

JANUARY 2021

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January 4, 2021
NEW YEAR, NEW CREATION

Readings for today: [Genesis 1-2](#), [Matthew 1](#)

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: [Genesis 3-5](#), [Matthew 2](#)

January 5, 2021
THE ORIGIN OF SHAME

Readings for today: [Genesis 3-5](#), [Matthew 2](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 6, 2021
THE DESCENT OF MAN

Readings for today: [Genesis 6-7](#), [Matthew 3-4](#)

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: [Genesis 8-11](#), [Matthew 5](#)

January 7, 2021
BEATITUDES

Readings for today: [Genesis 8-11, Matthew 5](#)

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

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

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

“And Jesus opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you...

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

You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire...

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 12-14, Matthew 6

January 8, 2021
CURE FOR ANXIETY

Readings for today: [Genesis 12-14, Matthew 6](#)

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: [Genesis 15-19, Matthew 7](#)

January 9, 2021
TRIBAL CONFLICT

Readings for today: [Genesis 15-19, Matthew 7](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 11, 2021
THE FEAR OF THE LORD

Readings for today: [Genesis 20-22](#), [Matthew 8](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 23-24, Matthew 9

January 12, 2021
LABORING FOR THE LORD

Readings for today: [Genesis 23-24](#), [Matthew 9](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 13, 2021
ELECTION

Readings for today: [Genesis 25-26](#), [Matthew 10:1-25](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 14, 2021
UNCONDITIONAL

Readings for today: [Genesis 27-28](#), [Matthew 10:26-42](#)

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 29-30, Matthew 11

January 15, 2021

REST

Readings for today: [Genesis 29-30](#), [Matthew 11](#)

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: [Genesis 31-35](#), [Matthew 12](#)

January 16, 2021
WRESTLING WITH GOD

Readings for today: [Genesis 31-35](#), [Matthew 12](#)

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: None

January 18, 2021
DANGEROUS DREAMS

Readings for today: [Genesis 36-37](#), [Matthew 13:1-23](#)

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

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

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

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

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

Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Refrain from the violence of fist, tongue or heart.

Strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health.

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

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

January 19, 2021
THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

Readings for today: [Genesis 38-40](#), [Matthew 13:24-58](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 20, 2021
TRUE ALLEGIANCE

Readings for today: [Genesis 41](#), [Matthew 14:1-21](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 21, 2021
THE NARROW WAY

Readings for today: [Genesis 42-43](#), [Matthew 14:22-36](#)

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

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

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

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

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

January 22, 2021
GODLY PERSPECTIVE

Readings for today: [Genesis 44-45](#), [Matthew 15:1-20](#)

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: [Genesis 46-48](#), [Matthew 15:21-39](#)

January 23, 2021
WAS JESUS A RACIST?

Readings for today: [Genesis 46-48](#), [Matthew 15:21-39](#)

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

Much of today’s writing comes from Kenneth Bailey’s work in [Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels](#). I highly recommend it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 25, 2021
EVERYDAY HEROISM

Readings for today: [Genesis 49-50, Exodus 1, Matthew 16:1-4](#)

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

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

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

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

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

January 26, 2021
IS GOD FORGETFUL?

Readings for today: [Exodus 2-4](#), [Matthew 16:5-28](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 5-6, Matthew 17

January 27, 2021
MEETING THE LORD

Readings for today: [Exodus 5-6](#), [Matthew 17](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 28, 2021
GOD ISN'T FAIR

Readings for today: [Exodus 7-10](#), [Matthew 18:1-20](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 29, 2021
THE SCANDAL OF FORGIVENESS

Readings for today: [Exodus 11-12](#), [Matthew 18:21-35](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 30, 2021

GOD'S LOVE FOR CHILDREN

Readings for today: [Exodus 13-15](#), [Matthew 19:1-15](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: None