of both?

It's important to read these stories in context. Jesus has just exercised His authority over creation as He calms the wind and the waves on the sea. Interlaced between these stories are miracles of healing and resurrection as Jesus exercises His authority over physical illness and even death itself. It shouldn't surprise us then that Jesus would exercise His authority over the spiritual forces of evil in our world. In addition, we need to remember that though these stories were written for us they are not written to us. They are written to people living in the first century with a first century understanding of the world around them. For most of human history and for most cultures around the world today, there is no separation between the physical and spiritual world. Human beings are integrated creatures with no division between heart, mind, body, and soul. The fracturing of the human person into these component parts is a thoroughly modern, Western concept.

For example, whenever I travel to rural villages in South Sudan, Uganda, and Ethiopia, I frequently hear the indigenous people describe illness or disease in terms of demonic activity. When they pray for healing, they pray for the whole person. They pray for the Spirit to heal body, mind, soul, and heart. It's powerful and it is a far more holistic way to approach healing. The same was true for the people Jesus encountered all over Galilee. They lived in a supernatural world where science and faith were not mutually exclusive but deeply intertwined with each other.

Why is the Western world so different? The renowned philosopher, Charles Taylor, outlined a powerful argument in his monumental work, *A Secular Age*, in which he traced the "disenchantment" of the world back to the Enlightenment. During that period, science and religion began to compete rather than collaborate and the result was a deep fracture that exists to this day. This, of course, creates all kinds of cultural distance we have to overcome when we read the Scriptures. In the Bible, we re-enter an "enchanted" world where the supernatural and natural overlap. This understanding is critical if we are to understand what's happening when Jesus performs His miracles. He is not just addressing physical issues but mental, emotional, and spiritual issues as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 10-11, Psalms 117

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September 28, 2024
The Source of Jesus' Power

Readings for today: [Luke 10-11, Psalms 117](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

It's one of the most challenging questions I face as a pastor and believer in Jesus Christ. How can a good God allow evil and suffering in the world? My atheist friends rightly press the question even further. "The existence of evil and suffering in the world leaves two possibilities...either your God is good but not all-powerful. Impotent in the face of evil and suffering. Helpless to stop it. Or your God is all-powerful but not good because He chooses not to step in. Either way, your God ceases to be god. Heads we win, tails you lose."

The Pharisees and religious leaders were essentially asking Jesus the same thing. Does He truly have the power and authority to defeat evil? And is His power good? Does it come from God? The reason they asked these questions is because they had just seen Jesus perform an exorcism. It's not the first time. They've probably heard reports of other miracles of deliverance. But now they are seeing it with their own eyes. A mute man released. Set free. Words literally tumbling out of his mouth. It's like everything he's wanted to say for so many years comes rushing out in a torrent all at once. Exorcism wasn't a common practice in Israel in those days but it wasn't unknown either. There were other Jewish exorcists running around, claiming to cast out demons but something about the way Jesus did it was different. The power and authority He exercised was clearly unique and set the religious leaders on edge. What were they seeing? The demons obeyed this man's every word. What did that mean? Grasping for understanding, they accused Jesus of being in league with Satan or Beelzebul himself. Perhaps the reason the demons obeyed is because Jesus' power came from the prince of demons? Jesus shoots that theory down. A house divided against itself cannot stand. Why would Satan fight against himself? That leaves only one other option. Jesus is confronting evil and darkness and the devil with the power of God.

Now we enter really dangerous territory. If the Kingdom of God has come. If Jesus is casting out demons by the finger of God Himself. If the Holy Spirit is at work in these miracles then to deny them is to deny God Himself! An unforgiveable sin! An unpardonable offense! If the religious leaders persist in their skepticism and unbelief, they will find themselves on the outside looking in when the Kingdom of God finally comes. This is why Jesus is so confrontational with them at the end of Luke 11. He wants them to believe. He wants them to come around. He wants them to lay aside their skepticism and disbelief and embrace Him as the Son of God and Son of Man. To see what He's doing as the work of God in confronting evil and suffering. To see what He's doing as the goodness of God in action in destroying all the works of the devil. The blind see. The deaf hear. The mute speak. The lame walk. Those who are oppressed and possessed are set free. These things are not random miracles. They are intentional acts of God to break the power of evil and suffering in our world.

And the work Jesus is performing here is just the beginning. After His death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus pours out His Spirit on the church. The people of God. The Body of Christ. We now are called to go forth - with the same power and authority - to confront the darkness! To defeat evil! To work for the good of the world. This is the commission given to us by our Father. So you ask what God is doing to defeat evil and relieve suffering in the world? I say look in the mirror. He has put you on this earth to make that happen. He has given you His Spirit to empower you and strengthen you and give you wisdom for the task. He has planted you in your neighborhood. Sent you into your school or workplace. Brought different people into your life and across your path for this very purpose.

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 12-13, Psalms 118 (No devotionals on Sundays)

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September 29, 2024
(No devotionals on Sunday)

Readings for today: [Luke 12-13, Psalms 118](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

September 30, 2024
Letting Go

Readings for today: [Luke 14-16, Psalms 119:1-32](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I used to be that guy. The one who would elbow his way to the highest place of honor no matter what the occasion. At work, I would weigh in on every matter whether I knew what I was talking about or not. At school, I would try to answer every question. On the athletic field, I did my best to stand out. My god was achievement. My goal was success. My greatest fear was failure. All because I wanted to be known. I wanted to be praised. I wanted to be the center of attention. This was true in my work as a pastor as well. When I went to seminary, I felt like I had something to prove so I did my best to outwork and outshine my classmates. After I graduated and started serving the church, I would look for opportunities to demonstrate I was more effective than my colleagues. I was constantly in competition with those around me. Constantly on the lookout for potential threats. It was exhausting. Then the Lord called me to plant a church in Wisconsin. It was the most painful, heartbreakingly experience of my life. He crucified my ego. He broke me of my pride. He stripped my life down to the studs. I had nothing left. I was at the end of myself. I was a complete and utter failure.

Perhaps that's why I resonate so much with the parable Jesus tells in Luke 14. I spent most of my life trying to claim the seat of highest honor only to have the Lord send me back to some of the lowest places over and over again. I was put in my place frequently by those with much more experience at work. My teachers stopped calling on me at school. My athletic career eventually ended as those better than me took my place. Even among my pastoral colleagues, I often made a fool of myself. Then, when things were falling apart in Wisconsin, I remember reading this story and thinking to myself, "Wow, God has sent me to the lowest possible place. Where do I go from here?" The answer comes at the end of the parable. Seek the lowest place. Don't try to raise yourself up. Stop competing with those around you. Stop jockeying for position. Stop trying to prove yourself. Instead, embrace obscurity and anonymity and insignificance and let the Master raise you up.

Honestly, I've not looked back. My life from the fall of 2009 onward has been one grace after another. As soon as I relinquished my need to be successful, my need for achievement, and my need for attention, I became far more open to God. Instead of exhausting myself trying to show everyone how smart and capable I am, I was able to let go. God spoke to me very clearly, commanding me to labor in obscurity, embrace anonymity, and pursue insignificance. These three words have guided my life ever since. Not only that, but He made it clear to me that I am not to seek another position nor ask for another raise. Instead, I am simply to trust Him to take care of me. Every opportunity I've had professionally over the last fifteen years has come from the Lord. I have not pursued a single one. Every financial blessing I've received from my church has come from the Lord. I've not asked for a single raise. In fact, I've turned several down. These are not points of pride for me but rather examples of what it means to live out the parable of Jesus. What about you? Where do you need to relinquish and let go? Where do you need to stop your striving and rest in God? Where do you need to give up control so the Lord can raise you up in His time and according to His will?

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 17-18, Psalms 119:33-64

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