

BIBLE IN A YEAR

BIBLE, FOLLOWING JESUS, DISCIPLESHIP

2019

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

BY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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DECEMBER

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December 1, 2019

SCRIPTURES FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Daniel 8, 1 John 2:1-17, Psalms 120, Proverbs 28:25-26

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 9:1-11:1, 1 John 2:18-3:6, Psalms 121, Proverbs 28:27-28

December 2, 2019
ANCIENT OF DAYS

Readings for today: Daniel 9:1-11:1, 1 John 2:18-3:6, Psalms 121, Proverbs 28:27-28

So I feel like I need to recap the last few days in Daniel as we head into the home stretch. The latter half of the book is confusing. Visions. Dreams. Terrifying nightmares. So much ink has been spilt trying to interpret the meaning of these chapters. Are they historical? Referring to past events and past kingdoms that have come and gone? Do they tell the future? Of a time when the great Enemy will rise and attack God's people? Are they both? Can we learn from what has happened in the past and look for those same signs to take place in the future? And what does it all mean for the Christian in 21st century America? How does it all relate to our daily lives?

I think we often miss the forest for the trees when it comes to reading Scripture. We get so wrapped up in the details. So lost in the weeds. And we lose sight of the overarching message God has for us. Daniel and his people are in exile. They have experienced national trauma on a level we simply cannot grasp or imagine. Their pain and suffering is real and terrible. Their hopes and dreams have been crushed out of existence. Ground under the heel of a merciless pagan empire. Everything they once held dear has been destroyed. These are the circumstances in which God has placed Daniel. He has been a counselor to pagan kings. He has served foreign rulers. He has done all he can to embrace the call God placed on His people back in Jeremiah to "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (Jeremiah 29:7) And he has prospered. He has been given power and authority. He has access and influence. He has wealth and privilege. He is considered one of the greatest wise men the empire has ever produced. But one thing continues to set Daniel apart...his great faith.

Daniel never loses sight of God. Never loses hope in a future restoration where God will act to deliver His people once again. Daniel trusts God. Daniel is faithful to God. At great personal risk, Daniel has demonstrated this faith over and over again. Lions. Fiery furnaces. Under threat of torture and death. Daniel has seen it all and done it all and not only survived but thrived. And now God is again visiting him with visions and dreams. He is showing him the future. Kings and empires will rise and fall. The pain and suffering they inflict will be great. The fear they will engender will cause many to flee. Safety and comfort will be in short supply. But over it all, there is this promise. God is in control. God is on the move. God is bringing human history to a predetermined end with Christ taking His seat in glory and His kingdom shall never end.

"As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened...I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." (Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14) Forget the four great beasts. Forget the visions of lions and eagles and bears. Rams and goats thundering towards one another across the earth. Forget the terrifying beast with ten horns or the little horn with the big mouth. The focus of Daniel's vision is on the One called the Ancient of Days. The One who reigns

and rules over it all. Pure as driven snow. Engulfed in holy fire. Tens of thousands at his beck and call. He judges the earth. He judges kings and rulers. He holds all dominion and power in His hand. And He calls to the Son of Man. Out of the clouds of heaven comes the Christ and He is given all authority on heaven and on earth. All peoples and nations and tribes and tongues shall serve him. His kingdom shall never end. This is the main point of the vision Daniel receives. God letting his beloved prophet know He is not done. There is still hope. There will come a day when Christ shall come and all things shall be set right and made new.

And what happens to us on that great day? Listen to how Daniel describes it, “And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.” (Daniel 7:27) We get to share in this glory! We get to share in this victory! When Christ comes again in glory, we will be given dominion and power and authority to reign and rule at His side and under His Lordship! There will be no more sin. No more evil. No more crying. No more pain. No more suffering. No more fear. For God Himself will be our God and we shall be His people! This is the great hope of the gospel! The great hope sealed by Christ’s death and resurrection! An empty tomb bears witness! Millions upon millions throughout history all stand to give their testimony! Christ has died! Christ has risen! Christ will come again!

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 11:2-35, 1 John 3:7-24, Psalms 122, Proverbs 29:1

December 3, 2019
DANIEL'S APOCALYPSE

Readings for today: Daniel 11:2-35, 1 John 3:7-24, Psalms 122, Proverbs 29:1

Biblical prophets speak truth to power. Biblical prophets bring hope and assurance to God's people by reminding them of God's sovereign power and plan. Finally, Biblical prophets often foretell the future. This is certainly the case in Daniel and though our reading today breaks up his final vision, it's best to read chapters 10-12 as a literary whole. To understand what's happening in these crazy dreams, you need to know the background. You need to know where Daniel stands in the timeline. You need to know what's happening in the life of Israel.

535 BC - Third year of Cyrus the Great's reign. Daniel is now 85 years old and has been serving pagan kings for seventy years. Daniel's grief is most likely the result of the conflict those who have returned from exile under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra are facing as they rebuild both Jerusalem and the Temple. Daniel fasts for three weeks but unbeknownst to him, a battle is taking place in the heavenly realm. Gabriel - most likely the identity of the angelic being who visits Daniel - is at war with Satan and his demonic forces and only prevails with the help of another archangel named Michael. Gabriel has been sent by God to comfort Daniel. To give him hope for the future. Hard times are coming. Terrifying times. Forces will be arrayed in heaven and on earth against God's chosen people. Satan is seeking - as he always does - their complete eradication from the face of the earth. God, knowing what is to come, sends his angel to Daniel with a vision of the future so he can record it for future generations.

Three relatively minor kings follow Cyrus on throne. But the fourth referred to in Daniel 11 is Xerxes who ruled from 486-465 BC. His power and might was unrivaled at the time and as he seeks to expand his empire, he will provoke the might of Greece. After a number of years, Alexander the Great (336-323 BC) will unite the Greek into one empire and head east to destroy the Persians. Alexander dies tragically and his empire is then broken up into four pieces, ruled by four of his closest generals. The Ptolemaic (Southern king) faction goes to war with the Seleucids (Northern king) and their battle rages for generations with Israel as the primary "buffer state" in between. Eventually, a brutal tyrant named Antiochus Epiphanes IV will sweep down from the north and cause tremendous suffering for the people of God. "But he who comes against him shall do as he wills, and none shall stand before him. And he shall stand in the glorious land, with destruction in his hand." (Daniel 11:16) He will even seek to place a statue of Zeus in the Holy of Holies (abomination of desolation mentioned in 11:31) which in turn gives rise to the Maccabean revolt detailed in the Old Testament Apocryphal books of 1st and 2nd Maccabees.

All of this is ancient history to us but it was still very much in the future for Daniel. As God unpacks for him what is to come, he sees tremendous suffering ahead for his people. "And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time..." Under the influence of Haman, Xerxes will try to kill every single Jewish man, woman, and child within the borders of his empire. You can read all about this in the book of Esther. The wars between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid factions will take a tremendous toll on both land and people as many of the battles are fought in and around the borders of Israel. Pagan kings will rape and pillage and burn what God's people are trying to build. And the worst of them all - Antiochus Epiphanes IV - will literally torture and kill as many Jews as possible. At the same time these conflicts are raging on earth, there is a battle going on in heaven. Michael and his forces are fighting Satan and his demons and though the battle is fierce, they will prevail just as God's people will prevail on earth.

This is why Daniel closes his book with such hopeful words, “But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” (Daniel 12:1-3)

What’s the relevance of all this history for God’s people today? No matter what you are going through, know that God is with you. He is literally fighting at your side. He is bringing about His purposes and His will even amidst your hardships. He will send His messengers to serve you. To comfort you. To bless you. He will bring you peace. Though you may experience suffering for a time, He will preserve your life. In fact, He has a reward waiting for you in His heavenly Kingdom. There the righteous will shine like stars in the sky and will reign with Him forever. As Christians, we do not place our hope in the things of this world. We do not place our hope in what we can achieve in this world. We place our hope in God alone.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 11:36-12:13, 1 John 4, Psalms 123, Proverbs 29:2-4

December 4, 2019
DISCERNMENT

Readings for today: Daniel 11:36-12:13, 1 John 4, Psalms 123, Proverbs 29:2-4

Discernment is a lost art. The ability to determine right from wrong. Truth from falsehood. Good from evil. In fact, recent studies have shown how challenging it is for people to identify fake news, debunk conspiracy theories, and identify propaganda. The crisis is compounded by the rise in online warfare as Chinese troll farms and Russian bots weaponize social media to sow seeds of dissent and confusion in societies that value free speech. All this is made possible, of course, by post-modern philosophies that started taking hold late in the 20th century where truth was intentionally relativized, individualized, and marginalized. The results are not good. We are more depressed than ever. More anxious than ever. More dis-integrated than ever. The social fabric of our culture tearing apart at the seams.

Over and against the prevailing winds come these words from the Apostle John, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” (1 John 4:1-6)

The Graeco-Roman world was a lot like our own. People did what was right in their own eyes. It was a culture that showed little to no restraint. People were encouraged to engage in whatever behaviors felt good and right at the time. John is writing to Christian believers who are trying to remain faithful to Jesus in the midst of all the mess. He wants them to be able to know right from wrong. Good from evil. Truth from error. So he offers them a roadmap as it were. A decision-making matrix that will allow them to find the godly path.

Test #1: Does the thought, attitude, or action align with Jesus? Does it reflect the ethics of the Kingdom of God? Does it bring honor and glory to His name? Will following the “spirit of the age” lead one to confess or deny Jesus?

Test #2: Resist temptation. Once one determines what is good and true and noble and right and godly, one must resist the very real temptation to go the other way. To listen to the false prophets. To follow the ways of the world. It’s tempting to think we are at the mercy of our feelings. Trapped by our biology. But these are lies from the spirit of the anti-Christ. John promises that in Christ we have the power to overcome temptation because greater is He that is in us than is in the world.

Test #3: Hold fast to your identity in Christ. No matter what challenges may come. No matter what difficulties you may face. No matter how much stress and anxiety and fear you may endure. You are from God. You are in Christ. Your heart has been transformed and renewed by the Holy Spirit. Listen to God’s Word. Obey God’s commands. Trust in His will and His way for your life.

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 1-3, 1 John 5, Psalms 124, Proverbs 24:5-8

December 5, 2019
MORE THAN WE CAN HANDLE?

Readings for today: Hosea 1-3, 1 John 5, Psalms 124, Proverbs 29:5-8

How many times have I heard well-meaning people tell those who are hurting or grieving or suffering, "God won't give you more than you can handle." I think the prophets would beg to differ. As we've read through the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, how many times have we seen God ask - even demand - more from His prophets than any person should ever be able to handle? Speaking truth to power. Risking your life over and over again. Wandering naked through the streets. Embodying the coming judgment of God. And just when we can't think it could ever get any worse along comes the prophet Hosea. Called by God to marry a prostitute. His life would mirror the broken relationship between God and His people. Hosea's pain is a reflection of God's pain. Hosea's heartbreak at Gomer's continual betrayals is a reflection of God's heartbreak over Israel's worship of the pagan gods. The names of Hosea's children reflect not only his suffering but the divine pathos of God Himself as He wrestles with the unconditional love He pledged to Israel. When Hosea purchases his bride back from the slave traders in Hosea 3, one is reminded of the incredible grace of God which relentlessly pursues us to the day we die.

As a pastor, I have spent countless hours in marriage counseling. More often than not, they are in my office because one or both have been unfaithful. They have stepped out on their spouse with a friend. A co-worker. Perhaps even a prostitute. The pain is unspeakable. The betrayal beyond words. It is almost impossible to recover. Why? Because even in our sex-saturated culture there is a sense that sexual intimacy is the greatest gift one can give to another person. It is the gift of oneself. The gift of the deepest, most profound parts of oneself. It is an act that transcends simple physical pleasure, joining hearts and entangling souls in a deeply spiritual way. This is why God has always reserved it for the marriage covenant. Sex was something to be enjoyed within the bounds of an unconditional commitment to one other person for as long as you both shall live.

However, we have made a mockery of this gift. Our culture debases sexuality by promoting a hookup, swipe right culture. We called it sexual freedom and yet suffer from an epidemic of STD's, unplanned pregnancies, and sexual abuse. We thought it would lead to greater relational intimacy but the quality of our relationships continues to decline. Marriages fail at ever higher rates as individuals pursue their own pleasure and fulfillment at the expense of the other. The sexual revolution continues to gain steam through social media, television, movies, etc. which are univocal in their declaration that we are at the mercy of our hormonal urges. Whatever feels good is right and true regardless of the collateral damage it leaves in our wake.

It is abundantly clear throughout the book of Hosea that our only hope in life or death is the great faithfulness of God. The steadfast loyal love of God for His people. No matter what we may do or where we may go or how many times we play the "whore" and chase after other gods. God will not let go. He will redeem. He will save.

"Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God." And the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head. And they shall go up from the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel."(Hosea 1:10-11)

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. "And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.' For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more. And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord." (Hosea 2:14-18, 20)

"Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days." (Hosea 3:5)

The heart of the gospel has nothing to do with us and everything to do with God. The fundamental truth of our lives is that we all fall short of God's glory. We all run from God to the far country and play the prodigal. We all would much rather wallow in the muck and mire of sin than surrender to God. The reality is life often gives us more than we can handle which is why we need God. And the great news is He is faithful. He is loyal. Steadfast. True. He will never stop pursuing. Never stop watching. Never stop waiting for us to repent and return. There is nothing that can separate us from His love. Nothing that can snatch us out of His hand. Nothing that can break the eternal covenant He first made with us. This is good news! Even great news for those who love God and are called according to His purpose!

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 4-5, 2 John 1, Psalms 125, Proverbs 29:9-11

December 6, 2019
FACE TO FACE

Readings for today: Hosea 4-5, 2 John 1, Psalms 125, Proverbs 29:9-11

“Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete.” (2 John 1:12)

We live in such a lonely world. Though we are more connected than ever, our relationships are superficial at best. We no longer know how to talk to each other. No longer know how to engage each other. No longer know how to share with each other. I see this particularly in my children’s generation. It’s amazing to me how scared they often are to make a simple phone call much less talk to someone face to face. Of course, this isn’t just a “millennial thing.” People across the age spectrum are finding it hard to relate to each other.

I remember years ago being asked by an older woman if I would come talk to her neighbor about Jesus. I asked her how long she had lived next to this person. “Over thirty years” was her response. And why have you never shared Jesus with her? “Because we only talk about the Packers and the weather.” What do you know about this person? “Well, they lost their spouse a few years ago. Went through a bout of cancer. Struggled with their kids a bit.” And you’ve never shared Jesus with them? Never taken them a meal? Never invited them over for dinner? Never prayed with them in the midst of their struggles? “No”. The look on her face was heartbreaking. She simply did not know how to get from the Packers to the deeper issues her neighbor was struggling with. I can sympathize.

We live in a world that fosters disconnection from real, flesh and blood, face to face relationships. The busyness of our daily lives creates relational distance. The pace we try to keep promotes exhaustion. The activity level we maintain connects us with lots and lots of different people but prevents us from spending the kind of time we need to build deep, intimate friendships. The result is isolation. Loneliness. Social anxiety. Fear. These things conspire to create a vicious cycle that only leads us deeper and deeper into despair.

Contrast this way of life with the way of Jesus. The celebration of Christmas is the celebration of the Incarnation. This miraculous idea that God would actually leave heaven to come to earth. The Word becoming flesh and blood and moving into our neighborhood. God becoming one of us that He might see us face to face. Go eyeball to eyeball with His beloved children in order to draw them into intimate relationship with Him. I’ve often had people ask me why God couldn’t make His will more plain. Why can’t God make His love more obvious? Why doesn’t He just write us a note and spread it across the skies? Because God doesn’t work like that. God’s not into text messages or social media. He’s not going to shoot you an email or hit you up on Snapchat. He came for you. He’s coming for you. He will not rest until He gets to look you in the face and tell you of His deep love for you. This Christmas season, may we not only receive His love but share it face to face with those around us.

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 6-9, 3 John 1, Psalms 126, Proverbs 29:12-14

December 7, 2019

TAKING SIN SERIOUSLY

Readings for today: Hosea 6-9, 3 John 1, Psalms 126, Proverbs 29:12-14

“For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.” (Hosea 8:7)

We do not take sin seriously enough. We do not know how deep the corruption runs. We do not understand how ruined we are. We are utterly broken. Our desires jumbled up and disordered. Our loves completely out of alignment. We tend to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. We tend to think we are pretty good. Graded on a curve against those around us, we measure up. We're better than most. We're more thoughtful. More moral. More loving. We care. We're compassionate when the mood strikes us. Our hearts are tender in the face of tragedy. Our eyes fill with tears when we hear about a soccer team trapped in a cave or a school shooting or we see images of children being separated from their parents on the border. These emotions make us feel righteous. Morally good. So when we read the words of the prophets confronting God's people on their sin, we have a hard time believing he's really speaking to us.

“But they do not consider that I remember all their evil. Now their deeds surround them; they are before my face.” (Hosea 7:2) God remembers everything we've done. Every word we've said. Every thought we've had. Every emotion we've ever felt. He has seen it. He remembers it. Nothing is hidden from His sight. For Him, these things are continually before His face in living color. God knows what happens in the deepest recesses of our hearts. He knows those things we try our best to keep secret. He sees what happens on business trips. He knows our browser history. He hears those illicit conversations over phone, text, or through that email we like to think is private.

There are consequences for sin. God's justice must be satisfied. Who may come into His presence? Who may ascend to His holy hill? “He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart...” (Psalms 15:2) But this does not describe us. We are all weak. Like sheep we have wandered astray. We have turned aside, each to our own way. We do what is right in our own eyes without giving God a second thought. We do not intentionally seek to align ourselves with His will. Frankly, we don't even know how to do that because we can barely muster up the effort to worship Him on a weekly basis much less spend daily time in His Word and in prayer. We have not surrendered to Him. We do not want to bow the knee before Him. We want to live our lives the way we want to live them and we expect, even demand, God to bless us along the way. This is why Hosea says, “They have deeply corrupted themselves as in the days of Gibeah: he will remember their iniquity; he will punish their sins.” (Hosea 9:9)

We do not take sin seriously enough because we do not take God seriously enough. And because we do not take our sin seriously enough nor take God seriously enough, we do not truly grasp the depth and the breadth of His amazing grace. God looks at us honestly. He is fully aware of how deep the evil runs in each and every human heart. He knows we are broken beyond repair. Sick beyond healing. Dead in our trespasses. Completely unable to save ourselves. This is why He sent His only beloved Son. He gave Him as a gift. Offered Him up freely on our behalf. He did what we could not. He took our place. Died the death we deserved. Satisfied the justice of God. Took all our unrighteousness on Himself. He carried the sins of the world on His shoulders. He who was blameless and did only what was right actually became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God. It's the most astounding, shocking, radical turn of events imaginable! Those on death row receive pardon while the most innocent man in history is executed in their place! This is the good news of the gospel, friends! And available for all who will surrender their lives to Christ!

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 10-14, Jude 1, Psalms 127, Proverbs 29:15-17

December 8, 2019

SCRIPTURES FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Hosea 10-14, Jude 1, Psalms 127, Proverbs 29:15-17

Readings for tomorrow: Joel 1-3, Revelation 1, Psalms 128, Proverbs 29:18

December 9, 2019
REPENTANCE

Readings for today: Joel 1-3, Revelation 1, Psalms 128, Proverbs 29:18

Joel is one of my favorite books of the Old Testament mainly because of how it describes repentance and revival. There is a lot of talk in churches today about revival. A lot of prayers ascend asking God to bring revival. To pour out His Spirit. To bless our nation. To awaken the slumbering hearts of God's people across our great land. Why then does revival not come? Why does our culture continue its rapid descent into chaos? Why is there such a rise in hate and anger and rage? Why is God not answering our prayers?

According to Joel, the answer is quite clear. Repentance always precedes revival. We have not yet come to the end of ourselves. We have not yet exhausted our strength. We still believe on some level that it is up to us and our programs and our resources to bring this revival about. So we believe the lies. If we could just elect the right person. Just put the right programs in place. Just attend church more often. Just worship with more emotion. Sadly, we will do anything and everything to avoid falling on our faces, helpless before the Lord. We will do all we can to avoid putting on sackcloth and ashes. We simply refuse to bow the knee. Confession of sins both personal and corporate is a lost art. And this is why revival has not and will not come to the American church. We are too puffed up. Too prideful. Too divided. Too rich. Too comfortable. Too consumer-driven. We spend more time complaining and arguing than we do in heartfelt prayer. We spend much time guarding our hearts because we've been wounded than forgiving those who hurt us. We have such little faith but remain unwilling to put the time and effort in to deepen our relationship with Christ. I know these are broad generalizations but study after study confirms they are true.

Joel speaks prophetically to the American church. To our church. To my church. To my own heart.

"Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord." (Joel 1:13-14)

"Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God?" (Joel 2:12-14)

"Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, "Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" (Joel 2:15-17)

These are challenging words. Joel is getting in our face. He leaves us no room for equivocation. We either accept or reject them and the consequences of our decision is clear. If we reject them, there will be judgment. If we accept them, there will be blessing.

“Be glad, O children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given the early rain for your vindication; he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the latter rain, as before. "The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you.” (Joel 2:23-25)

“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.” (Joel 2:28)

Friends, the Word of God is clear. God desires to bring revival to His people. But revival requires repentance. Revival requires submission to God’s will. To God’s way. And most importantly, to God’s love. Until we do this, we will not see revival come. We cannot receive from God until we open our hearts and unclench our fists. And this is a process. It’s not something that happens easily. It is a daily decision we make to place ourselves before the Lord. Bow the knee. Believe Him for who He is and what He has to say.

Readings for tomorrow: Amos 1-3, Revelation 2:1-17, Psalms 129, Proverbs 29:19-20

December 10, 2019
GOD'S JUSTICE

Readings for today: Amos 1-3, Revelation 2:1-17, Psalms 129, Proverbs 29:19-20

We all want justice. We want those who do evil to get what they deserve. We want those who commit the crime to do the time. No one can stand above the law. No one should get a pass. Be they a President or a member of the US Congress. Be they a lawyer or a doctor. A pastor or a priest. Everyone is subject to the governing authorities and all should be held accountable for their actions. We believe this passionately. It's driving our political debates right now. It's the underlying premise behind the Mueller Report and the Horowitz Report and the Impeachment process. Justice is all we seem to talk about these days.

But what about God's justice? What about when God judges the nations of the earth? What about when God judges Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, the Ammonites, and Moab for the violence and suffering they caused? What do we think when God applies the "eye for an eye" standard against those who transgress His Law? We start to backpedal. We start making excuses. We reject justice in favor of mercy and even begin to question the character of God. Why? Because down deep. In places dark and secret in our hearts. We all know we are guilty. We all know we are sinful. We all know we make mistakes. We all know we commit crimes against God and our fellow human beings every single day. And while we will cry out for justice against others, we certainly don't want that same standard applied to us. While we will go on social media and attack others, we never want those guns turned on us. While we cast aspersions on other people's character, question their motives, and assume the absolute worst of their intentions; we definitely want to be given a break. Shown a little grace. Given a little mercy. In short, we are so quick to judge others but so unwilling to judge ourselves.

The same was true for Israel. As they people of God, they enjoyed a special relationship with their Creator. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth..." (Amos 3:2) God had chosen them from among the nations of the earth. He had shown them favor. Showered them with blessing. Given them His Law. God's desire was that they would become a light to the pagan nations that surrounded them. They would serve as His instrument of salvation in the world. But Israel rejected God's Word. They rebelled against God's Law. They betrayed God at every turn. So God lays down His judgment on His own people. They would not escape His righteous justice.

What was true for the people of Israel remained true for the churches of Revelation. What was true for the churches of Revelation remains true for us today. We all stand under God's judgment. We are all subject to God's justice. All of us are guilty. All of us stand condemned. Left on our own with no advocate to speak for us before the Father, all of us would suffer the same fate as the pagan nations that surrounded Israel or the Nicolaitans whom God hated. This is why we need Jesus. The Righteous One who took our place. Stood as our substitute. Took the punishment we deserved. Satisfied the demands of God's justice. Turned aside God's wrath. It is only through faith in Christ that we escape the wrath to come. This is the true message of Christmas. God loving the world so much He sends His only Son to suffer on our behalf. God desiring none to perish so He takes the sin of the world on His own shoulders. God unwilling to watch the creature made in His image continue their descent into darkness, evil, and pain so He plunges into the depths to rescue. To save. Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Amos 4-6, Revelation 2:18-3:6, Psalms 130, Proverbs 29:21-22

December 11, 2019
LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN...

Readings for today: Amos 4-6, Revelation 2:18-3:6, Psalms 130, Proverbs 29:21-22

Whenever I read the words from Amos 5:24, I immediately think of Martin Luther King Jr. This verse was one of many that formed the bedrock of the Civil Rights struggle in the 1960's. Delivered August 28, 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial, this sermon is one of the greatest ever delivered. Sadly, Martin's dream has yet to be realized but his words remain timely and relevant for our own time.

"I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of the Nation. Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon of light and hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as the joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacle of segregation and the chain of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corner of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we have come to the capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men -- black men as well as white men -- would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But it is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check -- a check that has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity in this Nation.

So we have come to cash this check. A check that will give us the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America that the fierce urgency is now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to life our Nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

It would be fatal for the Nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. 1963 is not an end, but a beginning. Those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will be content will have a rude awakening if the Nation returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquillity in America until the Negro is granted his

citizenship rights. The whirlwind of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our Nation until the bright day of Justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.

We must forever continue our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people -- for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is inextricably tied up with our destiny. They have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.

We cannot walk alone, and as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights: "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We can not be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating "For Whites Only." We cannot be satisfied so long as the Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and the Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied and will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

Go back to Mississippi. Go back to Alabama; go back to South Carolina; go back to Georgia; go back to Louisiana; go back to the slums and ghettoes of our northern cities knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

I say to you today, my friends, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this Nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed--"we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a Nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the conduct of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its Governor, having his lips dripping the words of interposition and nullification -- one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and little white girls as brothers and sisters.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted: every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plane, and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our Nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together; to pray together; to struggle together; to go to jail together; to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside let freedom ring."

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true. So let freedom ring. From the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire, let freedom ring. From the mighty mountains of New York, let freedom ring, from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania, let freedom ring, from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the crevatal slopes of California.

But not only that. Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill in Mississippi. From every mountainside.

Let freedom ring and when this happens...And when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at Last! Free at Last! Thank God Almighty, We're Free at Last!"

Readings for tomorrow: Amos 7-9, Revelation 3:7-22, Psalms 131, Proverbs 29:23

December 12, 2019
PSALMS OF ASCENT

Readings for today: Amos 7-9, Revelation 3:7-22, Psalms 131, Proverbs 29:23

“O Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.” (Psalms 131:1-3)

Today’s reading finds us in the middle of what the Bible calls the “Psalms of Ascent.” Psalms 120-134. Many believe these were the songs Israel sang as they ascended to Jerusalem to keep the three annual festivals detailed in Deuteronomy 16. They are songs of worship. Songs of praise. Songs of thanksgiving. They express the deep gratitude the people feel towards God for all He has done for them. They sing them together. They sing them as they gather. One can almost imagine thousands coming to Jerusalem all singing these songs with one voice. It must have been a powerful, moving scene. In addition, many scholars believe these were the songs Israel sang at different high points in their history like the dedication of Solomon’s Temple or the rebuilding of the walls during Nehemiah’s time. Over and over again, Israel returned to these psalms to express their faith and trust in God.

Christians have built on this tradition of worship. Many churches throughout the world sing these psalms in worship. The Eastern Orthodox Church sings these psalms every Friday during Vespers. The Roman Catholic Church schedules these psalms to be sung during daily prayer. The goal is to remind Christians we are on our own pilgrimage to a Heavenly Jerusalem and these psalms build the spiritual intensity of the worship service as we prepare for the reading of the gospel. It’s a powerful thing to experience.

I think these Psalms are particularly potent during the Christmas season. For centuries, Christmas dedicated the weeks leading up to Christmas for reflection and prayer and fasting. Advent is one of the “penitential seasons” of the church where we spend intentional time denying ourselves the pleasures of this world in order to prepare for the coming of the Christ child. Sadly, we have commercialized this season. We’ve turned it into a season of excess. We eat too much. Drink too much. Spend too much. While there is greater generosity and greater joy, there is also a lot of stress and anxiety and fear as well. Depression rates skyrocket. Suicide rates go through the roof. People experience crisis after crisis. All because we have taken our eyes off of Jesus - the reason for the season - and fix them on the things of this world. This is where the Psalms of Ascent come in. They help focus us back on God. They lift our eyes above the hills to the One who comes to our rescue. They draw us into the presence of God where we can quiet our souls and calm our fears. They restore our hope in the Lord.

Imagine if you took the next twelve days and intentionally slowed things down. Imagine if you took the next twelve days and intentionally quieted things down. Imagine if you took the next twelve days and you filled your time with the Lord and the people you love. How would that change your experience of Christmas this year? Instead of feeling rushed and overwhelmed, you may find yourself feeling peace and joy. Instead of struggling to fit everything in, you may find yourself more focused on those relationships that are most important to you. Instead of barely making it to Christmas and through Christmas, you may find yourself with plenty of time to sit at the manger wondering at the glory of it all.

Readings for tomorrow: Obadiah 1, Revelation 4, Psalms 132, Proverbs 29:24-25

December 13, 2019
THE WAY OF JESUS

Readings for today: Obadiah 1, Revelation 4, Psalms 132, Proverbs 29:24-25

“For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” - Audre Lorde

At first glance, Audre Lorde is probably the last name you would expect to see cited on this blog. Lorde was a revolutionary. A proud black lesbian feminist whose deeply personal writings - both poetry and prose - contributed significantly to the Civil Rights movement. Most definitely not a Christian, Lorde identified more with the deities of her African roots. However, one of her most famous essays contains this powerful phrase, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Her essential argument is that real change requires us to dismantle current frameworks of thinking - the racist, patriarchal system in her mind - and replace them with new systems of thought. Put another way, any change generated from within a broken system remains broken and corrupted by the very system one is trying to change. I agree with her. Strangely enough, so does an ancient Jewish prophet named Obadiah.

“But do not gloat over the day of your brother in the day of his misfortune; do not rejoice over the people of Judah in the day of their ruin; do not boast in the day of distress. Do not enter the gate of my people in the day of their calamity; do not gloat over his disaster in the day of his calamity; do not loot his wealth in the day of his calamity. Do not stand at the crossroads to cut off his fugitives; do not hand over his survivors in the day of distress. For the day of the Lord is near upon all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head.” (Obadiah 1:12-15)

How many times have we seen it happen throughout human history? A marginalized group of people rise up in rebellion. Overthrow their oppressors. Replace those in authority with their own people. Only to fall prey to the same temptations. I think of what’s happening right now in Bolivia as a charismatic, revolutionary, indigenous leader swept into power by a populist revolt seeks to overturn the very constitution he swore to uphold by ignoring term limits. I think of the number of African nations that have watched this vicious cycle repeat itself over and over again. And I have concerns about the infighting in our own country. I think about the scorched earth policy both political parties employ to deny the other any kind of victory. It’s clearly a struggle for power with the winner gloating over the misfortune of the loser. The victor seeking to loot the wealth of the vanquished. The one who wins not content until they grind their opponent to dust. It’s a zero sum game. And all of us are perpetrators. All of us are victims. We will not find peace until we stop playing the “master’s game.” Stop playing by the “master’s rules.” Stop using the “master’s tools” to tear one another down.

The day of the Lord is coming, friends. A day of judgment. A day of recompense. When God Himself will arrive to judge the nations of the earth. As we have done...so shall it be done to us. Our deeds will return on our own heads. Our work will be tested with fire. Those who have placed their trust in Christ. Who have refused to play the by the rules of this world. Who have refused to conform to the patterns of this world. Who have refused to surrender to the powers and principalities who rule this world will be saved. As Christians, our primary allegiance is to the King of kings. Our primary loyalty is to the Lord of lords. Our citizenship belongs to the

kingdom of heaven. Our identity is grounded not in race. Not in sexuality. Not in gender. Not in wealth or power or privilege. But in Christ alone. As such, we are no longer slaves to the broken systems of this world. No longer servants to the corrupt frameworks of this earth. No longer bound and oppressed by the hate-filled, rage-fueled, violence-driven authority structures of this age. We can choose a different way. We can choose the way of peace. The way of hope. The way of joy. The way of love. We can choose the way of Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Jonah 1-4, Revelation 5, Psalms 133, Proverbs 29:26-27

December 14, 2019
DYING TO SELF

Readings for today: Jonah 1-4, Revelation 5, Psalms 133, Proverbs 29:26-27

Jonah is a great book. Especially when read in it's historical context. The northern kingdom of Israel has just been destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. They've been scattered to the four winds. Forcibly resettled in new lands. Their way of life gone forever. And now we get to read of God's prophetic attempt to call those same Assyrians to repentance. To say Jonah is an unwilling prophet is an understatement! He must have had a tremendously frustrating career. His own people refuse to follow the Lord. They keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again. They are unfaithful. They are unworthy. They are idolatrous. As a result, God sends the Assyrians to punish them. To drive them to their knees in humility and repentance. When that doesn't work, those same Assyrians become the instrument of His righteous judgment on His own people. One can only imagine the hatred a man like Jonah would harbor for such people. They are Gentiles. Unbelievers. Unclean. Unworthy of God's grace. But then he receives the call to go and preach the gospel to them. What the heck?!

Jonah is a great book to read today. Our world is full of hatred and enmity. Social media gives full vent to our anger and rage. Judging others seems to be the order of the day and grace is in short supply. If someone disagrees with you, they are almost sub-human. Worthy only to be unfriended, unfollowed, and publicly shamed. If someone questions you, they become a target. Attacked. Torn down. Their character assassinated. If someone doesn't affirm you, they get cut out of your life almost immediately. It is sad and disheartening and ultimately self-destructive.

Perhaps this is why Jesus calls us to love our enemies. Love humanizes. Love requires grace and forgiveness. Love requires listening and humility. Ultimately, love is selfless. It requires us to die to self in order to live for someone else. It forces us to take a good hard look at ourselves, our motives, our intentions, and lay them aside before engaging others. It celebrates diversity and assumes the best of others. It honors difference and dignifies those who disagree. It is deeply practical. And it should set Christians apart from the rest of the world.

Unfortunately, too many Christians seem to have forgotten this command. They explain it away. Rationalize it. Reject it. And the result is only more pain as the vicious cycle continues. Every Christian should ponder and pray over the closing words of Jonah... "When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:8-11) We need to ask ourselves if we do well to be so angry? So enraged? We need to ask ourselves if we pity those who are like us more than those who are different? Pity those who agree with us more than those who disagree? Pity our friends more than our enemies? Should God not pity Democrats and Republicans? Liberals and conservatives? Whites and blacks? Asians and Latinos? Aboriginal people as well as immigrants? Should God not pity Americans as well as Mexicans? Israelis as well as Palestinians? North as well as South Koreans? Should God not pity Trump supporters as

well as Bernie supporters? Rich as well as poor? Privileged as well as under-privileged? The list is infinite but thankfully so is God's grace.

The way to life is the way of love. And the way of love is the way of sacrifice. We must die so others might live. We must lay down our lives so that others may thrive. We must give our lives away so that others might rise. Friends and enemies alike. Worthy and unworthy alike. This is what it means to follow Jesus. This is what it looks like to have the heart of God.

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 1-4, Revelation 6, Psalms 134, Proverbs 30:1-4

December 15, 2019

SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Micah 1-4, Revelation 6, Psalms 134, Proverbs 30:1-4

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 5-7, Revelation 7, Psalms 135, Proverbs 30:5-6

December 16, 2019
GOD'S EVERLASTING ARMS

Readings for today: Micah 5-7, Revelation 7, Psalms 135, Proverbs 30:5-6

I grew up going to church every Sunday. I said the creeds. Prayed the prayers. Sang the songs. My mom was a music teacher and she instilled in all of us a great love for music, especially the music of the church. My brothers and I all participated in choir and we learned the great hymns. One of my favorites growing up was a hymn titled, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." More upbeat than most, the chorus goes like this. "Leaning, leaning; Safe and secure from all alarms! Leaning, leaning; Leaning on the everlasting arms." Though I did not come to faith until college, I've always experienced God as a comforting presence. Mainly because of songs like this one that declare His nature and character. Even though I was not a believer, God was instilling in me through the music, prayers, creeds, and sermons I heard a deep understanding of who He is. Building a bridge to my heart that I would later walk across at CU.

I love how Micah concludes his prophetic work. "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." (Micah 7:18-19) In this passage we hear echoes of the great epiphany of Moses from Exodus 34 where God literally appears and reveals His divine nature and character to His people. "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7) Throughout their history. Thousands upon thousands of years. Israel leaned on the everlasting arms of their God. They trusted in His forgiveness and grace. They experienced His deep, loyal, steadfast love. They rejoiced in His great compassion. Every week when they would gather for worship, they sang. They prayed. They declared the glory of God. And they passed on their faith to each successive generation.

Why is worship so important? Why is reading Scripture every day so important? Why is coming before Christ on a regular basis so crucial for our faith? Because we need to be reminded of God's great faithfulness. We need to be reminded of His great love and compassion. His mercy and grace. His forgiveness. We need to be reminded in the midst of judgment that while "weeping may tarry for a night, joy comes in the morning." (Psalm 30:5b) We need to be reminded that while God will not be mocked and will by no means clear those who are guilty of sin, He will not remain angry with us forever. "For His anger is fleeting but His favor lasts a lifetime." (Psalm 30:5a) We need to be reminded that God knows our weakness and has provided a way for us to salvation. "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days...And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth." (Micah 5:2, 4)

I don't know what you might be facing today. The challenges. The crises. The difficulties. Maybe it's a health issue. Maybe it's a family issue. Maybe it's a job issue. Maybe you're staring at an uncertain future. Maybe you've made a huge mistake and you're paying the price. Let me

encourage you to lean on the everlasting arms of Jesus! Trust Him. Believe in Him. Place your faith in Him to carry you through! Maybe things are going well for you. Life is blessed. Success seems to follow you wherever you go. Your kids are doing great. Your career is on the upward swing. You're surrounded by people who love you. Praise Jesus! Thank Him for His great faithfulness! Rejoice in His favor! Share it with others.

God is the same yesterday, today and forever, friends.(Hebrews 13:8) There is no shadow or turning with Him.(James 1:17) "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" (Numbers 23:19) Believe Him for your life today!

Readings for tomorrow: Nahum 1-3, Revelation 8, Psalms 136, Proverbs 30:7-9

December 17, 2019
TWO-FACED GOD

Readings for today: Nahum 1-3, Revelation 8, Psalms 136, Proverbs 30:7-9

“The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers. The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it. Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him. The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him. But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness.” (Nahum 1:2-8)

The Romans had a myth about a god named Janus. Janus was the god of beginnings and endings. He looked to both the future and the past. He was the god of transitions. The god of dualities. The god of doorways and gates. As such, he was always depicted as having two faces.

One of the most common questions I get when we read the Bible in groups is why God seems to have two faces. Why God seems to have two natures. The Old Testament often depicts Him as a vengeful, angry deity capable of great atrocities while the New Testament often depicts Him as a God of love and grace and mercy. What gives? How can both be true? Should we just jettison the Old Testament as irrelevant to our understanding of God’s nature and character as some are wont to do? Jesus doesn’t leave us that option. He tells us not one “jot or tittle” will pass from the Law. He clearly believes His Messiahship is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as much as He is our God today. He is the Alpha and the Omega. The Beginning and the End. He is the Lord of life and the Lord of time. In a sense, He is the true Janus with this one critical difference...He only has one face.

God is eternally consistent and He interacts with His creation in an eternally consistent way. From the beginning, God makes the heavens and the earth out of nothing. It is perfect. It is good. He then makes a creature in His own image. Endows it with the ability to discern right from wrong. Good from evil. Obedience from disobedience. He gives this creature dominion over all He has made. The sole reason for this creature’s existence is to steward all creation for the glory of God. Care for creation as the high priest of God. And creation itself is designed to thrive under the authority of this image-bearing creature. Tragically, the creature rebels against God. Rejects his calling. And abuses his authority. Now the world suffers. The world groans. The world cries out in pain. Disease. Pestilence. Violence. Natural disasters. Famine. Drought. These are signs of a world in chaos. A world in turmoil. A world in upheaval because the high priest has abandoned his call in order to serve himself.

All of us are guilty. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory God originally intended for us. All of us are naturally selfish. Self-interested. Self-promoting. Self-absorbed. We are our highest priority. Taking care of self is our number one goal. This is the opposite of God’s design. In God’s eyes, it is “evil” and the source of all the pain in the world. God is just. He is holy. He is righteous. So He judges the people of the earth. He sends His prophets to call them to account for their sin. He rightly demands they get back to work. Return to their high calling. Fulfill the

purpose for which they were designed in the first place. But humanity continues to rebel. Continues to dig in their heels. They make other gods. Gods they can control. Gods they can manipulate. Gods who reflect their broken image. These gods are lifeless of course. They offer nothing because they are not real. So sin piles up on sin. The injustice and violence and suffering of the world increases. Eventually, God does step in. He punishes. He puts an end to evil. The results are terrifying in their scope and power. Still humanity protests. Still humanity blame-shifts. How can God be so cruel? How can God be so unfair? How can God be so unloving?

Eventually, in the fullness of time, God sends His one and only Son into the world. This has been God's plan all along. Hatched in the mists of eternity before time began. God plotting to rescue His creation from the Fall. Planning to redeem the creature made in His image and restore him to his rightful place in the world. Sin has piled up on sin. The injustice and violence and suffering only continues to increase. So God steps in. He takes our punishment. He puts an end to evil. The scope and power of Jesus' suffering and death is terrifying to behold. How can God be so cruel to His Son? How can God be so unfair as to lay the sin of the world on His shoulders? How can the Father be so unloving towards His beloved Son?

In Christ, the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament come together. Jesus satisfies the demands of the Father's justice. He turns away the Father's righteous wrath. He takes the Father's righteous judgment on Himself. In so doing, He becomes a refuge for all who would come to Him. He becomes a stronghold for all who would run to Him. He becomes a sanctuary for all who would seek shelter in Him. He is good and His love endures forever!

Readings for tomorrow: Habakkuk 1-3, Revelation 9, Psalms 137, Proverbs 30:10

December 18, 2019
IS GOD ENOUGH?

Readings for today: Habakkuk 1-3, Revelation 9, Psalms 137, Proverbs 30:10

“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.” (Habakkuk 3:17-19)

When I was in college, I attended a Bible study one summer where the leader challenged us all to think about why we loved God. Drawing in material from across the Old Testament, he forced us to ask the fundamental question, “Is God worthy of our love simply because He’s God? Or does God need to earn our love and devotion on some level?” That may seem like an easy question to answer on the face of it but consider the implications. Consider the words of Habakkuk above. What if God withheld His blessings from your life? What if your work didn’t prosper? You never got married? Your children suffered? What if your health failed? You were discriminated against? Or falsely accused and imprisoned? What if your friends walked away from you? Your family turned against you? And you were left alone? What if your body turned against you and you contracted a disease like ALS? Or schizophrenia emerged when you were in your early 20’s? Or early dementia set in robbing you of your faculties? Would you still love God? Would He still be worthy of your devotion? Taking it one step further, would you rejoice? Praise the God of your salvation?

These are the issues the leader of our group forced us to confront as we wrestled with the fundamental question, “Is God Enough?” From a ministry perspective, consider the call God placed on Habakkuk’s life. He is called to preach judgment. Suffering. Pain. The coming retribution for cumulative sins of the people of God. This is not your best life now. Or seven steps to a better you. Or God has a wonderful plan for your life. This is hard stuff and I am sure it didn’t make him very popular. He probably didn’t pastor a mega-church. Probably didn’t fill an auditorium. Probably would not have appeared on the cover of OutReach Magazine. He fails the seeker-sensitive test. Fails to make faith attractive. He puts a stumbling block to faith in the path of every single person who would give him a listen. And yet, everything he says is true. God’s truth.

Passages like this force us to grapple with why we believe. Why we love God. Why we worship Him and serve Him. Is it for the eschatological goodies? Eternal salvation? An eternal home where the streets are paved with gold? A place where there is no more suffering, crying, or pain? Is that why we love God? Because He provides a safe and secure retirement plan? Or is it for the temporal blessings? Health. Wealth. Success. Take these things away and we often find our faith on the chopping block. I can’t tell you the number of Christians I’ve counseled over the years who’ve walked away from their faith simply because they felt God had let them down.

Is God enough? It’s a question every Christian has to wrestle with at some point in their lives. It’s fundamentally the question the great heroes of our faith wrestled with in their lives. Noah believed God was enough even as he watched the world be destroyed. Abraham and Sarah believed God was enough even though they were barren and had no children. Moses believed God was enough even as he was being sent back to what I’m sure he assumed would be certain

death in Egypt. David believed God was enough even after he committed rape and adultery. Jesus believed His Father was enough which is why He embraced the cross. Paul believed God was enough which is how he learned to be content in all circumstances. And on and on it goes. Down through the ages. The question is posed to every generation in all times and places. Until it comes to us. Do we believe God is enough? Or do we need more? What if God took away our American Dream? What if God took away our health? Our wealth? Our success? What if it served God's purposes to strip these things out of our lives? Would He still be enough for us? Or would we find ourselves needing more?

Especially during this Christmas season, I hope you will take time to ponder and reflect on the gift of Jesus. He truly is more than enough!

Readings for tomorrow: Zephaniah 1-3, Revelation 10, Psalms 138, Proverbs 30:11-14

December 19, 2019
THE CHALLENGE OF REVELATION

Readings for today: Zephaniah 1-3, Revelation 10, Psalms 138, Proverbs 30:11-14

I always find it strangely appropriate to finish my Bible reading each year in the Book of Revelation. As we head into the celebration of Christmas - the first advent of Jesus Christ - it is good to let our hearts naturally turn to His second advent. The day when He comes again. When the living and the dead are raised and heaven and earth come together in consummate glory and the reign of God is established once and for all.

When will it happen? How will it happen? No one really knows and the Book of Revelation is notoriously difficult to decipher and understand. So here are some basic ground rules as you wade into the final book of the Bible. First, it is written by John while in prison on the island of Patmos. In order to get this letter out to the churches, John had to write it in code. The Roman authorities would have screened every piece of communication coming in and out of the prison so John had to be careful. Second, the writing is apocalyptic which is a very specific genre known to many in the ancient world. The fantastic images and visions are hallmarks of this type of literature. Third, the churches John is writing to are under persecution. They are facing the prospect of torture and death on a daily basis. This book is meant to encourage and equip them so they can endure in the rough days ahead. Fourth, many different Christians approach this book from many different interpretive angles. There is no one way to read this book and we want to make sure to extend liberty and charity to one another as we go. Wherever you land on the "End Times" theological spectrum, what's most important is that we all agree Jesus will come again.

Does this mean we should just chuck Revelation? Of course not. But as we read, we should remind ourselves over and over again of the words John spoke to the seven churches. They must become the "lens" through which we read the rest of the book. After all, this letter was initially intended for their benefit and encouragement. As you and I struggle and wrestle through the ups and downs of life. As we battle our own demons and fight against forces beyond our control. As we watch our country and our world descend into more and more chaos. I believe these words from John become more and more relevant. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." (Revelation 1:8) God spoke the first Word in creation and God will have the last Word in consummation. He who began all things, will bring them to a close according to His will and good pleasure. God is. This is all we know. This is really all we can say. God stands outside the time and space continuum He created and will remain there looking in until He determines the time is right for His return. As John said in His Gospel, God revealed Himself to the world but the world did not recognize Him. He revealed Himself to His people, His family, and they rejected Him. When He comes again, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. He will leave no doubt. "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen." (Revelation 1:7)

It is good to know that God is in control. Not in a flippant, cliché, empty platitude kind of way but a real, gritty, earthy, down-in-the-weeds, feet-on-the-ground kind of experience that undergirds all of life. It is good to hold fast to an eternal perspective when things in this life go haywire. To know God is at work even now building a new Jerusalem which will one day descend to earth. To know that God is at work even now preparing a place for each and every one of us

that we may dwell with Him forever. To know that God is at work not just in heaven above but in earth below to draw many to Himself. He sends us out in His name to fight injustice. To minister peace. To heal the sick. Visit those in prison. Clothe the naked. Feed the hungry. Bring the good news of the gospel to those who have not heard or who need to hear again. Do we as the church often lose our way? Of course. Just look at the warnings John issues to the seven churches. Ephesus, you have lost your first love. Smyrna, you are about to suffer terribly. Pergamum, too many of follow false teaching. Thyatira, you tolerate sexual immorality and idolatry. Sardis, your works are not yet complete. Philadelphia, hold fast to your faith. Laodicea, pick a side. Sounds about right. Par for the course for the church of Jesus Christ. We are mixed bag. Broken people trying our best to follow Jesus. We won't always get it right. We won't always get it wrong. Thankfully, our eternal destiny does not rest on our faithfulness but on the faithfulness of the One who declares, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." (Revelation 1:17-18)

As your journey through the Bible in 2019 comes to a close and you ponder what the Lord may be calling you to in 2020, what lessons have you learned? How has your faith been challenged? Where have you found comfort? How have you grown spiritually? What questions persist? What doubts continue to plague? Don't be afraid to take these to Jesus! He is not afraid of your fears. He is not daunted by your questions. He doesn't get angry over your battle with unbelief. He is here to help. He is here to comfort. He is here to guide. Trust Him and He will see you through!

Readings for tomorrow: Haggai 1-2, Revelation 11, Psalms 139, Proverbs 30:15-16

December 20, 2019
CREATED FOR WORSHIP

Readings for today: Haggai 1-2, Revelation 11, Psalms 139, Proverbs 30:15-16

What is the meaning of life? Why are we put on this green earth? What is our purpose? What is God's will? These are the fundamental questions of our existence. And no matter how hard we try or how much we drink or how many pills we take or how much we smoke or how much we eat or how much we save or how much we spend or how hard we work out or how successful we become or how much sex we experience or how many children we have or how much power and control we are able to gain...we will never find peace until we find the answers. For thousands of years humanity has been on this quest. Searched high and low. Traversed the globe. Looked in every nook and cranny on earth. To no avail. U2 was right. We still haven't found what we're looking for.

What is the chief end of man? What is the reason for our existence? Why are we here? To worship God and enjoy Him forever. To praise God for who He is and what He's all about. To serve God and bear His glorious image to the world. This is why God comes down so hard on Israel when they neglect the rebuilding of His Temple. It's not that God's homeless. It's not that God is feeling lonely. It's not that God somehow is dependent on the worship of His people. Far from it. God created the universe and all that is in it and exists outside time and space in perfect communion with Himself. But God does love us and He desires to have a relationship with us and the Temple is the place where Israel could come and meet with Him. The Temple was the place where Israel could come and worship Him. The Temple was the place where heaven met earth and on that threshold we find all our fundamental questions answered.

"Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now, therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes...Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord." (Haggai 1:3-6, 8)

God will have the worship He deserves and the worship He demands. He created us to praise Him. Created us to worship Him. Created us to serve Him. When we abandon those purposes or neglect those purposes, our lives descend into chaos and confusion. When we are attentive to the Lord and surrender to His will and willingly offer our lives to Him, we experience the blessings of peace and joy and love that pass all understanding. As you head into Christmas this year, where is your heart? Is it drawn towards worship? Drawn to the stable? Drawn to the manger? Drawn towards the Christ child? Do you find your heart longing to go to the "Temple" to worship the Living God?

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 1, Revelation 12, Psalms 140, Proverbs 30:17

December 21, 2019

UNDERSTANDING REVELATION

Readings for today: Zechariah 1, Revelation 12, Psalms 140, Proverbs 30:17

Imagine for a moment you live in a world full of violence. Suffering. Pain. Disease. A world where food can be scarce. Clean water unreliable. Disposable income non-existent. Imagine your political leaders are corrupt. Regime change is a constant. Imagine armies marching through your town, your city, your community with frequency. Stripping your storehouses bare. Often burning your fields. Stealing everything of value. Imagine feeling trapped. Helpless. Powerless.

Now layer in the fact that you are a Christian in a predominantly pagan city. There are only about twenty to thirty of you. You have no wealth. No political power. No cultural influence. You are considered an oddity at best, seditious at worst. Because you refuse to participate in the cult of the emperor or the cultural festivals of your city, you are often persecuted. The people taking out their anger and frustration on you with great regularity. Because you follow special rules regarding diet, practice sexual restraint, and care for the sick, poor, and dying; you stand out. You cannot hide. You are marginalized.

Such was the lot of the early Christians John was writing to and it is against this backdrop that we have to read Revelation. Especially passages like the one we find in chapter twelve. The early Christians faced significant persecution. Their lives were threatened almost every day. Living out their faith was not safe. It was costly. It was sacrificial. They were discriminated against in the workplace, in the marketplace, and in the halls of political power in their communities. So when John writes about the suffering of the woman in Revelation and the terrifying might of the dragon as he pursues her, one can easily imagine those early Christians drawing strength and hope from his words... "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death." (Revelation 12:10-11)

One of the reasons reading and understanding Revelation is so hard for us is we've never experienced persecution. Not on the level of our brothers and sisters in the first century or in places like China or Iran today. We have lived relatively comfortable lives of privilege, power, wealth, and influence. We've enjoyed a somewhat unprecedented run of peace especially if one is white and middle class. We've not had to grapple with institutional discrimination. Systemic persecution. We don't know what it's like to be targeted by the government, and more importantly, the government's police force. And so we are left to speculate. Left to hypothesize on the identity of the woman and the dragon. Left to conjecture on when the war will happen and why God allows the war in the first place.

These questions are important ones but it is equally important to keep in mind the cultural distance between us and those Christians who are living under intense persecution around the world, including our own country. For them, these words are not allegorical but literal. They know what it's like to hear the dragon's roar, feel his breath, and endure his relentless pursuit. They know what it's like to watch their loved ones suffer and struggle and die for their faith. They are the casualties of the very real war being waged in the heavens. The dragon will not go quietly. He will not give up easily. He wants to take as many with him as he can.

So how do we read and understand this difficult book? We humbly let these truths sink in. We resist the temptation to engage this book philosophically and instead try to read it from the perspective of those who suffer. What hope can we find? What can we learn about perseverance and endurance and facing our trials by faith? How can we hold onto faith in the Son of God who came into the world to defeat the powers of darkness and destroy the devil once and for all?

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 2-3, Revelation 13, Psalms 141, Proverbs 30:18-20

December 22, 2019

SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Zechariah 2-3, Revelation 13, Psalms 141, Proverbs 30:18-20

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 4-5, Revelation 14, Psalms 142, Proverbs 30:21-23

December 23, 2019
SEALED AND SET APART

Readings for today: Zechariah 4-5, Revelation 14, Psalms 142, Proverbs 30:21-23

One of the more common questions I get from the book of Revelation has to do with the identity of the 144,000 listed in chapters seven and fourteen. Those who take a “dispensational premillennialist” view of Revelation will argue that after the rapture of the church, the Holy Spirit will set apart 144,000 Jewish believers who evangelize the earth. Others will argue - like the Jehovah’s Witnesses - that this is a special group of believers set apart by God. My belief is that this number is symbolic, representing the full number of those who have been redeemed.

Again, this is muddy water we’re swimming in. Interpreting Revelation is difficult at best and there are godly men and women who take different positions on these issues. So it’s important to hold loosely here to our eschatological positions while we hold tightly to one another in fellowship.

Why do I believe the 144,000 is symbolic? Several reasons. First and foremost, is the fact that the number itself is highly stylized. Numbers are often used symbolically throughout Scripture to communicate a deeper truth. We have already seen from much of the writings of the New Testament that one of the biggest challenges facing the early church was the inclusion of the Gentile believers into largely Jewish fellowships. Remember, John is writing to actual churches who are facing severe persecution and he is seeking to encourage them. So it makes perfect sense that in John’s vision from God, an angel of the Lord seals 144,000. A number combining the 12 tribes of Israel with the 12 apostles of Jesus multiplied by 1000 - a number which the Bible often uses to describe a multitude too large to count. Indeed, the very next section in chapter seven talks about “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9-10)

Second, the list in chapter seven of the tribes of Israel is unique and highly stylized as well. Judah is listed first, probably because Jesus is descended from this particular tribe thus giving him primacy over his older brother Reuben. Joseph is listed which is unusual as his place was taken by his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Levi is listed which is also somewhat unusual in that he is left out of some Old Testament lists since he didn’t inherit any land. Also, because room needs to be made for both of Joseph’s sons to be listed. Dan is left out, perhaps because his territory was the center of idolatry in ancient Israel. The point here is that this list is unique and actually not in alignment with Old Testament history which means a more symbolic, theological point is being made.

Third, when this number reappears in chapter fourteen, the 144,000 is described as the “redeemed from the earth” or “redeemed/purchased from humanity” which is universal language. Furthermore, if one is going to take a more literal view then one has to conclude that the 144,000 represent a special group of celibate, Jewish evangelists sent out to the earth. I tend to believe the language continues to be symbolic here with sexual purity representing the holiness attributed to those who believe - both Jew and Gentile alike - by the blood of the Lamb.

So what's the point? Are we just arguing over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? I think the larger issue at stake here is this...in this world we will suffer tribulation. In this world we will suffer persecution for our faith. Perhaps we've escaped for a time in America but those days are rapidly coming to a close. Christian hegemony has come to an end in the West and we will soon find ourselves faced with the challenges our brothers and sisters face around the world. John's Revelation will become even more significant in the years ahead not as an intellectual exercise as we try to "crack the code" but as an encouragement in our suffering for Jesus. Just as John wanted to encourage the early Christians to hold fast to our faith even under great trial, so he encourages us to do the same. We have been sealed as God's own people. We have been set apart to proclaim the excellencies of His grace. We have been saved from a crooked and perverse generation and now are sent out to be His lights in the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 6-7, Revelation 15, Psalms 143, Proverbs 30:24-28

December 24, 2019
CHRISTMAS EVE

Readings for today: Zechariah 6-7, Revelation 15, Psalms 143, Proverbs 30:24-28

It's Christmas Eve. The most special and miraculous night of the year. I think of the millions who will gather around the globe this evening to sing praises to God for all He has done. To worship Christ the newborn King. To marvel at God's presence in a manger. To tell the old, old story once again.

Why does this story refuse to die? Why does it not just fade into history like so many other stories? What is it about this particular baby that makes Him stand out from all others? As many have pointed out over the years, human history is full of myths and legends. Full of miracles and signs and wonders. Many different religions have come and gone over the centuries. Why has Christianity persisted? Why does it remain so compelling? Historians puzzle over the answer. The rise of the Christian faith is one of the most unlikely things that has ever occurred. There really is no good human explanation for how a rag-tag bunch of uneducated disciples were able to convert an empire within three centuries. No one really understands or can explain how a group of largely poor, powerless, marginalized, and persecuted people were able to spread the gospel so far and wide.

Perhaps it is true? Perhaps this baby we celebrate tonight truly is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Perhaps He is who He says He is. God incarnate in human flesh come to dwell among us. Come to be with us. Come to fight for us. This, of course, is the conclusion of literally billions of people on the earth today and throughout history. It is what keeps them coming back. It's what keeps them preaching. Keeps them serving. Keeps them giving so much of themselves for the sake of the world.

I love the picture today from the Book of Revelation. The saints of God who have triumphed over death. Those who have persevered through the trials and tribulations of this life. Those who have endured suffering and persecution but have held fast to their faith in Christ. Together, they gather before the throne. Spread out over a sea of glass mingled with fire. And what are they doing? They're singing. They're worshipping. They're praising God for all He has done. "And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying "Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed." (Revelation 15:3-4)

Tonight you and I have the chance to sing the "song of the Lamb" once again. Sing the song of the Emmanuel. Wherever you gather this evening and whoever you gather with, I pray it is a special time of worship. May Christ fill your hearts with His presence and perfect love! Merry Christmas!

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 8, Revelation 16, Psalms 144, Proverbs 30:29-31

December 25, 2019

CHRISTMAS

Readings for today: Zechariah 8, Revelation 16, Psalms 144, Proverbs 30:29-31

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 9, Revelation 17, Psalms 145, Proverbs 30:32

December 26, 2019
SONGS OF PRAISE

Readings for today: Zechariah 9, Revelation 17, Psalms 145, Proverbs 30:32

There may not be a better Psalm for the day after Christmas. After all the songs have been sung. The Word preached. The candles lit. The majesty and mystery of Christmas Eve comes to a close. We go to our homes. We eat good food. We drink good wine. We enjoy special time with those we love. Then life ramps up again. We head back to work. Homes empty as friends and family catch flights back home. Gifts are returned. Decorations taken down and put away for another year. Before we know it, we launch into another year.

It's easy to forget God in the midst of ordinary life. It's easy to lose sight of Him. It's easy for the feelings of peace and joy and love and grace to fade the further we get from Christmas. The Psalmist encourages us to keep praising God. To keep reminding ourselves of all His wonderful acts. To remain consciously aware of His abiding presence. To lay hold of His perfect love which casts out all fear. How do we do this? We worship. We praise. We glorify God each and every day of each and every week of each and every month in the coming year.

“I will exalt you, my God and King, and praise your name forever and ever. I will praise you every day; yes, I will praise you forever. Great is the Lord! He is most worthy of praise! No one can measure his greatness. Let each generation tell its children of your mighty acts; let them proclaim your power. I will meditate on your majestic, glorious splendor and your wonderful miracles. Your awe-inspiring deeds will be on every tongue; I will proclaim your greatness. Everyone will share the story of your wonderful goodness; they will sing with joy about your righteousness. The Lord is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. The Lord is good to everyone. He showers compassion on all his creation. All of your works will thank you, Lord, and your faithful followers will praise you. They will speak of the glory of your kingdom; they will give examples of your power. They will tell about your mighty deeds and about the majesty and glory of your reign. For your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom. You rule throughout all generations. The Lord always keeps his promises; he is gracious in all he does. The Lord helps the fallen and lifts those bent beneath their loads. The eyes of all look to you in hope; you give them their food as they need it. When you open your hand, you satisfy the hunger and thirst of every living thing. The Lord is righteous in everything he does; he is filled with kindness. The Lord is close to all who call on him, yes, to all who call on him in truth. He grants the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cries for help and rescues them. The Lord protects all those who love him, but he destroys the wicked. I will praise the Lord, and may everyone on earth bless his holy name forever and ever.” (Psalms 145:1-21)

There is nothing more important for your spiritual life than meditating on promises of God. Reminding yourself of His steadfast love and faithfulness day after day. God is good. All the time. God is great. All the time. God is gracious and merciful. All the time. He is close to all who call on Him with a sincere heart. He protects those who love Him. He hears the cries of His people. He answers the prayers offered in His name and for his glory.

Friends, we are coming to the end of yet another year of reading Scripture together. Some of you finished early. Others fell behind. Others will finish right on time. I trust all of you wrestled and struggled and prayerfully reflected on how God was speaking to you through His Word as we read. It's not easy to read the Bible. It's not easy to attempt to immerse yourself in the strange

world of Scripture. But I believe God rewards those who diligently seek Him and I am thankful for the questions you asked. The doubts you wrestled over. The fears you courageously expressed. The way your faith has been challenged and tested and grown. I want to invite you to join us in 2020 for another round. We will launch around January 5th in the new year with a chronological plan that will involve reading six days with Sundays off as we join together in corporate worship. Looking forward to it!

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 10-11, Revelation 18, Psalms 146, Proverbs 30:33

December 27, 2019
RESOLUTIONS

Readings for today: Zechariah 10-11, Revelation 18, Psalms 146, Proverbs 30:33

What are your resolutions for the coming year? The promises you are making yourself? Is it to eat better? Exercise more regularly? Is it to stop drinking? Stop smoking? Conquer some other addiction in your life? Is it to dream bigger? Start a new business? Launch out on a new career? Is it to try something new? Learn something you never thought you could? Is it to make more time for those you love? Slow down? Simplify?

Studies show four out of five people end up breaking their resolutions. Fully one-third barely make it past the first month. Why? Because we are often trying to accomplish these goals through sheer will-power alone. We try to make these changes without help. Without accountability. Without relying on anyone's strength but our own.

Listen to the wisdom of the Psalmist. "Don't put your confidence in powerful people (including yourself!); there is no help for you there. When they breathe their last, they return to the earth, and all their plans die with them. But joyful are those who have the God of Israel as their helper, whose hope is in the Lord their God." (Psalms 146:3-5) God alone can give you the strength to change. In fact, if you have accepted Christ, His promise is that He will send His Spirit to dwell inside you. To initiate and accomplish His sanctifying work. He will make you more like Jesus! He will transform you from the inside out! He who began this good work in you will bring it completion!

What's our role in all this? Simply to surrender. To present ourselves before God day after day and ask Him to have His way with us. We open our hands and hearts to His love and grace. We intentionally seek to pattern our lives after His life. And what does His life look like? Again, hear the wisdom of the Psalmist. "He made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them. He keeps every promise forever. He gives justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry. The Lord frees the prisoners. The Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are weighed down. The Lord loves the godly. The Lord protects the foreigners among us. He cares for the orphans and widows, but he frustrates the plans of the wicked." (Psalms 146:6-9)

Today in my devotional reading, I ran across this great quote from 20th century Christian missionary and statesman, Frank Laubach... "If anybody were to ask me how to find God I should say at once, hunt out the deepest need you can find and forget all about your own comfort while you try to meet that need. Talk to God about it and He will meet you there. You will know it." I believe this with all my heart because I have seen and experienced it with my own eyes. When I have gotten engaged in God's mission in the world, I have found Him waiting for me there. My faith grows. My heart breaks. My eyes fill with tears. And I realize God is changing me. Giving me His heart of compassion. His heart of love. His heart of mercy. And I am overwhelmed with deep thankfulness. This thankfulness spills over into my everyday life. I become a better husband and father. A wiser pastor. A more faithful friend.

If you are wondering what you can do in the coming year to "make God your helper", let me encourage the following four spiritual practices...

1) Spend time with God every day. Intentionally place yourself before Him and ask God to help you look at your life and the world around you through His eyes.

2) Gather with a local church family in corporate worship each week. Put it on your schedule right now. Before all the activities and opportunities begin to crowd God out. God promises to meet His people wherever two or three or more are gathered in His name.

3) Find a small group of friends to intentionally pursue Jesus with. Pursue relationships of authenticity and transparency and accountability. Deep spiritual friendships don't happen by accident. They require intentionality and sacrifice.

4) Find a place to serve. Inside the church. Outside the church. Both. Find a way to get involved in God's mission to reach the lost and to teach others all He has commanded us as believers. We were created to carry God's image to the ends of the earth. Get in touch with why you were made.

Don't try to do 2020 on your own! Don't fall for the lie that somehow you are strong enough or bold enough or talented enough or stubborn enough. Surrender to the Lord and He will become your helper. He will be your strength and your courage. He will lift you up and carry you though!

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 12-13, Revelation 19, Psalms 147, Proverbs 31:1-7

December 28, 2019
FORWARD LOOK

Readings for today: Zechariah 12-13, Revelation 19, Psalms 147, Proverbs 31:1-7

Anyone who is familiar at all with the gospel story will recognize the Messianic prophecies embedded throughout Zechariah's visions. This is a critical reminder of the importance of the Old Testament. We have to understand the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the climax of a story that has been unfolding for centuries. Jesus is the true fulfillment of the covenant God first established with Abraham. He is the true seed. The promised Son. The faithful Israelite. He is the perfect emodiment of God's eternal plan and its fulfillment. Throughout the Old Testament, as God interacted with His people, He dropped clues as to what was coming. The "Day of the Lord" it was often called. A day when the Messiah would come and Israel would be saved. The people of God looked for this day. Longed for this day. Prayed for this day. Especially in periods of great hardship and suffering. So again, Zechariah is prophesying at a time of great change and upheaval. Decades of exile and slavery has come to an end. The people have survived Babylon. They've survived attempts at genocide. They've survived attempts to forcefully assimilate them into a broader, pagan culture. And now they've returned home. To a ruined city. To ruined homes. To a ruined Temple. Time to start over. Where will life go from here? Will God remain faithful? What life will they build? These are the fundamental questions they're asking and God sends Haggai, Nehemiah, Ezra, and Zechariah - among others - with the answer.

He gives them a picture of the future. When Messiah's Kingdom comes to earth. And so we read familiar words like...

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9)

"Then I said to them, "If it seems good to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them." And they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver. Then the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter"—the lordly price at which I was priced by them. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord, to the potter." (Zechariah 11:12-13)

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn." (Zechariah 12:10)

"And the Lord will be king over all the earth. On that day the Lord will be one and his name one." (Zechariah 14:9)

Surely, it is argued, the gospel writers ripped these verses out of context. These prophecies were meant for a particular people bound to a particular time. But such a perspective is itself bound by modern, western understandings of philosophy that would have been completely foreign to the Hebrew authors of the Bible. For them, the text is living and active and often comes layered with different meanings. So it's the most natural thing in the world - after they meet the Risen Christ - to go searching through the Old Testament to understand the clues God left that lead us to faith in His Messiah. Such words - often quoted or alluded to throughout the New Testament - are

meant to remind us that God is in control. God reigns sovereign over all the earth. His plan is being worked out. His purposes are coming to pass. His will is being done on earth as it is in heaven.

Christmas is now behind us. The celebration of the first Advent of the Messiah naturally causes us to long for His second Advent. The day pictured in Revelation 19 when Jesus shall return to put all things right, make all things new, and put an end to sin and evil and death once and for all. But until that great “Day of the Lord” comes, what should we do? Cling to hope. Cling to faith. Cling to God. He will never let us down. His promises are sure. His faithfulness is great. His steadfast love is loyal and true. So these words from Zechariah encourage us just as they encouraged God’s people so many centuries ago.

“Thus says the Lord: I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain...Thus says the Lord of hosts: Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country, and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.” (Zechariah 8:3, 7-8)

“On that day the Lord their God will save them, as the flock of his people; for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land. For how great is his goodness, and how great his beauty!” (Zechariah 9:16-17)

“I will strengthen the house of Judah, and I will save the house of Joseph. I will bring them back because I have compassion on them, and they shall be as though I had not rejected them, for I am the Lord their God and I will answer them.” (Zechariah 10:6)

“The Lord will give victory to the rest of Judah first, before Jerusalem, so that the people of Jerusalem and the royal line of David will not have greater honor than the rest of Judah. On that day the Lord will defend the people of Jerusalem; the weakest among them will be as mighty as King David! And the royal descendants will be like God, like the angel of the Lord who goes before them! For on that day I will begin to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. “Then I will pour out a spirit of grace and prayer on the family of David and on the people of Jerusalem.” (Zechariah 12:7-10)

“I will bring that group through the fire and make them pure. I will refine them like silver and purify them like gold. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘These are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The Lord is our God.’” (Zechariah 13:9)

Friends, the Lord will come again! He is on His way even now! Every day brings us one step closer to the day when heaven comes to earth and every tear wiped away. Believe this! Trust this! Hold fast to your faith no matter circumstances this life may bring!

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 14, Revelation 20, Psalms 148, Proverbs 31:8-9

December 29, 2019
SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Zechariah 14, Revelation 20, Psalms 148, Proverbs 31:8-9

Readings for tomorrow: Malachi 1-2, Revelation 21, Psalms 149, Proverbs 31:10-24

December 30, 2019
NEW HEAVENS AND NEW EARTH

Readings for today: Malachi 1-2, Revelation 21, Psalms 149, Proverbs 31:10-24

I love the image of a new heavens and new earth. Creation redeemed. Creation renewed. Creation restored to its original glory. God finally putting an end to sin and evil and death once and for all. This is the final fulfillment of God's salvation plan. It's the final act of the divine play that's been working itself out since the opening words of Genesis. And as you let these words sink into your soul, take note of a few important things.

First, the new creation will be like a bride adorned for her husband. I remember well my wedding day. My wife has never looked more beautiful. Never more pure. Never more perfect than at that moment she walked down the aisle. (I have never felt more unworthy either!) The same is true for the new creation when it comes. God has always intended to have a relationship with His creation. He desires depth. Intimacy. Complete and total transparency. The kind of relationship we can only dream about this side of heaven. The kind of relationship of which human marriage is but a foretaste.

Second, there is no Temple. God is fully present and we are fully able to bear His presence in our glorified, resurrected bodies. God literally takes up residence with us. He can be seen. Touched. Heard. He wipes away our tears. He heals our infirmities. He makes us finally, completely, and utterly whole. There is no need for sun or moon for God will be our light. There is no need for walls or guards for God is in perfect control. There is no need for judgment or punishment for all the nations of the earth will walk in the light of the Lord and will bring Him the worship He deserves.

Third, there are no divisions in the new creation. No human distinctions to keep us apart. Every dividing wall of hostility will finally be torn down. The New Jerusalem is built on the foundation of the twelve apostles and her gates represent the twelve tribes. In other words, God will gather His people - Jew and Gentile alike - together and make them one. He will gather His people from every tribe, tongue and nation before His throne and all that separates us will fade away like mist before the Lord.

It's a beautiful picture, is it not? Now here's the challenge. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We ask for the church to be a living reflection of this future glory. We ask for God's will to be done in our lives. In our community. In our nation. In our world. How are we living and acting and speaking and treating others so that they see the new heavens and new earth emerging in our midst? How are we presenting to the world a picture of heaven? How are we giving those around us a foretaste of what's to come through what we say and do? Christians are called to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God in this world. As you close out your Bible reading this year, I'd encourage you to reflect on the following questions...

- 1) Is there less of you and more of Jesus than when you began this year?**
- 2) What parts of your life have been crucified with Christ and therefore no longer live?**
- 3) How have you intentionally died to self and sought to live for Christ?**

Becoming more like Christ is more a marathon than a sprint. It involves a long obedience in the same direction. I hope you've gleaned that if nothing else from your reading this year. God is at work across the centuries and across the generations. His primary desire is to make us more and more into the image of His Son. To restore us to the image He originally intended for us to bear. May the Lord continue His work in us and among us and through us until He comes again! Maranatha!

Readings for tomorrow: Malachi 3-4, Revelation 22, Psalms 150, Proverbs 31:25-31

December 31, 2019
MARANATHA!

Readings for today: Malachi 3-4, Revelation 22, Psalms 150, Proverbs 31:25-31

Come, Lord Jesus!" Echoing Paul's famous phrase from 1 Corinthians 16:22 - "Maranatha" - John finishes the Revelation with what has become the heartcry of Christians for centuries. Come, Lord Jesus. Come soon. The vision John received has reached its climax. The new heavens and new earth have come. New Jerusalem has descended out of heaven. God in the midst of her. The gates are open continually for the nations of the earth to receive their blessing. The leaves of the trees that grow beside the river of God are for their healing. God has wiped away every tear. God has done away with every evil. There is no more crying or suffering or pain. God has made good on His promise. The Alpha has issued the final "Omega." What was once broken is now whole. What was ruined has now been restored. The incomplete has been brought to completion. It is truly finished. All things made new.

The delay of the "parousia" or 2nd coming of Jesus has plagued Christians for centuries. Why does Jesus not return? What is He waiting for? Many Christians have believed He was coming back in their lifetimes. As they looked around at the evil and suffering in their world, they could not imagine things getting worse. Many believed they were seeing the four horsemen of Revelation storming all over the earth bringing war, disease, famine, and death. Such has been the lot of humanity since Cain first slew Abel all those years ago. The Apostles were no different. John, Paul, Peter, along with most of the Christians of the first century, believed Jesus was returning in their lifetimes. It colors some of their advice to the local churches they were writing to. Scholars suggest you can even see Paul grappling with this delay, especially in his correspondence with the Corinthians and Thessalonians.

Why hasn't Jesus returned? Our atheist friends suggest it's because God doesn't exist. The "Father" Jesus so faithfully believed in is a myth. Jesus, as good as He was, made a mistake. Others suggest it's because the work of the church isn't finished. The Great Commission has yet to come to completion. We haven't preached the gospel to every tribe, tongue, and nation so everyone hasn't yet had a chance to hear the good news. Still others believe it's because the events of Revelation haven't yet come to pass. The anti-Christ has yet to be revealed and as bad as things may be, they will get much, much worse before the end. To be honest, I have no idea why Jesus hasn't returned and can only assume it's because His plan for this world have yet to reach its fulfillment. Time doesn't pass for God like it does for us. While we are stuck in "chronological" time. Time as it ticks by. God exists in "Kairos" time. Time outside of time. Special time. Anointed time. The appropriate time. And only God knows where we stand according to His eternal clock.

What we can know is that Jesus promised He would come. No less than three separate times, He affirms this to John in the last chapter of Revelation.

"And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." (Rev. 22:7)

"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (Rev. 22:12-13)

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." (Rev. 22:20)

And what should our response be? To come to Jesus. "The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price." (Revelation 22:17) Don't miss this! The movement goes both ways. God comes to us, we come to Him. God returns to us, we return to Him. God draws near to us, we draw near to Him. This is the pattern God has set since the first chapters of Genesis and it repeats itself here at the end of Revelation. This is God's great desire. It is the primary message He's been preaching through the entire Bible. It is the Word He longs for us to hear and receive and respond to by faith. So trust Him, friends! Accept His invitation! Believe in His name and receive the salvation He offers you by grace!

Postscript: If you've been walking through the Bible in a Year with us...well done! You've made it! Congratulations! This is a significant milestone in your spiritual life. What's next? Do it again. And again. And again. Keep reading. Keep reflecting. Keep seeking to hear God's voice through His Word. Email me if you would like to join us in 2020 as we dive back in with a new plan for a new year! Doug@pepc.org.