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July 1, 2022
The Danger of Idolatry

Readings for today: 2 Kings 14-15, 2 Chronicles 25-27

High places. We see them pop up all over the place in the Kings and Chronicles. Often the righteousness of kings is judged on whether or not they tolerate them. What are they? Originally, they were sacred spaces where the Canaanite tribes worshipped their gods. If you flip back to Deuteronomy 12, you read these words, “You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place.” (Deut. 12:2-3) Yahweh had set His people apart. They would be different. They would not be like any other tribe or nation. Because they were a nation of priests, they would worship Yahweh in the way He prescribed. “But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the Lord your God has blessed you.” (Deut. 12:5-7)

Where was this place? Originally, it was the Tabernacle that traveled with them in the wilderness. After Solomon, it was the Temple in Jerusalem. This was the place where God had set His name and indwelt with His presence. This was the “place” the Israelites were commanded to seek when they worshipped. However, the travel could be difficult. The cost was high. It meant time away from the fields. Time away from home. After the kingdoms split, it meant possible defection by the northern tribes so the Israelite kings set up their own shrines (the sin of Jeroboam) and forbid their people from traveling to Jerusalem at the prescribed times. The people set up their own shrines to Yahweh on the very high places He once commanded them to destroy. If we assume the best of them, they were trying to worship Yahweh. Trying to remain faithful. Just not in the way He demanded or the way He deserved. At their worst, they adopted the worship practices of the locals and sought other gods.

God cares about our worship. He cares about what happens week in and week out in local churches all over the world. Not because God is taking attendance but because God seeks worshippers who will worship Him in Spirit and in Truth. Worshippers who will give Him the worship He demands in the way He deserves. Worshippers who will not compromise. Worshippers who will honor Him as holy. Worshippers who refuse to make themselves the center of the experience. Worshippers who lay aside their wants, their needs, their desires, their preferences to come before the Lord in humility. To do anything else is to create a “high place.” A shrine to another god. And most of that time, that “god” is Self. The besetting sin of the Western Church is the idolatry of self. We are the object of our worship. Our satisfaction is the key performance indicator. We engage worship based on our own personal preferences. We refuse to honor God as holy. God as supreme. God as Lord. We are proud. We are arrogant. We think far too much of ourselves. And if the lives of the kings teach us anything it is this...God will not be mocked. We will be judged on the basis of who or what we worship.

Where are the high places in your life? Do you find yourself despising the gathering of God’s people? Do you find yourself avoiding weekly worship? Do you find yourself struggling to hear the Word? Sing the songs? Pray the prayers? Let me gently but boldly call you to repentance, friends! Remember

whose presence you are in! Remember who you've come to serve! Remember what worship is all about! Repent. Confess. And ask the Spirit to renew your passion for true worship.

Readings for tomorrow: Jonah 1-4

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July 2, 2022
Love your Enemies

Readings for today: Jonah 1-4

Jonah is a great book. Especially when we read chronologically. We just finished reading about the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians and now we read of God's prophetic attempt to call those same Assyrians to repentance. Jonah is an unwilling prophet to say the least. He must have had a tremendously frustrating career. His own people refuse to follow the Lord. They keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again. They are unfaithful. They are unworthy. They are idolatrous. They are evil. As a result, God sends the Assyrians to punish them. To drive them to their knees in humility and repentance. When that doesn't work, those same Assyrians become the instrument of His righteous judgment on His own people. One can only imagine the hatred a man like Jonah would harbor for such people. They are Gentiles. Unbelievers. Unclean. Unworthy of God's grace. But then he receives the call to go and preach the gospel to them. What the heck?!

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

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

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

Who are you at war with in your life today? Who engenders hatred in your heart? What enemies is God calling you to reach? Will you go? Or will you run?

Readings for tomorrow: None

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July 4, 2022
Loving our Nation

Readings for today: Amos 1-5

“I love America more than any other country in this world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” - James Baldwin

I immediately thought of this quote as I read through the first few chapters of Amos this morning. James Baldwin was a civil rights writer and activist. He mainly gave voice to the oppressed through his brilliant novels and plays. Whereas some might call Martin Luther King Jr. the movement’s prophet, Baldwin was her poet. He described in often deeply personal terms the impact of injustice on his people. Though he lived abroad for a good portion of his life, he loved America enough to call her to live up to her high ideals and traveled extensively through the Deep South giving lectures and advocating alongside other civil rights leaders.

As we dive into the prophetic literature of the Bible, it is tempting to assume these men hated their nation. Their words are often harsh and judgmental. They offer little in the way of hope. They pull no punches and lay out the dire consequences should Israel or Judah refuse to repent. And yet, I’ve come to believe these prophets loved their people just as Baldwin loved America. They longed to see their people return to the Lord with all their hearts. Long to see their nation rise up and live according to the commandments of God. They longed for Israel and Judah to be a light to the nations, set apart as God’s chosen people on earth.

Amos was a simple shepherd when he first received God’s call. He lived at a time when both Israel and Judah seemed to be experiencing great prosperity and success. You might remember Uzziah enjoying great success as he expanded Judah’s borders, rebuilt cities, and amassed much wealth. Similarly, Jeroboam II also enjoyed great success, expanding Israel’s borders to her “former limits”, conquering Damascus, defeating the Arameans, and amassing great wealth through trade. Indeed, most biblical scholars would argue that Israel and Judah reached the zenith of their power and wealth during the reigns of these two kings. Tragically, however, the seeds of destruction for both nations were already sown. They rejected the law of the Lord. (Amos 2:4) They sold the righteous for silver. (Amos 2:6) They trampled the heads of the poor and did not care for the afflicted. They engaged in sexual immorality and profaned God’s holy name. (Amos 2:7-8) These actions brought them under God’s judgment and He sent Amos to warn them with the hope that they might repent and return to Him.

What would such a return look like? Seeking the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. Honoring Him by obeying His commands. Confessing their sin. Repenting of the way they treated the poor and powerless in their midst. Caring for those in need. Always seeking good rather than evil. Letting justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. This is what it means to return to the Lord and it remains God’s call to the nations of the earth to this day. America will only be great insofar as she seeks the Lord. Insofar as she clings to justice and righteousness and compassion and mercy. America will be judged, like all the nations of the earth, on how she cares for the poor, the afflicted, and the oppressed. She will be judged on how faithfully she follows God’s commands and lives up to the ideals embedded in her founding documents. Ideals birthed out of deep reflection on Scripture and the nature of God. May we take time this 4th of July to not only celebrate the birth of our nation but pray for her as well. May we rededicate ourselves to the task of “forming a more perfect union” in alignment with God’s will and God’s ways.

Readings for tomorrow: Amos 6-9

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July 5, 2022
Self-Reflection

Readings for today: Amos 6-9

One of the temptations when reading the prophets is to assume God is talking about someone else. Assume God is talking about kings and princes and nations rather than ordinary people like me. And yet, as I read the opening lines from Amos 6, I feel a deep conviction settle in my own heart. Am I not at ease here in Parker? Do I not feel secure here in suburban America? I live in one of the wealthiest communities on the face of the planet. I live in one of the fastest growing areas in the country. Colorado is one of the most gorgeous states in our nation. Great weather. Majestic mountains. Active lifestyle. Lots of opportunity for work. Good schools for the kids. Great place to raise a family. It's tempting in such a place to become self-absorbed. To shut out the rest of the world and focus on myself. To retreat into a bubble and never emerge.

Amos confronts our complacency. He calls us to engage those outside our comfort zone. He calls us to pay particular attention to the poor and needy in our midst. Those who are less fortunate. Those who don't have access and opportunity to the blessings we've received. He calls us to radical generosity and a commitment to justice and righteousness. He calls us faithfulness and obedience to the Lord. If we do these things, we shall live long in the land God has provided. If we fail in these things, we will fall under His judgment.

Amos doesn't just talk the talk, he walks the walk. He makes a huge sacrifice by leaving his own comfort zone. He leaves all that's familiar behind - including his home and family and livelihood - to travel north to Israel. He stands in the gap for God's people when God begins to reveal visions and dreams of judgment. He prays for God to relent lest He utterly destroy His people and God answers His prayers. He is falsely accused of sedition and treason. And despite everything he endures, he ends his prophecy with words of hope. There will come a day when God will restore His people. He will repair their breaches and raise up their ruins. He will bless them with abundance and they will enjoy His favor again.

If you are like me, you long for those latter days. You long for the days when God restores the years the locusts have eaten. You long for the days when "mountains shall drip sweet wine and all the hills shall flow with it." You long for the days when all that was lost is regained. All that was ruined is rebuilt. All that was uprooted shall be planted and harvested. You long for the days when we can dwell secure once more not in our own strength which is fleeting but in the favor of the Lord which is forever. There's only one way to get from here to there and that is faithful obedience to the Lord's commands. Loving God with all our heart. Loving our neighbor as ourself. These are the first and second great commandments. They are the foundation on which we rebuild our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 1-5

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July 6, 2022
God's Great Faithfulness

Readings for today: Hosea 1-5

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

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

This is the central message of Hosea. God takes up the very real issue of adultery and employs it as a metaphor to describe the relationship between Himself and His people. He even calls His prophet Hosea to embody this relationship by marrying a prostitute. Hosea's pain is a reflection of God's pain. Hosea's heartbreak at Gomer's continual betrayals is a reflection of God's heartbreak over Israel's worship of the pagan gods. The names of Hosea's children reflect not only his suffering but the divine pathos of God Himself as He wrestles with the unconditional love He pledged to Israel. When Hosea purchases his bride back from the slave traders in Hosea 3, one is reminded of the incredible grace of God which relentlessly pursues us to the day we die.

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

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

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. "And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.' For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more.

And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord.” (Hosea 2:14-18, 20)

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

This is the heart of the gospel. No matter how bad things get. No matter how many times we sin and fall short of the glory of God. No matter how far we run into the far country and play the prodigal. God is faithful. God is loyal. Steadfast. True. He will never stop pursuing. Never stop watching. Never stop waiting for us to repent and return. There is nothing that can separate us from His love. Nothing that can snatch us out of His hand. Nothing that can break the eternal covenant He first made with us. This is good news! Even great news for those who love God and are called according to His purpose!

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 6-9

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July 7, 2022
True Repentance

Readings for today: Hosea 6-9

I often get asked what it means to truly repent. Is it feeling bad about what you've done? Is it feeling guilty for being caught? Does it involve shame for being exposed? How do we repent? Is saying sorry enough? Does it involve asking for forgiveness? What about reconciliation? These are all really good questions and thankfully the Bible has answers. Consider Hosea 6:1-6...

“Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.” What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away. Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light. For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:1-6)

Repentance begins with humility. An honest, transparent acknowledgment of what we have done. No excuses. No blame-shifting. Just a confession that God is right and we are wrong. God is righteous in His judgment and we earned the punishment we received. God has torn us. God has struck us down. Our love was transient. It faded like a morning cloud or like the dew on the grass. God was faithful. He sent us prophets. He warned us by their words. But we did not listen. We refused to change our ways. Therefore His judgment fell on us and we are broken.

Repentance involves change. “Let us return to the Lord...” There phrase is pregnant with meaning. It signals a shift in attitude and action. A 180 degree turn on the path we were going down. A radical change in direction. Whereas we once were headed down the road to destruction, we are now traveling the narrow way that leads to life. What does this look like in real life? It looks like steadfast, faithful, sacrificial, authentic love instead of empty, nominal, “just going through the motions” worship. It involves a relentless pursuit of God and a longing for a deeper relationship with Him over simply satisfying the letter of the Law.

Repentance clings to hope. God is faithful. If we seek Him with all our heart, He promises to heal. He promises to bind up our wounds. He promises to revive us and raise us up. We can count on Him because we know His “going out is as sure as the dawn.” His love as dependable as the spring showers that water the earth. There will come a day when God will restore the fortunes of His people.

What was true for Hosea and his family and the people of Israel remains true for us today. If we truly repent of our sin and come humbly before our God, He will restore our fortunes as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 10-14

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July 8, 2022
The Tenderness of God

Readings for today: Hosea 10-14

Hosea includes some of the most tender imagery in the Bible. I love how he describes God's love for His people. It is deep. Profound. The love of a Father for his children. I identify with this language as a father myself. I know how this love feels. I feel it in my gut when I think about my own children. I remember holding each of them when they were born. I remember the feel of their soft skin and the wonder of their sweet cries. I remember when they took their first steps and said their first words. I remember when they began to smile and laugh. Though my children are now adults or approaching adulthood, these tender feelings of love remain. My heart swells with pride when I think of them and all they have accomplished over their short lives. Are they perfect? No. Have we had our battles over the years? Of course. Has any of that diminished my great love for them? Not a chance. The same is true for our God. Listen again to these words. Let them wash over you. Let them remind you of just how much you are loved and cherished by your Heavenly Father.

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son...Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them...How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.” (Hosea 11:1, 3-4, 8-9)

I don't know who may need to hear this today but God is for you not against you. God loves you, He does not hate you. When God looks at you, He has a smile on His face and a twinkle in His eye. His heart fills with joy every time He thinks of you. He is with you every minute of every day. He will never, ever leave your side. This is His promise and though you may experience what feels like His anger for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime. How do I know these things are true? He says as much in His Word, “I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon; his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow; they shall flourish like the grain; they shall blossom like the vine; their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon.” (Hosea 14:4-7)

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 1-4

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July 9, 2022
A Political Faith

Readings for today: Isaiah 1-4

“The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.” (Isaiah 1:1)

The book of Isaiah begins with a political statement. Everything he says from this point forward (66 chapters!) must be viewed through a distinctly political lens. Uzziah. Jotham. Ahaz. Hezekiah. We know their stories. We’ve just read through their histories in the Kings and Chronicles. We know Uzziah reigned for over fifty years and for the most part remained faithful to God. However, at the end of his life he grew proud and brazenly entered the Temple to offer sacrifices. We know his son, Jotham, reigned for sixteen years and also remained faithful to the Lord but failed to address the nation’s ongoing idolatry on the high places. We know Ahaz reigned for sixteen years and was an evil, faithless king. The entire kingdom suffered under his rule. We know Hezekiah returned to the ways of the Lord, experienced a miracle of healing, but also grew prideful and set his descendents up for disaster when he shows off his riches to the envoys of Babylon.

Isaiah presumably witnesses all of this. He sees it all go past. He lives it. His prophetic career begins at some point during the glory days under King Uzziah and ends at some point during the reign of King Hezekiah. Through it all, he watches his nation shift its allegiance from Yahweh to other gods. He watches his nation descend into cultural chaos as they abandon true worship and true righteousness. He watches the leaders of his nation attempt to reform and revitalize the country. He sees the ups and downs of their efforts. The successes and failures. He sees it all and then offers this Word from the Lord. It is honest. Real. Raw. No holds barred. He confronts. He speaks the truth. He calls out his own people. “Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.” (Isaiah 1:4) “Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!” (Isaiah 1:10) “For Jerusalem has stumbled, and Judah has fallen, because their speech and their deeds are against the Lord, defying his glorious presence.” (Isaiah 3:8)

At the same time, he offers hope. He calls them to repentance. He begs them to return to the Lord to find grace and healing and mercy. “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause. Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” (Isaiah 1:16-18) He directs their attention to the glorious day of the Lord when all flesh shall witness the appearance of our God. “It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 2:2-3) He calls them back to faithfulness. Back to loyalty. Back to a right relationship with God. “In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. Then the Lord will create

over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.” (Isaiah 4:2-6)

Once can easily recognize the parallels to our own time. How many of us lament the state of our nation? How many of us lament the moral drift of our culture? How many of us lament the pain and suffering and sin and degradation we see all around us? We lament the encroaching secularism that threatens to push our faith to the margins. And yet, are we willing to confront the deeper questions Isaiah poses? Why doesn't prayer for our nation fill our homes? Why are so many of our churches struggling with sin? Why do so many of our pastors and priests fall? How have we marginalized our own faith by refusing to share Christ with our neighbors, friends, and co-workers? By not speaking out for justice and righteousness and truth? By not walking in a spirit of love and grace and mercy and humility? Are we not as guilty as the people Isaiah was speaking to? And are we willing to hear his words as the Word of the Lord to us? Are we willing to repent and re-commit ourselves to God's ways?

Readings for tomorrow: None

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July 11, 2022
Promised Land

Readings for today: Isaiah 5-8

I flew into Tel Aviv on Sunday morning at 10AM. As we descended through the clouds in our 787, I eagerly leaned over my sleeping wife to catch my first glimpse of Israel. She goes by many names. The Promised Land to the ancient Israelites. The Holy Land to many Jews, Christians, and Muslims around the world today. Israel to her Jewish citizens. Palestine to the Arabs. The “vineyard of the Lord” to an Israelite prophet named Isaiah. That last moniker is admittedly hard to see at first. It’s a dry arid land. But Israel specializes in “desert agriculture.” Whereas the rest of the world fights against encroaching desertification and the degradation of fertile farmland, the people of Israel specialize in transforming the desert into fruitful, agricultural fields. They invest 4.3% of their GDP in agricultural research and development, provide 95% of their own food supply, and are a major exporter of fresh produce. It’s truly a miracle and a glimpse of the picture Isaiah once saw all those years ago.

“Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.” (Isaiah 5:1-2)

Our guide is a man named Rami. He is Israeli by citizenship, having been born in Nazareth. He is Palestinian by nationality. He is Arab by ethnicity. He is Christian by religion. Listening to him share his story is fascinating as he sits personally at the intersection of so many of the political and social dynamics in play in this country. He is a joyful man. He laughs easily. He clearly loves his land and loves his people. He wishes for peace. You can literally hear the longing in his voice for a day when all the different tribes and faiths who lay claim to this land will humble themselves together before the Lord. However, you can also hear his despair. As I listen to him, I think about the call on Isaiah’s life and wonder if he ever felt some of the same despair as well?

“And the Lord said, “Go, and say to this people: Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.” The holy seed is its stump.” (Isaiah 6:9-13)

So where does Isaiah find hope? Where can Rami find hope? Where can we find hope even as we pilgrimage through this weary land the Lord loves so much? We can trust only in God. We cannot fall prey to falsehood and conspiracies. We cannot trust those who would seek power and privilege at the expense of others. We cannot assume human governments will do justice and love mercy. We cannot give into fear though we undergo all kinds of violence and suffering and heartbreak and pain. No, we must heed Isaiah’s call. “The Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary...” (Isaiah 8:13-14a)

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 9-12

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July 12, 2022
Seeing the Light

Readings for today: Isaiah 9-12

It's one thing to read the prophecies of Isaiah about the Messiah. It's another to actually visit the "land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali" and see where God made glorious "the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations." Our guide told us the very first day that we would never read our Bibles the same way again. I believed him then but I didn't grasp how much my reading would truly change. After all, I've been reading through the Bible each year for over twenty years. I love the Scriptures. I hear God speak to me through His Word. There is nothing I get more excited about than sharing God's Word with others, whether from the pulpit in the church I serve or across a table and a cup of coffee at Fika.

But now I find myself visiting places like Caesarea, Tiberias, Mt. Carmel, Joppa, and Galilee. These are no longer names on a page to me but places I've visited. Roads I've walked. Vistas I've seen. I couldn't help but think of Jonah as I stood at the ancient port of Joppa. I couldn't help but think of Elijah as I stood on the slopes of Mt. Carmel. I couldn't help but think of Joseph and Mary and Jesus and his brothers growing up in Nazareth. I knelt down in each place to grab a handful of dust. I touched the indents of thousands of sandals impressed upon the ancient cobblestones. I took deep breaths of the unique smells wafting through each place. And through it all, the words of Isaiah kept ringing in my ears...

"But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this." (Isaiah 9:1-7)

God seems very near over here. His presence fills this land. The memory of His redemptive acts throughout history come alive. They take on three-dimensional shape. They go from analog black and white to full on digital 4K color. And still none of this is possible without saving faith. It is the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to see and our hearts to understand. Only when we invite Him into our lives, keep in step with Him, and trust Him to complete His sanctifying work in us, will we find ourselves walking in light rather than darkness. Joy rather than sorrow. Victory rather than defeat. For this is the heritage of all those who trust in the "child who was born, the son who was given."

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 1-4

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July 13, 2022
Lessons from Megiddo

Readings for today: Micah 1-4

I recently stood on the tel of Megiddo looking over thirty different layers of history dating back to the Canaanites. The layers tell the story of city after city that was raised and destroyed over centuries. Over that period of time, a mound began to grow as each city was built on top of the next. Eventually the city was abandoned after the Assyrian invasion in 732BC. For hundreds of years, it sat there waiting to be discovered. Grasses and trees and bushes and flowers grew on top of it until a team of archaeologists in the 19th century began to probe it's depths. Today it remains a treasure trove to those who want to learn more about the different civilizations that came and went at this particular place.

I thought about Megiddo when I read these words from Micah today...“Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.” (Micah 3:12) The judgment of God is harsh and unyielding at times. He simply will not allow evil and idolatry to go unchecked. In my experience, judgment always begins at the house of the Lord. God holds His people to a higher standard. Called and set apart to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth, He demands more from us. We are to serve as living examples of what life in God's Kingdom is all about. This is why it's so tragic when we fail. When we follow the ways of the world. When we allow injustice and oppression and unrighteousness and idolatry to rule and reign over our lives. When we pursue power and wealth and trample those who might get in our way. God will not be mocked. Though we are His chosen people, He will not spare us. Though He loves Jerusalem and actually made His dwelling place there in the Temple, it did not stop Him from bringing judgment down on that place. Plowing her like a field. Making her a heap of ruins. Her house a wooded height.

This is what happens to Megiddo according to Scripture. It is destroyed along with the rest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel for her idolatry and sin. One of the amazing finds at this particular tel is a water tunnel running under ground protecting the water source of the city. It's a marvel of ancient engineering that was commissioned by King Ahab. Those who are familiar with Ahab know he presided over a period of relative wealth and political success in Israel. At the same time, he is also known as the most evil king in her history as he led her into all kinds of sin. His reign was marked by deep injustice and brutal oppression and severe drought. He worshipped Baal and forsook the Lord. He was the adversary of Elijah and eventually was killed in battle. However, the seeds of destruction were sown and eventually bore fruit in the reign of his descendants. Assyria swept in from the north and literally wiped the northern kingdom off the map.

Megiddo tells this story and also serves as a warning. We cannot presume upon the grace of God. We cannot ever fall into the trap of feeling entitled to the mercies of God. If we chase after other gods and follow the ways of this world, we can expect His judgment to fall. He will not spare us but will correct us and rebuke us so that we might find our way back to Him. God disciplines those He loves. He loves us so much He is willing to confront us and convict us and turn us over to the consequences of our choices. No matter what happens, He will bring to completion the good work He's begun in us to make us more like His Son.

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 5-7

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July 14, 2022

Justice. Love. Kindness. Humility.

Readings for today: Micah 5-7

I've spent the last day or so talking to our guide. As I shared in a previous devotional, Rami is Israeli by citizenship, Palestinian by nationality, Arab by ethnicity, and Christian by religion. This puts him squarely at the intersection of many of the different tension points that exist in this country. Interestingly enough, Rami is not a bitter or angry man. He just carries a great sorrow. He is burdened for his own people and for the nation of Israel. He has strong opinions but at the same time is honest enough to acknowledge the deep complexities that exist. Today I asked him if he could see a way forward. "To be honest, probably not. The system is simply broken. But at the same time, if we would just learn to listen and treat each other as human beings worthy of dignity and honor and respect as image-bearers of God, perhaps we might find a way." I shared with him that I often have those same feelings about my own country and the challenges we face. No matter where you go in the world today, oppression and injustice and hatred and rage and violence seem to be the rule rather than the exception. How in the world can we ever flip this script?

Sadly, nothing is new under the sun. The prophet Micah saw some of the same dynamics in his country thousands of years ago. What was his prescription? Listen again to those famous words from Micah 6:8, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" It seems so simple. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly before God. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else. This is how God defines what is good. This is what it means to be a godly nation. This is the only way to secure God's blessing. Where injustice and hate and pride are allowed to take root, God turns His face. He gives us over to the consequences of our decisions. He withdraws His protective hand. The result is violence and chaos and suffering and despair. We see this dynamic play out over and over again both in the Bible and throughout human history.

Judgment begins at the household of God. Micah is speaking to the people of God. People who know His Word. People who worship Him at His Temple. People who, at least in theory, have set their hearts to listen to His voice and obey His commands. If they will not do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God then who will? This is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable. It's why the scandals that have rocked the church in recent years are so tragic. It's why the abuse is so horrifying. It's why the hypocrisy is so heart-breaking. How can we expect those who are lost to find the way of Jesus compelling when we don't? How can we expect those who do not believe to find Jesus attractive when we barely can get out of bed to spend time with Him? How can we expect our nations to pass righteous laws and enact just social policies that balance mercy and grace and kindness without the church leading the way?

Friends, we have much work to do and here's the good news. It begins with a single step. It begins when you and I choose to do the next right thing. It begins when we humble ourselves before God in prayer. Falling on our knees before Him in repentance and confession of sin. It begins when we leverage whatever influence we have over the people we love and organizations we lead and the communities we serve to bring about the justice, kindness, and mercy of God. This is good and this is what the Lord requires of us.

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

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July 15, 2022

Samaria

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

“And the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel. And they took possession of Samaria and lived in its cities...To this day they do according to the former manner. They do not fear the Lord, and they do not follow the statutes or the rules or the law or the commandment that the Lord commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named Israel.” (2 Kings 17:24, 34)

Samaria. The heart of the former northern kingdom of Israel. Utterly destroyed by the Assyrians in the 8th century BC. The people of God deported and scattered throughout the empire. New people groups from all over imported in. They brought their own gods with them. They mixed and married with the people left in the land. The result was a melting pot of culture and religion and ethnicity that made the area anathema to the Jews. It's hard to overstate the animosity Jews held for their Samaritan neighbors. And yet Jesus intentionally visited this region. Intentionally sought to save the Samaritan people. And Jesus sends us not only into this region but to the ends of the earth as well. (Acts 1:8)

It's one thing to read these stories. It's quite another to stand in Caesarea itself on the shores of the Mediterranean. It's powerful to stand before the home of Simon the tanner where Peter receives his vision from the Lord of a great Gentile mission. There are no words when you stand in front of St. Peter's in Joppa and ponder the fact that it was intentionally built with an orientation to the west rather than the east to point God's people to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. (Admittedly, Joppa is a little south of Samaria but the point holds.)

How did it all begin? In tragedy and heartbreak. The kings of Israel abandoned their faith in God. They led God's people into all kinds of idolatry. They modeled their reigns after that of their pagan neighbors. They wanted to be kings who ruled like the other kings of the earth. Again, the result is judgment. Exile. Death. Destruction. Some people I know can't believe God would ever do such a thing. They believe God's judgment calls into question his goodness. They blame God for creating our mess in the first place. Such arguments are fundamentally flawed. They ignore human freedom and responsibility. They are deflections. Attempts to shift the blame off ourselves for pain and suffering we bring down on ourselves. As creatures made in God's image and given dominion by God over His creation, we are accountable for the way we choose to live our lives. Created to bring God glory and graciously steward all God has made, we will be judged based in no small part on how we do. Called by God to love Him first and love our neighbor as ourselves, we will be held liable for every careless word, thought, deed, and act of worship. This is sobering and would be downright scary except for Jesus Christ. He is faithful where we are not. He is true where we are false. He is whole where we are broken. He is good and He is love and He offers His own life in place of our own so that we may live.

What will we do with such a gift? How will we choose to live in response to what God has done for us? For me, it almost ups the ante. I find myself wanting to commit more and more of myself to Him because of how He has committed Himself to me. I find myself wanting to serve Him with all my heart because of how He first served me. I find myself pursuing faithful obedience not out of obligation but from a deep sense of gratitude that my God would die for me. This is the heart of the gospel and it is for Jews and Samaritans and Gentiles and anyone who would call on the name of the Lord.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 13-17

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July 16, 2022
Refuge

Readings for today: Isaiah 13-17

God's Kingdom is a refuge. A sanctuary for all who seek shelter. A place we can run to when we are in trouble. A safe and secure place where we will find help in our time of need. It is a refuge for all people. The nations of the earth. The many different tribes. The diverse cultures and languages. It is a place for the desperate. For those in despair. For those who have lost all hope. For those who are oppressed. Persecuted. Poor. Needy.

God's Kingdom was established on earth through a family. A man named Abraham and a woman named Sarah. They had a son named Isaac. He had two sons named Esau and Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons who became the ancestors of the nation of Israel. God forged His Kingdom through fire and suffering in the land of Egypt. He shaped His Kingdom as they wandered in the desert. He taught them humility and dependence and how to worship Him in spirit and in truth. He gave His Kingdom a land. A place to call their own. They called it Israel. Set up to be a light to the nations. The hope of the world. A place where all who sought God could find Him. A refuge for the alien and stranger and sojourner.

Israel failed. She turned inward. She lost sight of her high calling. She built up her walls. The refuge became a fortress. A stronghold where only the pure could find a home. Her gates were closed to those on the outside. She no longer served the nations but expected the nations to serve her. She grew proud and arrogant. She grew wealthy and strong. But her wickedness grew as well. Her appetites were insatiable. Her greed knew no ends. She abandoned truth and justice and mercy. She chased after other gods. And her fall was great. God's judgment swift and terrible. The nations of the earth who once looked to her for wisdom now marched through her streets, laying waste to everything in their path. But God did not abandon her. He retained a remnant. A holy seed that would grow up into a shoot and bear fruit once again.

This remnant would begin the work of God's Kingdom anew. They would start over. They would rebuild a refuge amidst the ruins. Listen to how Isaiah puts it, "Give counsel; grant justice; make your shade like night at the height of noon; shelter the outcasts; do not reveal the fugitive; let the outcasts of Moab sojourn among you; be a shelter to them from the destroyer. When the oppressor is no more, and destruction has ceased, and he who tramples underfoot has vanished from the land, then a throne will be established in steadfast love, and on it will sit in faithfulness in the tent of David one who judges and seeks justice and is swift to do righteousness." (Isaiah 16:3-5)

Friends, God's call remains the same for His people today. We are called to create a refuge, a sanctuary, a safe and secure place where people can find shelter from the storm. We are called to be a generous people, offering hospitality to all in need. We are called to be a loving and faithful people, always seeking to serve rather than be served. We are called to be a just and righteous people, holding fast to what is good and noble and right and true. We are called to look outward rather than inward. To let our light shine bright and bold so those who wander may find a way back home.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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July 18, 2022
Mount Zion

Readings for today: Isaiah 18-22

All roads eventually lead to Zion. The mountain of God. The summit where Abraham first came to sacrifice Isaac. The city of David. The place where God made His dwelling among His people. The very spot where the New Jerusalem will descend when Jesus returns. It's not hard to see why. Yesterday, we made the journey from Jericho to Jerusalem. We ascended four thousand feet from the Dead Sea to the Mount of Olives where we got our first look at the city. It was breathtaking. We drove through a tunnel that's been drilled through the Mount of Olives and as we emerged on the other side, we could see the Dome of the Rock gleaming in the distance. My heart leapt within me as I'm sure it does for most people when they make the pilgrimage over here.

I thought about that first glimpse when I read these words this morning from Isaiah, "At that time tribute will be brought to the Lord of hosts from a people tall and smooth, from a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide, to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the Lord of hosts." (Isaiah 18:7) Now I know Isaiah's not talking about me but it's hard not to read myself into the text. I have come to bring tribute. I come from a nation mighty and conquering. A people feared near and far. And I am not the only one. This is a trek many Americans make - especially American Christians - each and every year. We come to Mount Zion, to the place of the name of the Lord of hosts, to experience His presence and see His glory firsthand. We come to walk where Jesus walked. Weep where Jesus wept. Read His words again in the very places He first spoke them. The Bible comes alive over here. It takes on fresh meaning. It reminds us that what we believe is no mere myth or story but actual history.

One of the questions that often gets asked when people are on pilgrimage over here is "why is Israel so important?" "What makes it such coveted territory?" After all, the land is arid and dry. Water can be scarce. It's definitely not a lush paradise. Still, this land has been contested for millennia. It holds strategic importance as the land bridge between the great civilizations in Anatolia (modern day Turkey), Mesopotamia, and Egypt. God knew exactly what He was doing when He decided to claim this land as His own. He knew He was literally placing His people at the crossroads of civilization. He knew it was here that the peoples of the earth would come and see the glory of the One True and Living God. He knew it was here that the nations of the earth would stream to catch a glimpse of His glory. I love the vision Isaiah presents in 19:19-25, "In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt. When they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and deliver them. And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. And the Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them. In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance."

God has a plan, friends. And that plan involves every tribe and tongue and nation standing together before the throne of God. It involves every culture and color on the planet coming to Mt. Zion to kneel before the Lord of hosts. It involves Jew and Samaritan and Gentile all coming together to worship and bring Him praise. And the great news is the church is the forerunner of that reality! The church is called to give the world a taste of what's to come! This is why the gospel is such good news!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 23-26

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July 19, 2022
Wastelands

Readings for today: Isaiah 23-26

“Behold, the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered; for the Lord has spoken this word. The earth mourns and withers; the world languishes and withers; the highest people of the earth languish. The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left.” (Isaiah 24:1-6)

Yesterday, we traveled down through the wilderness of Judea to the region of the Dead Sea. From 2500 feet above sea level in Jerusalem to 1500 feet below sea level at the seashore. I have never seen such a wasteland. The cliffs were barren and desolate. The dunes were rocky and void of life. The heat was oppressive. Water is scarce. Nothing can grow on its own as a result. I imagine this is what Isaiah had in mind when he prophesied judgment over God’s people. They could look down from Mount Zion and literally see the desolation of the Lord. They had traveled those lands. They had tasted the salty sea. They knew firsthand the hardship and suffering that accompanied those who tried to scratch out a life in a land full of death.

Look at the picture again for today’s devotional. This is what the land looks like under the curse of sin. The land languishes, unable to produce any fruit. The earth is scorched under the blazing hot sun. The wastelands are empty and endless and seemingly stretch in every direction. Now consider the deeper meaning behind Isaiah’s words. The soul of his people is a similar wasteland. Their hearts are far from God and living under a curse. Devoured by sin, they produce little fruit. They perish for lack of access to the living waters of their God. The result is pain and hardship and suffering and death. None shall be spared. People, priest, slave, master, maid, mistress, buyer, seller...all will come under the judgment of God.

The same is true in our day as well. Violence and strife. Rage and hate. Injustice and oppression. Greed and selfishness. These are all the hallmarks of a people rushing headlong into destruction. A nation given over by God to the curse of sin. And before we look outward to blame those around us, we must first look inward and ask ourselves about the state of our own souls. How have we “transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant?” Where have we sinned and fallen short of God’s glory? How have we personally contributed to the mess we are in by paying lip service to God while remaining far from Him in our hearts? Are our lives a spiritual wasteland or a fruitful garden for the Lord? Are we spiritual desolate with seemingly no life of God within us? Do we languish under the curse of sin, refusing to surrender and humble ourselves before the Lord?

You see, friends, what happens on a macro level in our country is simply a reflection of what is taking place on a micro level in each of our lives. The only thing that’s different is the scale. And if we truly want to make a change, it must begin with us. It must begin with each of us committing ourselves to seek the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. It must begin with the people of God gathering to worship God in Spirit and in truth. This is the only way to stave off the judgment to come.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 18:1-8, 2 Chronicles 29-31, Psalms 48

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July 20, 2022

The House of the Lord

Readings for today: 2 Kings 18:1-8, 2 Chronicles 29-31, Psalms 48

“Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King.” (Psalm 48:1-2)

It’s one thing to read about the restoration of the Temple and the covenant renewal that took place in Israel under the reign of Hezekiah and another to actually stand in the place where it happened. Not much is left of the Temple of course. Today two mosques dominate the Temple Mount and yet one can still walk the steps that lead to the Huldah Gates. One can pray at the Western Wall. One can walk on the same paving stones millions of faithful Jews once walked as they came to the Temple to worship. It’s incredible. The restoration of the Temple is a flashpoint politically over here. If one were to attempt what Hezekiah once did, it would ignite a massive conflict because the Temple Mount is considered holy by Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike.

One has to admire the courage of Hezekiah. Cleansing and rebuilding the Temple was no easy effort even in his own day. Yes, he didn’t have to contend with a religion like Islam but destroying the high places, cutting down the Asherah poles, and grinding the bronze snake Moses once held up as a sign of deliverance to dust would have made him a lot of enemies. The logistics of re-establishing the Levitical priesthood had to be overwhelming. The cost of the repairs would have emptied the royal treasury. And to top things off, he calls all of Israel to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Feast. Hundreds of thousands of people came. Indeed, there had not been a Passover like this since the days of Solomon! They continued the work of cleansing the city of her idols and restoring true worship in the Temple. Their hearts were turned to the Lord. It was nothing short of revival.

All because one person had the courage to live out his convictions. One person had the courage to do what was right and good and faithful before the Lord. One person submitted his time and talent and treasure to the work of the Lord. One person sought the Lord with all his heart and God honored his prayers and devotion and sacrifice. Listen to how the chronicler describes it, “Thus Hezekiah did throughout all Judah, and he did what was good and right and faithful before the Lord his God. And every work that he undertook in the service of the house of God and in accordance with the law and the commandments, seeking his God, he did with all his heart, and prospered.” (2 Chronicles 31:20-21)

What about you? It’s doubtful you and I will ever wield the authority of a king over a nation but what about the spiritual authority God has entrusted to us over our homes? Our marriages? Our children? Our grandchildren? What about the spiritual authority God’s given us in our workplace? Schools? Communities? What about the spiritual authority God’s entrusted to us in the church? Among our fellow believers? Every single Christian is indwelt with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Every single Christian walks in Christ’s authority in everything they say and do. As such, we’ve been given divine power to tear down every stronghold and every high thing that sets itself up against the knowledge and worship of God. If revival is to come in our time. If revival is to come to our families and our churches and our communities, it must come to us first. Our hearts must be stirred just as Hezekiah’s was stirred to courageously and boldly and humbly and faithfully serve the Lord.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 27-30

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July 21, 2022
Cornerstone

Readings for today: Isaiah 27-30

“Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation; whoever believes will not be in haste.” (Isaiah 28:16)

I thought about these words throughout our trip. Each of the churches we went to seemed built upon a particular stone. There was the Church of the Nativity where one could touch the stones on which the manger lay. There was the Monastery of the Temptation where one could gaze upon the stone on which Jesus sat while being tempted by the devil. There was the stone of Golgotha where Jesus was crucified. And there was the stone of the empty tomb where Jesus rose from the dead. Praying at each of these places was powerful. One could literally feel the weight of glory pressed into each of these stones and it makes Isaiah’s words from today’s reading come to life even more.

“And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb line; and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter. Then your covenant of death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand...” (Isaiah 28:17-18)

God has established an everlasting covenant with His people. A covenant of life not death. A covenant of joy not sorrow. A covenant of peace not conflict. A covenant of grace not condemnation. Here in the Holy Land we see signs of that covenant all around us. The Western Wall where faithful Jews still gather to pray. The tombs on the slopes of the Kidron Valley where faithful Jews have been buried for centuries with the hope of greeting the Messiah when He comes. The many different churches and shrines marking the places where Jesus lived and taught and suffered and died and rose again. The Holy Land presents one of the most powerful testimonies to the truth and hope of the gospel and it’s why every believer should try to make the trip here at least once in their lives.

Because God Himself has laid the chief cornerstone in Jesus Christ, we who believe in Him will never be put to shame. We can trust Him to be faithful. We can trust Him to be our refuge and strength in times of trouble. Our stronghold and refuge when the storms of life come. Nothing will shake a foundation that is built on Christ. Rather than seeking to save ourselves, we can respond to God’s gracious call, “Thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, In repentance and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength...the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore He exalts Himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for Him.”

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 31-35

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July 22, 2022
Escape Routes

Readings for today: [Isaiah 31-35](#)

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

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

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

“And the Assyrian shall fall by a sword, not of man; and a sword, not of man, shall devour him; and he shall flee from the sword, and his young men shall be put to forced labor. His rock shall pass away in terror, and his officers desert the standard in panic,” declares the Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and whose furnace is in Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 31:8-9)

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

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

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July 23, 2022
Empty Threats

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

Standing on the top of the ancient citadel in Amman, Jordan is eye-opening. The history of the site can be traced back to the Bronze Age (3300-1200BC) and has been conquered several times. The Persians, Greeks, Nabateans, Romans, Byzantines, Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids, Ayyubids, Mamelukes, and Ottomans all had their day. Every time a new empire would sweep in, they would often raze the city to the ground and rebuild on top of it. They would establish their dominance by repurposing important, often sacred structures like churches, as storage rooms or stables or trash dumps. It's fascinating to walk through the ancient streets and think about all the different tribes and nations that called this place their home.

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

The Lord makes all human threats empty. No empire - no matter how mighty and strong - can defeat Him. No weapon that is fashioned against Him shall stand. No king or emperor can aspire to ascend His throne. God will brook no rivals. God will allow no pretenders. God will not be mocked. Not by any human being, great or small. Listen to how God Himself describes it in Isaiah 37:23-29, "Whom have you mocked and reviled? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes to the heights? Against the Holy One of Israel! By your servants you have mocked the Lord, and you have said, With my many chariots I have gone up the heights of the mountains, to the far recesses of Lebanon, to cut down its tallest cedars, its choicest cypresses, to come to its remotest height, its most fruitful forest. I dug wells and drank waters, to dry up with the sole of my foot all the streams of Egypt. Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass, that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins, while their inhabitants, shorn of strength, are dismayed and confounded, and have become like plants of the field and like tender grass, like grass on the housetops, blighted before it is grown. I know your sitting down and your going out and coming in, and your raging against me. Because you have raged against me and your complacency has come to my ears, I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth, and I will turn you back on the way by which you came."

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

Readings for tomorrow: None

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July 25, 2022

Healing Prayer

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

One of the things I've learned from all my travels around the globe is the power of healing prayer. Believe it or not, there are millions around the world today who do not have access to anything but the most rudimentary form of healthcare. Infant mortality rates are high. Life expectancy is low. They live with sickness, disease, and death on a daily basis. They have no recourse but God so they lean on Him for healing and strength. I have prayed for healing alongside believers in the slums of Addis Ababa, rural villages in Uganda, among South Sudanese refugees, North Korean defectors, and for Palestinian believers who are displaced in their own country. I have watched God's Spirit intervene miraculously to bring sight to the blind, healing from different diseases, strength to those who are weak and on the brink of death, even raise the dead.

King Hezekiah was sick to the point of death. He had no access to modern healthcare. Little in the way of hope. In fact, the prophet Isaiah even visited to give him the dire news. "Thus says the Lord: Set your house in order for you shall die, you shall not recover." (Is. 38:1) And what was Hezekiah's response? He turned to the Lord in prayer. He asked for healing. It's a simple prayer. Not a lot of words. Not a lot of drama. He just turns his face to the wall and calls on God to remember his faithfulness. "Please, O Lord, remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight." (Is. 38:2) It's a prayer of trust. A prayer of faith. A prayer of surrender. However God chooses to respond, Hezekiah is prepared to accept the answer. Through his tears, he commits his life and his fate to God.

God chooses to answer Hezekiah's prayer. He heals him from his disease and adds fifteen years to his life. Note that God's answer serves an even larger purpose. Hezekiah's healing will be accompanied by the even greater miracle of God's deliverance of His people. God Himself will defend them and protect them from the Assyrian king. To top things off, God gives Hezekiah a sign. He makes the shadow cast by the sun turn back ten steps. It's an amazing miracle. Hezekiah is saved. Israel is delivered. God is glorified.

So why doesn't this happen more often? Why do miracles seem so rare in our day and age? Why does God seem so silent in the face of our prayers? Perhaps it's just a matter of perspective. I can't tell you the number of times I have prayed with those who are sick and dying in our own country. I've been at the sides of countless hospital beds asking God for miracles. Recently, I prayed with a good friend who I've known for thirty years who was on death's door. She had been told by her doctors to put her affairs in order. She would not make it beyond a few weeks. We spent an hour talking through her funeral. But before I left, we prayed. We asked God for healing. We asked God to intervene. We asked God to remember her faithfulness. We told God we trusted Him. We knew she was in His good hands no matter the outcome. The next day her body began to respond to the treatment. Within a few days, they were talking about rehab. Within a week or so, she was coming home. It was nothing short of a miracle.

God often works His miracles through ordinary means. It could be a cake of figs (Is. 38:21) or oxygen and anti-biotics. God's healing can happen instantaneously or it can happen over time. And no matter what happens, it must be acknowledged that healing in this world is always incomplete. We are mortal, finite creatures. The reality is Hezekiah didn't live forever. He was given fifteen more years. My dear friend won't live forever. She's simply been given the gift of a little more time. None of us will live forever. Our lives will be filled with all kinds of joy and sorrow, health and sickness, pleasures and pain. The real question is what will we do with the time we've been given?

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 40-42, Psalms 46

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July 26, 2022
The Comfort of God

Readings for today: Isaiah 40-42, Psalms 46

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

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

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." (Is. 40:1-2)

"He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young." (Is. 40:11)

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength." (Is. 40:28-29)

"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." (Is. 41:10)

"For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, Fear not, I am the one who helps you...I am the one who helps you, declares the Lord; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel." (Is. 41:13-14)

"When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them." (Is. 41:17)

"I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations..." (Is. 42:6)

“And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them.” (Is. 42:16)

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 43-45, Psalms 80

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July 27, 2022
Calling

Readings for today: Isaiah 43-45, Psalms 80

One of things I often do when I travel overseas is look at the tracking map they make available while you're onboard. It's a great way to pass the time. I watch as cities like London, Paris, Rome, Cairo, Khartoum, Juba, Entebbe, Bahiir Dar, Asmara, Djibouti, Jeddah, Mogadishu, and Aden all come into view. I've flown over Greenland, Iceland, and Europe as I make my way to the Horn of Africa. I've fallen love with this part of the world. God has given me a heart for the people over there. I have dear friends in Ethiopia, Uganda, and South Sudan. They are some of my spiritual heroes and heroines. They are engaged in the great work of taking the light of the gospel into some very dark places. They encounter a lot of idolatry. The worship of false gods. And when you've seen some of the things I've seen, Isaiah's words don't seem so foreign or unfamiliar. "The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it." (Isaiah 44:13-15) The thing is...I've met these carpenters. I've seen the craftsmen hard at work fashioning their idols. I've watched them bow down before them and it shatters my heart. I've wept over the lost. I've held those who are sick. I've prayed with those who are dying. I've seen the desperately poor. And I've dedicated my life to bringing them the hope of the gospel.

"But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1) I believe with all my heart that God called me for such a time as this. God created and fashioned me for this purpose. He redeemed me so many years on the campus of the University of Colorado in Boulder so that I might fulfill His great plan to bring the gospel to the nations. This is why He called me by name. To set me apart. To serve His purposes. To take all that I am and all that I have and use me for His glory. I have no identity of my own. I have nothing to call my own. This is not just something I do in my spare time or support with the leftovers of my life. This is literally the reason I exist. "Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you; you are my servant...I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you." (Isaiah 44:21-22)

Now you may be tempted to dismiss this as my individual calling. Something unique to Doug Resler but nothing could be further from the truth. Every single person who calls on the name of the Lord has been saved and set apart for this glorious purpose...to bring the gospel to the nations! It starts right outside your front door and extends to the very ends of the earth. Every resource you've been given. Every gift you've received. Every talent you've developed. Every life experience you've gone through. God has carefully orchestrated all these things in order to prepare you for His service. By the way, this is true whether you acknowledge Him or not! Consider the example of Cyrus the Persian from our reading today! The reality is you don't have to go to Africa to see idolatry. You don't have to go to the Middle East to see the worship of false gods. Our nation and our neighborhoods are just as dark as places like Juba and Khartoum and Entebbe. The people we live among need the gospel just as desperately as the people I will have the opportunity to go and serve this fall. When it comes to the Kingdom of God and the promise of eternal life, we hold no advantage. We have no privilege of position. We will not be "boarding" first or get any special treatment. God has given us a truly GREAT

commission. To share the good news of the gospel. To go and tell the nations of all He has done! To sing a new song! To lift up praise to our King! To place our lives in His hands for Him to use as He sees fit according to His divine plan.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 46-49, Psalms 135

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July 28, 2022
Lean on God

Readings for today: Isaiah 46-49, Psalms 135

You have a choice. Either carry your god or let God carry you. Either you load yourself down with idols...Idols that are false. Idols that are dead. Idols that cannot save. Or you let God bear you up on eagle's wings. I love how Isaiah 46 puts it, "Bel bows down; Nebo stoops; their idols are on beasts and livestock; these things you carry are borne as burdens on weary beasts. They stoop; they bow down together; they cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity. "Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save." (Isaiah 46:1-4) The picture Isaiah paints here is of foreign nations carrying their gods around from place to place. They put their gods on carts borne by beasts of burden. They are heavy loads. The oxen have to strain to keep going. And all for naught as because the idols are dead and empty. The end result is defeat. Exile. Captivity. Contrast this with the Living God of Israel. No idol can depict him which means no statue or totem to carry. Israel's faith was so strange and unique that many of their Ancient Near East neighbors considered them atheists! All because they didn't appear to have a god! And yet Israel's God is real. Alive. Active. He bears them up from birth even to their old age. They didn't make him, He made them. They didn't bear him, He bore them. They didn't carry him, He carries them. They didn't save him, He saves them.

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 50-53

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July 29, 2022
Suffering Servant

Readings for today: Isaiah 50-53

I am extremely blessed to be friends with a man named John Rucyahana. John is a retired Anglican bishop who chairs the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Rwanda. For almost thirty years, he has been engaged in helping his country recover from the horrific genocide in 1994. As such, he has wrestled deeply with the question, "Where was God as over one million people were being slaughtered?" And here is his answer in his own words, "Where was God when a million innocent people were being butchered? Where was God when priests and pastors helped massacre the people in their churches? I'll tell you where God was. He was alongside the victims lying on the cold stone floor of the cathedral. He was comforting a dying child. He was crying at the altar. But He was also saving lives. Many were saved by miracles. God does not flee when evil takes over a nation...God is the giver of eternal life, and He can bring great good out of any situation. He raises the dead; He can also raise the broken. He can restore their hearts and minds and lift their spirits to renewed life. In my country God is doing this today by the thousands. There is so much pain here, so many real tears, and so much guilt that our ministry is like preaching hope from the top of a pile of bones. From atop a mountain of mutilated bodies, we are stretching a hand upward to proclaim a message of transformation and recovery." (The Bishop of Rwanda)

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

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

The same God who bore the sins of many. The same God who makes intercession for transgressors. The same God who loved His enemies so much He died for them is the same God who is alive and active in Rwanda. Bringing about reconciliation through forgiveness. Preaching hope from atop a pile of His own bones. From atop His own mutilated body, He is stretching a hand upward to proclaim a

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 54-58

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July 30, 2022
Full Devotion

Readings for today: Isaiah 54-58

The great Reformer, Martin Luther, taught that we learn to hear God's voice in three primary ways. Oratio - Prayer. Meditatio - Meditation. En Tentatio - Within the "tensions" of real life. It is this last one that resonates most often with my heart. Many years ago, I took a trip to Rwanda. A nation still recovering from a horrific genocide that resulted in the death of over 1.1 million people. Spurred on by a racist national government with a history of systematic abuse and oppression, many ordinary, everyday people turned into rabid killers. They murdered and raped friends. Family members. Neighbors. Co-workers. Things turned so evil that some pastors turned on their congregations. They turned their church buildings into charnel houses. They lured their parishioners into traps with the promise of safety. One pastor even bulldozed his own church down on the heads of those he served. These events provide a dark backdrop to these words from Isaiah this morning...

"Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it? Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord? "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard." (Isaiah 58:3-8)

Rwanda was known for many years as a Christian nation. Some 90% of the population claimed to know Christ prior to the genocide. So how does one adequately explain how these same people ended carrying out one of the most gruesome pogroms in human history? Bishop John Rucyahana, a key figure in the forgiveness and reconciliation movement in the wake of the genocide, suggests it is because their Christianity only went skin deep. It hadn't penetrated to the heart. Yes, they worshipped. Yes, they fasted and prayed. They had all the appearance of godliness but they did not love God with their hearts. Isaiah was facing a similar situation in his own time. The people of God worshipped, fasted, sang, made sacrifices. They appeared to follow God's commands but in reality they were seeking their own pleasure. Their own power. The results were obvious to anyone who could see. Oppression of the weak. Violence. Dissent. Pride. All were hallmarks of Israel at the time.

In the face of evil, God calls His people back to Himself. He calls them to lay aside their comforts, their safety and security, their wants and desires to serve a higher calling. A greater purpose. To humble themselves before the Lord and lay their lives and their future in His hands. Prior to returning to Rwanda, Bishop John was leading a flourishing ministry in Uganda. He was doing God's work and many people were being saved. But God wanted Bishop John to leave his comfortable life and return to his own country. Bishop John reports hearing God telling him, "If you do not go there and present the healing gospel, then the fate of Rwanda will be in the hands of those who carry guns. If God is the remedy and the solution, whom shall He use, if you don't allow Him to use you?" This powerful message from the Holy Spirit convicted Bishop John and he laid everything aside to return home. Isaiah calls his people to a similar return. To return back to God in faithfulness and service. To "loose

the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke...to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house..." God promises that when His people commit their ways to Him, their light shall break forth like the dawn and the glory of the Lord will be their rearguard.

So...here's the challenge for us...do we believe these words are as much for us as they were for the people of God in Isaiah's time? For the Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda in the 1990's? Do we believe God has called us to place our lives in His service? To loose the bonds of wickedness in our own communities and nation? To give all that we have and all that we are to the higher calling of righteousness and justice and peace? To set aside our own agendas and let God guide and direct our steps so that might serve the oppressed and hungry and helpless in our midst? This is what it means to follow Christ. There are no other options. There is no other way. Only full and undivided devotion will do.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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