

FORMATIONS

COMMENTARY

May–August 2020

We hope you enjoy the comments of Judson Edwards each week. Our goal is to provide *Formations* subscribers with a variety of perspectives on the Scripture text for any given week. The Learner's Study Guide contains excellent commentary and structure to aid in adult faith formation. The *Formations* Commentary continues to widen our understanding by bringing the experience and insight of capable and thoughtful church leaders. Judson Edwards's experiences provide him with unique perspectives on the Bible and congregational life that we are pleased to share with you.

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CONTENTS

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The Spirit and Power

May 3	<i>The Spirit Descends</i> Luke 3:15-22	4
May 10	<i>Pray for the Spirit</i> Luke 11:1-13	9
May 17	<i>You Shall Receive Power</i> Acts 1:1-11	14
May 24	<i>The Samaritan Pentecost</i> Acts 8:14-25	19
May 31	<i>A Crucial Question</i> Acts 19:1-7	24

The Beloved Disciple

Jun 7	<i>Called to Come and See</i> John 1:29-39	29
Jun 14	<i>Remaining at Jesus' Side</i> John 13:18-30	34
Jun 21	<i>A New Family</i> John 19:25b-30	39
Jun 28	<i>The Beloved Disciple's Testimony</i> John 21:20-25	44

The Book of Hosea

Jul 5	<i>Hosea's Marriage</i> Hosea 1	49
Jul 12	<i>Israel's Redemption</i> Hosea 2:14, 16-3:5	54
Jul 19	<i>God's Indictment</i> Hosea 4:1-11a	59
Jul 26	<i>God's Tender Compassion</i> Hosea 11	64
Aug 2	<i>Israel's Restoration</i> Hosea 14	69

Humor in the Bible

Aug 9	<i>A Cheerful Heart</i> Proverbs 15:13-15; 16:23-24; 17:22	74
Aug 16	<i>Laughter and Sorrow</i> Ecclesiastes 7:1-6	79
Aug 23	<i>Mourning into Joy</i> Psalms 30; 126	84
Aug 30	<i>God Has Brought Me Laughter</i> Genesis 17:15-17; 18:9-15; 21:1-8	89

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judson Edwards is the author of twelve books, including *Quiet Faith: An Introvert's Guide to Spiritual Survival*. Jud served as pastor of the Heritage Park Baptist Church in Webster, Texas, and the Woodland Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas, until he retired in 2010. He now lives in Cedar Park, Texas, and devotes his time to writing.



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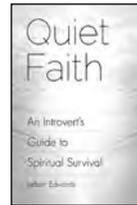
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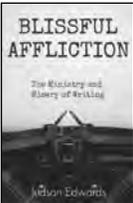
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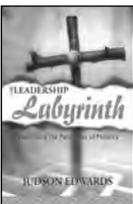
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THE SPIRIT DESCENDS

Luke 3:15-22

Introduction

What happens when the Spirit of God comes into a person's life? That crucial question is at the heart of this passage in Luke 3.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus were led by God's Spirit and willing to do whatever God wanted them to do. Luke makes it clear in the first two chapters of his Gospel that John and Jesus were both set apart at birth for special assignments from God. They were strikingly different in temperament and personality, but they shared the same passion: to be attentive and faithful to the Holy Spirit and to be true to the divine assignments given to them at birth.

But these verses lead us to believe that the Holy Spirit is not always predictable and consistent and that the Spirit deals with people in different ways. Trying to diagram the work of the Holy Spirit is like trying to catch the wind. Our verses this week tell us that the Spirit led John and Jesus down radically divergent paths.

That difference helps us realize that God deals with each of us differently, too. What God says to me and does in my life might not match up with what God says to you and does in your life.

In Luke 3, John the Baptist has to come face to face with his limitations and then endure tragedy and death, all because of his willingness to follow the Spirit's promptings. Jesus, listening to that same Spirit, hears words of calling and blessing that are full of hope and motivation. At this moment in their lives, John and Jesus are guided by the same Spirit, but they're given completely different assignments and challenges.

This passage, then, is the saga of two young men coming to grips with who they are and, more important, who God is calling them to be. The Spirit descends, and John has to recognize his limitations and disappointments. The Spirit descends, and Jesus recognizes his gifts and blessings.

Let's examine how the Spirit led both of them with an eye toward learning how God might also lead us.

An Honest Recognition of Limitations and Disappointments

There might not be a more tragic story in the Gospels than the story of John the Baptist. In verses 19-20, Luke only mentions a story told in more graphic and horrible fashion in Matthew 14:5-12 and Mark 6:17-29.

Matthew and Mark give us the gory details that Luke omits: John is not only tossed into prison by King Herod but is also beheaded at the request of his niece and stepdaughter, Salome, who pleased the king with her dancing. Then John's head is brought out on a silver platter and given to Salome. John's disciples bury his body and tell Jesus about John's fate. It's a sad, sickening story that reeks of unspeakable evil.

Luke, on the other hand, focuses on describing how people are so impressed by John that some think he must be the Messiah (Lk 3:15). John quickly denies this speculation and says that he is just the forerunner, the one who announces the arrival of the true Messiah. When this Messiah comes, John says, he will baptize people with the Holy Spirit and fire (v. 16). He will separate the wheat from the chaff and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. Then, seemingly as an afterthought, Luke mentions that Herod puts John in prison—the only detail he includes of the tragic part of John's story.

It seems obvious in his description of Jesus' coming ministry that John doesn't have a clear picture of the kind of Messiah Jesus will be. John pictures a stern, military-like Messiah who will judge people. Of course, that is not who Jesus proved to be. So we learn in a later story (Lk 7:18-35) that there comes a day when John sends disciples to Jesus with this question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (v. 19). Jesus' loving, Suffering Servant kind of Messiah wasn't what John was expecting at all.

The main point we should notice in this passage is where John's obedience to God's Spirit takes him. First, it takes him to an honest recognition of his own limitations. Second, it takes him to a painful awareness that his obedience to God will come with a price: it will lead him to prison and eventually death. In following the Spirit's promptings, he must acknowledge that he is not the Messiah, and then he has to face almost unimaginable evil. As with many of the Old Testament prophets before him, John's faithfulness to God's call leads him not to safety but to suffering.

This, of course, is not good news to any of us. No one wants to suffer, and no one wants to think that God would lead them in that direction. But when Jesus tells his disciples about the coming of the Holy Spirit, he calls that Spirit "the Spirit of truth" (Jn 16:12). It is the Spirit's role

to lead us to know and accept the truth. And the truth is that, like John, we have our limitations and need to acknowledge them. The truth is also that, like John, we will sometimes suffer and face unspeakable evil.

That means the Spirit of truth will not let us play games or indulge in wishful thinking. No, the Spirit will lead us to be honest about ourselves and our limitations. And the Spirit will lead us to be honest about our experiences and suffering as well. Contrary to our wishes, we will not lead a problem-free life.

In other words, according to Jesus, the Holy Spirit is all about truth and honesty. That Spirit will have us face the truth about ourselves and our experiences. That Spirit also promises to be with us through everything we have to endure.

An Honest Recognition of Gifts and Blessings

If John's experience in this passage is about recognizing limitations and disappointments, Jesus' experience is about recognizing gifts and blessings. As he is baptized by John, the Spirit descends upon him, and he hears these glorious words: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Lk 3:22).

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus hears these affirming words of love. He is the Beloved of God. God takes delight in him. There must have been many times in his life—when he was harassed by the Pharisees, when he was rejected in his hometown of Nazareth, when his friends forsook him, or when he agonized in the garden of Gethsemane—when Jesus looked back on this moment and took heart. Whatever life tossed at him, he was the Beloved of God, held and sustained by God's delight.

The Spirit of truth comes into our life not only to help us face our limitations and heartaches but also to help us acknowledge our gifts and blessings. The Spirit whispers to us the same words Jesus heard: "You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And we can live secure in that love. Whatever life hurls at us, we know we are held in the embrace of One who takes great delight in us.

Perhaps one of the best examples of the way God feels about us is to think about the way we feel about our children and grandchildren. My son and daughter, now grown with children of their own, were never quite perfect. They made mistakes, did stupid things from time to time, and occasionally disappointed me. But never once did my love for them fade. They were, and are, the absolute delights of my life. I would die for them if need be.

And that holds true for their children: my four grandsons who have become the new delights of my life. Those boys sometimes lose their temper, show signs of selfishness, make merely average grades at school, and strike out with the bases loaded. But I wouldn't swap them for any other kids in the world.

Now hear Jesus, in a passage from Luke 11 that we will study next week, as he talks about the way God feels about us: "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Lk 11:11-13).

In other words, the love we have for our own children and grandchildren is nothing compared to the love God has for us. God knows we're sinners, prone to make mistakes and do wrong—and loves us anyway. Furthermore, God is eager to give us the Holy Spirit, to lead us to truth and bless us beyond measure, if only we will ask.

One day the Apostle Paul got to thinking about the delight God had shown in him, the ways God had blessed his life. It led him to write one of the greatest chapters in the Bible, Romans 8. In that chapter, Paul begins with no condemnation: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (v. 1). He ends with no separation: "Nothing in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 39).

Surrounded by no condemnation and no separation, we live with confidence and joy. "What then are we to say about these things?" Paul writes. "If God is for us, who is against us?" (v. 31).

If God is not going to condemn us or leave us, what do we have to fear? Who or what can possibly defeat us? That is the message the Spirit of truth keeps whispering in our soul. It is a message we need to cling to as if our life depends upon it—because it does.

Conclusion

The biblical message about the Holy Spirit seems strange to many modern people. When they hear Christians talking about a Holy Spirit—or even worse, a "Holy Ghost"—it sounds like religious mumbo-jumbo.

But the biblical teaching about the Holy Spirit is one of the most practical and joyful teachings imaginable. It says that the God of the universe has not abandoned us. It says that the God who fashioned the world and everything in it has decided to be involved in that world. God

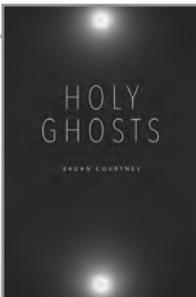
has decided to take up residence in the hearts and minds of people and lead them to truth. We don't have to wander around frantically trying to learn the truth. We have an inner Compass that will take us to joy and purpose if only we will pay heed.

Today's passage gives us a hint of how that Spirit leads people. Sometimes, the Spirit of truth leads us to admit our limitations and disappointments, to come face to face with ourselves and our problems. John the Baptist, in being attentive to the Spirit, had to walk down that road.

But sometimes the Spirit of truth inspires us to celebrate our gifts and blessings, to realize how much God loves us and wants to bless us. Jesus, in being attentive to the Spirit, was blessed to walk down that road.

The good news in all of this is that we are not alone. God has not abandoned us and continues to guide, encourage, and love us. We have One who walks beside us, who knows the way home and will take us there if we will but follow his lead.

Thank you, God, for being involved in our lives. Make us sensitive to your Spirit's promptings. We ask you to lead us to the truth about our limitations and experiences. But we also ask you to lead us to the truth about your love for us. We want to know the truth so that the truth can set us free. Amen.



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PRAY FOR THE SPIRIT

Luke 11:1-13

Introduction

“He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples’” (Lk 11:1).

Three events probably precipitated that request. First, and most obviously, Jesus had been praying. The unnamed disciple, seeing Jesus returning from his time of prayer, wanted to learn how to have a meaningful prayer life himself. Since Jesus evidently found prayer to be meaningful and helpful, this disciple wanted to learn how to pray like that, too.

The second event that might have prompted this request is that John the Baptist had given his disciples instruction in prayer (v. 1). If John would do that for his followers, it was only reasonable to think that Jesus would do the same for his.

The third event that might have precipitated this request is the visit that Jesus and his disciples had just completed with Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42). Martha was encumbered with all the details of hosting a party while Mary sat at Jesus’ feet, listening and communing with him.

Though Martha was irritated by her sister’s apparent laziness and refusal to help her, Jesus defended Mary. In this clash between activity and contemplation, Jesus opted for contemplation. That experience might have been enough to make the disciples realize that they, too, needed to learn how to be still, contemplate, and pray.

Whatever the reasons, a disciple comes to Jesus and asks him for a lesson on prayer. Jesus responds by giving him a model prayer, telling him a strange story, and assuring him that God is most eager to respond to prayer.

We can be grateful that this unnamed disciple came to Jesus with his request. It gave Jesus an opportunity to teach his disciples—and now us as well—some practical truths about prayer.

Obstacles to Prayer

Let’s begin by frankly acknowledging that it is not easy to pray. The reasons for that are many and varied:

- *We're not sure why we need to pray.* If God is all-knowing and therefore already aware of our needs, and if God is all-powerful and capable of meeting those needs, why do we need to beg God to do things? Prayer seems to be an unnecessary exercise in telling an omniscient, omnipotent God what God already knows.
- *We're not sure what we should be praying for.* We would love to have a new car, but is it legitimate to ask God for one? We would love for our child to make the all-star team, but is that something we should be praying for? Given our blindness to our sins and faults, most of us know we're not praying about the most pressing issues in our lives.
- *We're not sure if prayer "works."* We've prayed for many things in the past that never happened, and we secretly wonder if prayer is worth the effort. Sometimes it feels as if our prayers rise to the level of the ceiling above us but go no higher.
- *We find it hard to concentrate when we pray.* Our minds tend to wander, and we find ourselves thinking about a dozen different things. We keep trying to concentrate on God and our conversation with God, but it's not easy. When it comes to prayer, most of us have the attention span of a three-year-old.

So, for those reasons and more, we find ourselves struggling with prayer. On the other side of the ledger, though, we also know that the Bible encourages us to pray, that other people testify to the power of prayer, and that we ourselves have experienced times when we felt like our prayers really did make a difference.

Even on our most cynical days, we can't dismiss prayer and discard it as a religious hoax our ancestors have foisted upon us. We know there must be something to prayer, so we join a long line of seekers who come to Jesus with the request of this unnamed disciple: "Lord, teach us to pray."

A Model Prayer

In response to that disciple's request, Jesus gives an example of prayer. This version of the Lord's Prayer in Luke 11:2-4 is shorter than the more familiar version in Matthew 6:9-15. Even so, it contains six key elements:

- "*Father, hallowed be your name*": an acknowledgment of the intimacy we can have with God and our need to honor and hallow God's name.
- "*Your kingdom come*": a recognition of the kingdom of love and peace that God wants to build on earth and of our part in making that happen.

- “*Give us each day our daily bread*”: a request not for super-sized wants but for daily needs.
- “*And forgive us our sins...*”: an admission of our sinfulness and our willingness to let those sins be washed away by God’s grace.
- “*...for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us*”: a willingness to get rid of our resentments and to quit keeping score in our relationships.
- “*And do not bring us to the time of trial*”: a humble admission of the sad truth that we humans can resist everything but temptation and that we need God’s help to keep us from falling into it.

When we examine Jesus’ model prayer, we see that it has three characteristics. First, it is brief. We can say the entire prayer in fifteen seconds. Perhaps we would have more success in our prayer lives if we didn’t try to spend thirty minutes praying one long prayer and instead prayed thirty one-minute prayers every day.

Second, it is practical. Its six elements relate to the stuff of everyday life: knowing God, working to build God’s kingdom, being grateful for bread, seeking forgiveness, giving forgiveness, and trying to avoid sin. There’s nothing mystical or mysterious about any of that. Jesus’ model prayer is about the nitty-gritty issues we all face daily.

Third, it assumes a willing and receptive Audience. Undergirding this prayer is the sense that God really is a Father who wants to give good gifts to his children. The God of this prayer deserves to be hallowed, is working to build a loving kingdom, wants to give us daily bread, wants to forgive our sins, wants us to live in harmony with our neighbors, and wants to keep us from temptation. The God Jesus addresses in this prayer is accessible and friendly, which leads him to tell a story to make that truth clear.

A God Who Is Eager to Give

The story Jesus tells in verses 5-8 is often called the parable of the friend at midnight. In the ancient Middle East, travelers usually journeyed in the evening to avoid the midday heat. In Jesus’ story, a traveler does just that and shows up at a friend’s house at midnight. The problem is that the friend is not prepared for guests and has to go to a neighbor’s house to ask for three loaves of bread.

Not surprisingly, the neighbor is not thrilled to have someone knocking on his door at midnight. He yells from inside the house, “Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything” (v. 7). The man at

the door keeps pounding, though, and finally the neighbor begrudgingly gets up and gives him what he needs.

The point of that story is not that God is like this surly neighbor and will begrudgingly respond to us if we persist in our prayers. Jesus' point here is based not on likeness but on contrast. If even this churlish neighbor will respond to the man's persistence, how much more will God, who is not churlish and upset at all, respond to our requests? God is not like this reluctant neighbor; God is most *unlike* this reluctant neighbor and is eager to give good gifts to anyone who knocks on the door.

"So I say to you," Jesus continues, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you" (v. 9). Then he uses an example I referred to in last week's lesson. If our child asks for a fish, will we give that child a snake? If our child asks for an egg, will we give our child a scorpion? Of course not! We love our children with every fiber of our being and want only the best for them. So, Jesus concludes, if we evil, sinful parents will give good gifts to our children, how much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?

In Matthew's version of this passage, God gives "good things" to those who come asking, seeking, and knocking. Here in Luke 11, though, the gift God bestows upon seekers is the Holy Spirit. Luke says that those who persistently knock on God's door will be given the Holy Spirit.

Last week, I mentioned that the notion of a Holy Spirit seems outdated and bizarre to most modern people. But if the Holy Spirit is nothing less than the presence of God within us—guiding, comforting, and challenging us—what better gift could we receive? To know that God is with us in our times of grief and loss, to sense the presence of God when we feel abandoned by people, to get a surge of inner peace when the world is collapsing all around us, and to have a moment of clarity when everything seems confusing: those experiences are priceless. We might think that our most pressing need is a new house or car, but those things pale beside our need for the Holy Spirit.

Of all the gifts God could bestow upon us, the gift of the Holy Spirit is the best one.

Conclusion

This passage will certainly disappoint those who want prayer to be a spiritual slot machine. If we want prayer to guarantee us that we will win the lottery or get a Lamborghini, Luke 11 will not sound like good news.

We will be saddened to hear that persisting in prayer will only guarantee that we will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

When I was listing the obstacles to prayer in the Introduction, I mentioned that we sometimes have difficulty praying because prayer seems useless to us. Why pray, we secretly wonder, when God already knows our needs and has the power to meet those needs? If God is really eager to bless us, why do we have to ask him for blessings?

The answer has to do, I think, with the Holy Spirit. When we pray, we become aware of God's presence. We open our lives to those divine whispers that take us to truth and to the will of God for our lives. We don't pray to receive "things"; we pray to receive the Spirit and to become aware of the Spirit's working in our lives.

In his book *Hunting the Divine Fox* (New York: Seabury, 1974), Robert Capon ponders the rationale behind many of our spiritual disciplines. The spiritual disciplines all seem a bit redundant and useless, so why worship, study, give, fast, or pray? If none of those disciplines earns God's love, why do we do them? Capon writes that only a fool would advise quitting those disciplines:

Why kiss your wife, when you both know you love her? Why tell great jokes to old friends who've heard them before? Why take your daughter to lunch on her birthday, when you're going to have supper together anyway? What the fool is really saying is, "Why be human, when you can be a jerk instead?"

Only a fool would give up on prayer. It makes us aware of the Spirit. It opens us to God's will. In a material world, it keeps us tethered to the spiritual. And, maybe best of all, it keeps us human when we could become jerks instead.

God, there is much about prayer that we don't understand. But we do know that we need to stay connected to you and that we need your Spirit within us. Amen.

YOU SHALL RECEIVE POWER

Acts 1:1-11

Introduction

Baptists and other Christians with a more informal worship style typically don't celebrate the day Jesus ascended into heaven. We celebrate his birth, death, and resurrection in grand fashion, but Ascension Sunday usually passes by unnoticed and uncelebrated.

The reason for that is easy to understand. Ascension Day is the day the present Lord became absent. Who wants to celebrate being left behind? Who wants to mark the day that Jesus went out of the world, never to be seen again? Hungry as we are for the presence of God, the one thing we don't need is a reminder of God's absence.

The ascension of Jesus marks a time of transition, both in the biblical story and in the experience of his early followers. Think about it: For three years, their experience with Jesus had been immediate and direct. They walked with him, talked with him, and observed how he related to people. They heard him pray and they listened to him tell delightful stories about God. If they had any questions, they could go directly to him for an answer. Jesus was a daily presence in their lives. He was close and personal.

The ascension of Jesus changed that. After Jesus was taken up into heaven, he was gone, and the disciples had to play by different rules. They couldn't go directly to him any longer. They had to adjust to life without his physical presence. It must have been a jarring and difficult transition for those early believers. There was a hole in their individual lives—and in their community—that simply couldn't be filled.

The early Christians assumed that Jesus would be back soon. They thought he would return as mysteriously and strangely as he had departed, so they lived on tiptoe, certain that Jesus would show up again at any moment. Then they would once again hear his laugh, recognize his voice, and feel his arms embracing them.

But they waited and waited, and Jesus never returned. Days turned into months, and months turned into years, and still no Jesus. One of the key questions those early Christians eventually had to deal with was, "What do we do now that Jesus is gone?" Most of the New Testament was written in an attempt to answer that question.

Today's passage is helpful for us because we find ourselves in the same situation as the first Christians. We too live with the physical absence of Jesus. How do we relate to him since he is not tangibly among us? How do we keep going spiritually? How do we keep the fire alive when the one who ignited the flame has left us and ascended to heaven?

Our passage lets us eavesdrop on the early saints as they wrestle with this all-important question: *What do we do now that Jesus is gone?* Acts 1 suggests that they answered the question in at least three ways.

Relying on the Holy Spirit

First, now that Jesus is gone, *we must rely on the Holy Spirit*. That is the main message Jesus communicates to his followers in this passage. He tells them, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (1:5). Then he promises them, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8).

This isn't the first time Jesus makes such a promise. Earlier he told them,

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. (Jn 14:16-18)

There are also other occasions in the Gospels when Jesus promises the Holy Spirit to his followers.

As we have seen throughout this unit of study, the Spirit is nothing less than the presence, power, and peace of God among and within us. The God who made the world and everything in it has chosen to take up residence in individual people, inspiring and empowering us to live with purpose and joy. Jesus wanted to make sure his followers knew this and tapped into the Spirit's power.

For most of us, I think, the Spirit's power is not wide-screen and Technicolor, but we have felt the quiet wind of the Spirit and know this unmistakable power. We have sensed the Spirit in our sorrow, when we found unexpected hope and strength. We have felt the Spirit in the dark of night, when we tiptoed to the baby bed, watched our sleeping child, and realized how blessed we are. We have sensed the Spirit in a time of confusion, when we received surprising insight and direction. We have

even suspected the Spirit's presence when we were so tickled that we laughed until we cried.

In many different ways and situations, we have sensed the Holy Spirit moving in our lives. We are more than a little grateful for this presence.

Living in Community

Second, now that Jesus is gone, *we must live in community*. One of the first things Jesus did when he began his public ministry was choose a small group of disciples. That group traveled together, ate together, learned together, ministered together, and caught a vision of the kingdom of God together.

Jesus speaks the words of Acts 1 to these devoted followers. Though he will no longer be physically present with them, their work is not over. The kingdom of God must be built, and they will be the ones to build it.

When we read the rest of the book of Acts, we see how well they succeed in doing that. They establish a community called the church that embodies a kind of love and selflessness that still amazes us. In Acts, Luke chronicles the courageous and compassionate exploits of the first church. It is safe to say that the book of Acts knows nothing of a Christianity that is detached from this community.

Early in my pastoral career, I occasionally preached evangelistic sermons in which I downplayed the role of the church. "Get your friends to accept Christ," I said to my flock. "Don't just invite them to church." One of my favorite lines back in those days was, "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you a car."

Somewhere along the way, I changed my tune. I realized that the best evangelism and the best ministry take place in the context of the church. I realized that it is about as hard to be a Christian without the church as it is to be a baseball player without a team. I suppose it is possible to go to a batting cage, wear a uniform, play catch in the backyard, and call yourself a baseball player. But some would doubt the authenticity of your claim.

I also know that it is possible to get people to agree to a series of theological propositions and pray a prayer of personal commitment. But until they join the church, I'm not sure how serious that commitment is or how long it will last. "Lone Ranger Christianity" is foreign to the book of Acts because it isolates believers from the body of Christ that provides them life and love.

When Jesus speaks these words of commissioning before his ascension, he says them to the people he had chosen to be his community.

Now they are to be filled with the Holy Spirit and invite others to join that community. They will no longer have Jesus physically present with them, but they will have each other—and they will carry on Jesus' mission without him.

Telling His Story

Third, now that Jesus is gone, *we must remember and tell his story*. When Jesus promises his followers that the Holy Spirit will come upon them, he says that the Spirit will give them the power to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The Holy Spirit will empower them not merely to *feel* something but mainly to *do* something. The Spirit will enable them to remember Jesus' story and tell it to the world.

Those first Christians started out talking to each other about Jesus, remembering what he had said and done. Then they started writing their memories down. Just twenty or thirty years after the ascension, the first books of the New Testament were written. Those books were passed from church to church. Remarkably, they're still being passed around today. We still read and remember those writings and teach them to our children and grandchildren.

The early followers of Jesus, energized by the Holy Spirit, met to worship together on the first day of the week to commemorate Jesus' resurrection. They also used bread and wine to remember his death and proclaim his coming again. They baptized people who were willing to follow Jesus as a sign of the new life they had found in him. They did all these things because they knew how crucial it was to remember Jesus and tell his story. They didn't want to forget him, and they didn't want anybody else to forget him either.

After 2,000 years, we Christians still do those things today. Energized by the Holy Spirit, we study the stories and teachings of Jesus in Bible study groups. We gather to worship every Sunday. We receive the Lord's Supper to remember Jesus' death until he comes. We baptize converts as a symbol of the new life they have found in Christ. We sing songs, preach sermons, teach Vacation Bible School, go on mission trips, and in a hundred other ways seek to remember and tell the story of Jesus.

Those first Christians received the charge to remember and tell the story of Jesus in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and on to the ends of the earth (v. 8). We modern Christians have been given the same charge: to remember and tell the story of Jesus in Austin, Alabama, Alaska, and on to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Conclusion

Two thousand years have come and gone since Jesus ascended to heaven, and we Christians still wonder about his absence. When I was a pastor, I sometimes had people ask me hard questions about the absence of Christ: Where was Jesus in my sickness? Where was Jesus when the accident happened? Where was Jesus when my world started falling apart?

Like Mary when her brother Lazarus died, they were saying that if only Jesus had been here, things would have been different (Jn 11:32). He could have changed things. They were struggling with the absence of Christ in their time of pain.

Other people would come wanting to talk about Jesus' second coming. Their questions were sincere and pointed: When will Christ return? What will be the signs? Are there any good books to read about the second coming? What does the Bible say about his return? I think those questions were their way of affirming that, though we don't see Jesus visibly right now, someday we will. Our absent Lord will one day become our present Lord once again.

If anything, 2,000 years of absence have made us long even more for a visible Jesus. But thank God, we are not without resources. We have a Holy Spirit who will guide and inspire us in Jesus' absence. We have a community called the church where we can be the presence of Christ to one another. And we have good news to remember and tell to the world.

We might not have all the visible proof we want, but we have enough resources at our disposal to build a credible, hopeful faith.

God, teach us to walk by faith and not by sight. Thank you for the resources you have given us to build a credible and hopeful faith. Amen.

THE SAMARITAN PENTECOST

Acts 8:14-25

Introduction

Last week we studied Acts 1, a passage about the ascension of Jesus and the formation of the first church. As we continue to read the story of this church in the book of Acts, we see that it had many significant issues to address and many formidable walls to tear down.

Primarily, the early Christians had to determine who the gospel was for. If it was only for Jews, that would be easy. They could keep the gospel to themselves and reach out only to their own kind. If Christianity was just a new and improved version of Judaism and only for Jewish people, they could handle that with no problem.

But if the gospel of Jesus was a whole new way of approaching God and life, and if it was for the whole world, then things got considerably more complicated. That meant the first Christians had many walls to break down, many stereotypes to debunk, and many prejudices to overcome.

In Acts 6–15, Luke sets out to show how the church attempts to do that. He moves through a series of wall-toppling incidents and then culminates with the Jerusalem Council, where the church's leaders issue an official statement about the universality of the gospel. It was a simple and straightforward statement that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for everyone.

Our passage from Acts 8 tells us about one of those wall-toppling events. Luke records that the apostles in Jerusalem receive word that the people in Samaria have accepted the gospel due to Philip's evangelistic preaching. In New Testament times, Jews thought of Samaritans as racial and religious half-breeds and refused to associate with them. (Of course, the Samaritans had similar opinions of the Jews!) The possibility of despised Samaritans becoming a part of the church was a mammoth wall for the Jews to climb. So in Acts 8 we read that they send Peter and John to Samaria to investigate and bring back a report.

Once they get there, Peter and John do more than investigate. They lay hands on the Samaritans, and those new believers receive the Holy Spirit. Then they deal with a man named Simon, who wants to package this Holy Spirit “magic” and sell it to the masses.

Finally, on their way back to Jerusalem, Peter and John stop along the way to proclaim the good news to other Samaritans. By the end of our passage, it is obvious where Peter and John stand on the Samaritan issue, and another wall is about to topple.

The Things We Do Not Know

This passage begins by describing an incomplete conversion experience. When Peter and John get to Samaria, they discover that the Samaritan people have not yet received the Holy Spirit: “for as yet the Holy Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 8:16). They probably hadn’t been baptized in the Holy Spirit for the simple reason that Philip hadn’t yet told them that they could be. Once Peter and John tell them and lay hands upon them, the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit.

This incident reminds me that, for most of us, our knowledge of the Christian Way is incomplete as we begin our journey. Like those Samaritans, there are some things we simply don’t know. We start out as babes in Christ and gradually grow into maturity by baby steps. But our conversion is a process, not a one-time experience. Many of us, I would guess, are very different Christians now than we were when we first believed.

I know that is true for me. I grew up in a devout home, went to church all of my days, and consumed a weekly diet of conservative, maybe even fundamentalist, theology. Our pastor preached long sermons laced with fear and threats and ending with an invitation hymn that went on forever. We left church each Sunday with the fear of God in our souls. I took it all in, made a profession of faith as a boy, and eventually decided that God was calling me to preach.

I enrolled in seminary and soon encountered a professor who met with a group of students on an informal basis outside of class. He introduced us to new books, new ideas, and a new understanding of what it means to be a Christian. His approach was heavy on grace, servanthood, discerning our spiritual gifts, and being open to the new thing God wanted to do in our lives. For the first time, I understood why the Christian message is called good news. I was like those ancient Samaritans: I had been a Christian for a long time, but my conversion was incomplete. There were some important things I simply didn’t know.

It is not a coincidence that most of the metaphors we use to describe our relationship to God have to do with movement. We speak of a “walk” with God, a “journey” with Christ, and a “pilgrimage” of faith. Those metaphors are accurate for the simple reason that we all grow

into new truths and understandings as we mature as Christians. We are not supposed to be the same kind of believer at age sixty that we were at sixteen. Old things have passed away and all things have become new. Like the Samaritans in Acts 8, we've gotten some new and needed understanding, and much of it has come from other people—our own versions of Peter and John.

Sharing the Spirit

Luke doesn't tell us exactly what happened when Peter and John laid hands on the Samaritans and the Holy Spirit came upon them. It must have been something dramatic and impressive, though, because Simon wanted some of it for himself and was willing to pay money to get it.

In previous sessions in this unit, I've referred to the Spirit coming in mostly quiet, personal ways. I've alluded to the Spirit giving us peace in the midst of chaos, hope in the midst of despair, and insight in the midst of confusion. Whatever happened to the Samaritans here in Acts 8 must have been more obvious and dramatic than those quiet expressions of the Spirit. This was something big and noticeable.

Maybe they were filled with joy and started to dance and sing. Maybe they were filled with ecstasy and started to speak in unknown tongues. Maybe they were filled with generosity and started giving gladly to the poor. Whatever the manifestation was, the Spirit came and everyone noticed.

The Holy Spirit came upon those people because of the ministry of Peter and John. These apostles were the conduits through which the power of the Spirit came to the Samaritans. They not only brought a new understanding to the Samaritans; they also brought the power of their personality and presence. Then they bestowed that power through the laying on of hands. Peter and John were held in such respect and reverence that the mere touch of their hands was a spiritual experience. To be in touch with them was to be in touch with God's Spirit.

There are some people who are so in touch with God—so real, so humble, and so kind—that simply being in their presence lifts our spirits. Even if we don't break out in song or speak in tongues, we're positively affected when we're around people like them. They're certainly not dogmatic, preachy, or even religious, but they have a quiet authenticity that makes us want to be authentic, too.

When we think of Peter and John sharing the Spirit with the Samaritans, most of us can picture people in our own lives who have shared the Spirit with us—and we can pause and whisper a prayer of

thanks for these people. We can also whisper a prayer that we might become Spirit-sharers to a few people, too.

Abusing the Gospel

If Peter and John are the heroes in this passage, a man named Simon is the villain. Luke already introduced us to him earlier in this chapter. He is a magician who has amazed the people with his magical skills. The people think he is great and that his magic comes from God. When Philip comes to Samaria preaching the gospel, Simon becomes a believer and is baptized into the church.

Then when Simon sees the dramatic manifestation of the Holy Spirit that comes when Peter and John lay hands on the people, he offers to pay them money if they will show him how to do that, too. This laying on of hands would be the best magic trick imaginable, and he wants the power to do it. Imagine the crowds he could draw if he could add this skill to his repertoire!

It's a classic case of using the gospel for personal gain, and Peter minces no words in condemning Simon. In verses 20-23, Peter scolds him with angry words and calls him to repent. To his credit, Simon accepts the rebuke and says, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me" (v. 25).

Ever since Simon, people have tried to use the gospel as a way to feather their own nests. Sadly, history is filled with sordid stories about people who have used the gospel for financial, sexual, or emotional gain. We all probably know of cases where, under the guise of Christianity, preachers have become obscenely wealthy, men have preyed on innocent women for sexual favors, and children have been punished excessively. People with sinful motives can turn anything into a tool of evil—even a gospel of love and peace.

But this abuse of the gospel is not to be accepted or allowed today, just as Peter and John didn't accept it or allow it in the first century. You can almost see the smoke coming from Peter's reply to Simon in this passage. He was livid, and Simon knew it. We can only hope that, con man that he seems to be, Simon was sincere in his repentance.

Conclusion

The story of the Samaritan Pentecost has the power to stir up many different thoughts and feelings in us. It can stir up gratitude for the truths we've learned as we've matured as Christians. It can stir up excitement for the truths we have not yet learned but will one day. We are all

on a pilgrimage of faith, and we still have some discoveries to make along the Way.

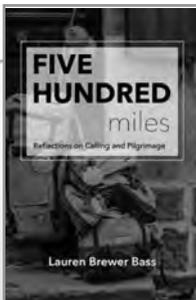
The story can stir up honest questions about the work of the Holy Spirit in New Testament days and in ours. It can also stir up the hope that, like Peter and John, we can become bearers and sharers of the Spirit to others.

It can stir up a candid look at our own faith to make sure it is not abusive in any way. And it can give us the courage to speak up against anyone who uses the gospel as a tool for personal gain.

Luke ends this passage by saying, “Now after Peter and John had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans” (v. 25). Evidently, Peter and John became energized in Samaria. After their encounter with the Samaritan believers, they stopped on their way back to Jerusalem to share the good news with other Samaritans. Their ministry didn’t deplete and diminish them; it emboldened and encouraged them.

May our preaching, teaching, and ministering do the same for us.

God, as we study this passage, we think of some of the walls in our own culture that still need to be demolished. Give us the spirit of our ancestors in the faith who went about breaking down walls and making the good news available to all people. Fill us with the Holy Spirit so that we can be bearers and sharers of good news everywhere we go. In Christ’s name and spirit we pray. Amen.



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A CRUCIAL QUESTION

Acts 19:1-7

Introduction

The action in Acts 19 is fast and furious as Paul preaches the gospel in Ephesus and infuriates the followers of the goddess Artemis. But the events described here may have happened over a longer period of time than it seems. Paul was in Ephesus for about three years, so this one chapter deals with an extended period of his ministry.

We know from some of Paul's letters that his stay in Ephesus was filled with controversy and struggle. We learn in 1 Corinthians that Paul "fought wild beasts" in Ephesus (15:32). It may have been in Ephesus that he was imprisoned with two fellow apostles named Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16:7). When you think of Paul in the city of Ephesus, think of trouble, conflict, and discouragement.

Luke had to be selective about what to include from Paul's stay in Ephesus. He condensed the action down to four incidents. The first of those incidents is the focus of our study this week. In Acts 19:1-7, Luke tells us about Paul guiding some disciples from "the baptism of John" to "the baptism of Jesus." Like the Samaritans in Acts 8, these people had experienced an incomplete conversion. They knew of John's stern way of repentance, but they knew nothing of Jesus' liberating way of grace.

So as Peter and John had done with the Samaritans, Paul laid his hands on the Ephesians, and they received the Holy Spirit. They spoke in tongues, prophesied, and gained a whole new perspective on what it means to be a Christian. They moved from the rigorous marching of John's message to the joyful dancing of Jesus' message. That is a movement every Christian can make, and this passage gives us an opportunity to think about how it happens.

Baptized into What?

Today's verses remind me of an experience I had years ago with a young woman I'll call Lucy. Lucy was attractive, personable, bubbly, and a joy to be around. She had a magnetic personality that attracted everyone to her. She was an absolute delight.

Lucy met a young man who was a ministerial student, and the two became engaged. I lost track of her for several years, but when I

next saw her, she just didn't seem the same. It seemed as if something or someone had drained the life out of her. The sparkle was gone, and the laughter was missing. She no longer attended to her appearance, and her zest for life seemed to be gone. She was a more somber version of her former self.

I asked a mutual friend what had happened to Lucy, and his answer was, "Oh, she got converted and baptized."

A host of disturbing questions flooded my mind: Converted to what? Baptized into what? Converted to a life of joylessness? Baptized into a drab life with no sparkle? It seemed that she had more life before her conversion and baptism than she did after.

My guess was that she had been baptized into the way of John, not the way of Jesus. I suspected that her brand of Christianity was filled with a bunch of joy-draining "oughts" and "shoulds" that were a burden to lug around. Like many Christians I have known, she had probably been baptized into a legalistic system of laws and commandments that was full of righteousness...and sorely lacking in joy.

She desperately needed to hear Jesus say to her what all miserable Christians need to hear him say: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). I used to see that verse as one aimed at grief-stricken, problem-ridden people. Lately, however, I've come to see it as an invitation to all people who are burned out on religion and need a fresh alternative: Jesus' way of grace. I sensed that Lucy needed to move beyond the religion of John and fall into the freedom of Jesus.

Come to the Party

In light of my experience with Lucy, I think we should use this passage in Acts 19—and the one last week in Acts 8—to remind ourselves that being baptized into the way of Jesus means being baptized into a rich, full, and joyful life. As he so pointedly reminds us in John 10:10, Jesus "came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Certainly, the world will know we are Christians by our love, but it will also know we are Christians by our joy.

Some of us probably grew up believing that the Christian Way is mainly a way of prohibitions. We grew up believing that following Jesus means we don't do any number of things: don't drink, don't smoke, don't dance, don't cuss, don't go to movies, don't give the impression that we're having too much fun. I'm not suggesting that we start doing all of those

formerly forbidden things to prove how “free” we’ve become. I’m simply saying that the way of Jesus is more than a list of “don’ts.”

The Way of Jesus is a way of abundant life. The disciples Paul met in Ephesus had responded to the message of John the Baptist, but they knew nothing of the message of Jesus. The message of John was stern, threatening, and demanding: an imposing list of “don’ts.”

Anyone who decided to walk that way would have stumbled into the religion of the elder brother in Jesus’ story of the prodigal son (see Lk 15:11-32). He was faithful, loyal, and obedient to his father. But at the end of the story, there is a party going on and he doesn’t want to go. He is full of morality, but he doesn’t know how to celebrate. He knows how to march, but he can’t dance.

Evidently, the Ephesian disciples of John had embraced the elder brother’s kind of religion, and Paul wanted them to move up a notch on the conversion scale. He wanted them to be baptized into the Way of Jesus, be filled with the Holy Spirit, and start producing the fruit of the spirit in their lives: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23).

True, they had an emotional experience and spoke in tongues, a phenomenon that occurs several times in Acts. But beyond that experience, there was a deeper and ongoing reality. Now they could live with unrestrained joy and experience the fruit of the Spirit in their lives.

In his great book *Come to the Party* (Waco: Word, 1972), Karl Olsson writes, “In the amazing chronicle of God’s acts through the centuries, it is apparent that there are two kinds of people: those who bring gifts to God in order to secure his blessing and those who adore him because they are already secure in his blessing” (80–81). In other words, we can be baptized into the way of *unblessing*, never feel secure in the love of God, and struggle to earn God’s favor. Or we can be baptized into the way of *blessing*, feel secure in God’s love, and rest confidently in God’s grace. We’re either one of the blessed or one of the unblessed.

As we’ve studied the Samaritans in Acts 8 and the Baptist disciples in Acts 19, who both experienced an incomplete conversion and baptism, we must ask ourselves, What about me? What have I been converted to? What have I been baptized into? Am I one of the unblessed or one of the blessed?

Friendly Fire

When we ask ourselves those questions, a great irony comes into focus. We start to realize that our cohorts on the Christian pilgrimage are

sometimes the ones who stifle our joy and keep us from the party. In my book *Making the Good News Good Again* (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2009), I write:

When I reflect on my spiritual journey, I realize a startling, ironic fact: Christians have done more to dissuade me from faith than non-Christians. Pornographers, drug pushers, secular humanists, and militant atheists have done little or nothing to douse my commitment to Christ. In fact, their presence in the world has probably nudged me into firmer conviction.

But I have attended scores of Christian meetings where my fervor took a nosedive, watched dozens of Christian programs that pushed me toward agnosticism, and stood in the presence of quite a few saints who diminished my joy. The saints have wreaked more havoc on my spiritual welfare than the sinners!

In my own experience, it has not been *enemy* fire that has wounded me and stifled the good news. It has been *friendly* fire. (47)

I then mention six kinds of Christians who can stifle our joy:

- *The Overly Certain*, who seem to live in a black-and-white world with no room for struggle or doubt.
- *The Overly Simplistic*, who have reduced the mystery of the gospel to bumper sticker slogans.
- *The Overly Emotional*, who lift hands, talk incessantly of the Spirit, and measure everything in terms of feelings.
- *The Overly Controlling*, who use the gospel to dominate, intimidate, and even manipulate people.
- *The Overly Critical*, who are angry and mean-spirited and never have a good word to say about anyone.
- *The Overly Negative*, who turn the good news of grace into the bad news of law.

Most of us rub shoulders with these kinds of Christians on a regular basis. Our challenge is to love them, forgive them, and not let them rain on our spiritual parade. Above all, we must remember that we are each captains of our own spiritual ships. How others navigate their ships is between them and God. We just have to be true to the Spirit who is rummaging around in our own souls.

In the nineteenth century, Søren Kierkegaard wrote in his journal, “The thing is to understand myself, to see what God wishes me to do; the

thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die” (*A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall [Princeton: Princeton Press, 1946], 5). Though we live in families, churches, and other groups, it eventually comes down to a personal decision. We each have a solitary road to travel...and a solitary Spirit to obey.

Conclusion

In Acts 19, Paul arrives in Ephesus and discovers that certain believers there have had an incomplete conversion. He lays his hands on them, and they receive the Spirit.

As we read this passage, we are reminded that we, too, are surrounded by Christians who are a long way from spiritual maturity. When we realize this, we have three options available to us. First, *we can become critical*. We can berate our fellow Christians for their faults and become condescending toward them and condemning of them. Or *we can become discouraged*. We can let these less-than-perfect saints damage our own faith and send us spiraling into the spiritual pits. Finally, *we can become determined*. We can look honestly around us and realize that not everyone is a spiritual giant, and then we can let that realization spur our own attentiveness to God’s Spirit.

As Kierkegaard put it, we can determine to understand ourselves, find what God wants *us* to do, and be obedient to the quiet Holy Spirit who lives within us. And we can always remember that the gospel is good news—the best news ever sounded on planet earth—and spend our days celebrating the wonder of it all.

God, we have spent the last five weeks exploring how your Spirit works in the world and in our lives. We don’t pretend to understand completely how the Spirit works, but we are grateful that you are working in us to guide and encourage us. Lead us to life more abundant. Make us people of good news. And let us be aware of your presence all of our days. Amen.

CALLED TO COME AND SEE

John 1:29-39

Introduction

The Gospel of John doesn't identify its author. The traditional view is that John the Apostle wrote it, but many scholars believe that it was written by one of John's followers or even by a school of John's disciples. I will refer in these studies to John as the author of the Gospel, with the understanding that it was written either by John himself or by one or several of his close followers.

For the next four Sundays, we will study passages from this Gospel. We will look specifically at passages that tell us about John's special relationship with Jesus. John was with Jesus in all of the pivotal moments in Jesus' life and came to see himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved."

The Gospel of John is unlike the other New Testament Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are often called the Synoptic Gospels because they have the same view of Jesus' life and ministry. They describe many of the same events, give many of the same parables, and basically cover the same territory.

The Gospel of John, though, is different. The Fourth Gospel has no account of Jesus' birth, baptism, or temptations. It tells us nothing of the Last Supper, Gethsemane, or the Ascension. Perhaps most surprising of all, it has no parables. Instead, John focuses on the last part of Jesus' ministry. Almost half of his Gospel focuses on Jesus' death and resurrection.

Our first session highlights another John: John the Baptist. In John 1, John the Baptist sees Jesus coming toward him and says, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (v. 29). The very next day, he sees Jesus walking by and again exclaims, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" (v. 36).

Two of John's followers are intrigued and decide to investigate this new rabbi. Jesus sees them following him and asks, "What are you looking for?" (v. 38). When they ask where he is staying, Jesus offers them a compelling invitation: "Come and see" (v. 39).

If we keep reading, we learn that one of those men is Andrew. The other is unnamed, though some scholars think he might have been John. Andrew tells his brother, Simon, about this Jesus he has met and then takes him to meet Jesus for himself. The next day, Jesus calls Philip

and Nathanael to follow him, and his band of disciples begins to take shape.

Let's focus on three things in this passage: (1) John the Baptist and his ministry as the introducer, (2) the all-important question Jesus asks the two seekers, and (3) the all-important invitation Jesus offers to help those seekers make a life-changing decision.

The Introducer

John the Baptist wore a lot of hats in his brief ministry. He was a preacher, and people came from miles around to hear his message of repentance. He was a baptizer who baptized countless people, including Jesus himself. He was a confronter who was not bashful about telling people of their sin. And he was a sufferer who met a tragic death at the hands of an evil King Herod.

He wore all of those hats in the short time that he ministered, but if you asked him what his main role was, his answer would have been swift and certain: he was an *introducer*. His calling from God was to introduce the Messiah to the world. Here in John 1, at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, he wears that hat twice.

On the day after emissaries from Jerusalem asked him to explain his ministry, John sees Jesus coming and identifies him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Then he recalls his own experience of seeing the Spirit of God descend on Jesus like a dove in fulfillment of the sign God had given him (vv. 32-33). If John ever had any doubts about Jesus being the long-awaited Messiah, they were put to rest when he saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus. He knew that Jesus was the promised Coming One, and he knew that it was his calling to announce that truth to the world.

On the next day—the “third day” of our story so far—John makes this announcement again: “The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’” (vv. 35-36). Twice he uses that same image to describe who Jesus is. He is the Lamb of God, the very one the prophets of old predicted would one day come:

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth...

Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and he was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:6-7, 12)

John the Baptist knew that Isaiah's prophecy was going to be fulfilled in this young rabbi named Jesus. He wasn't just another rabbi; he was the Lamb of God, the one Isaiah spoke of all those years ago. John also knew that God had called him to proclaim Jesus to the world and to tell people what kind of Messiah he was going to be.

The Question

Two of John's disciples are fascinated by what their master says and decide to learn more about Jesus. They follow him, but perhaps out of shyness or fear they don't speak to him. Jesus sees them walking behind him, though, and takes the initiative. He asks these two men a question that is both probing and brilliant: "What are you looking for?" (v. 38).

On one level, that question could have been about simple logistics. Are you two guys lost? Can I help you find your way? Are you looking for a particular place or person? On that level, Jesus' question was simply practical and helpful.

But on another level, that question could have had a far deeper, more probing meaning. Are you two hungry for a new direction in your lives? Are you looking for a new cause, a new purpose that will captivate you? Is there a longing in your heart that you need to address?

From Jesus' perspective, it was certainly a natural and understandable question. He may have been trying to ascertain who these two men were and what they wanted. Were they religious scholars wanting to talk about the law and quiz him about the details of Scripture? Were they opportunists hoping to hitch their wagon to this new rabbi that John the Baptist was touting so highly? Were they nationalists wanting to find a military leader who could overthrow Rome? Were they pietists wanting to pray, read Scripture, and be still before the Lord?

It would seem from what follows that these two were sincere seekers who were genuinely fascinated by Jesus and what John had said about him. But Jesus' question to them may well have set them to thinking. What *were* they looking for? Why *were* they following this person they didn't even know? What *was* it about him that so intrigued them?

Jesus' question can set us to thinking, too. What are we looking for? What is our heart's deepest desire? Security? Money? Companionship?

Personal peace? Forgiveness? What is the one thing that we long for more than anything else? Jesus' question can prompt us to think about who we really are and what we really want in our life.

The Invitation

The two seekers respond to the question of Jesus with a question of their own: "'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?'" (v. 38). Jesus answers with a gracious invitation: "Come and see" (v. 39). They take him up on that invitation and end up spending the whole day with him. The final line in our passage tells us, "It was about four o'clock in the afternoon" (v. 39).

I have to believe that Jesus' invitation to those two disciples of John to "come and see" involved more than gathering information about where he was staying. The invitation was a way of letting them get to know Jesus better, hear his message about the kingdom of God, and ultimately decide if they wanted to become his disciples. John doesn't tell us all that they talked about that fateful day, but they decided to follow Jesus, and life was never the same. As it turned out, "come and see" was a life-altering invitation.

That invitation is still the best invitation we Christians can offer the world. We don't have to be religious salespeople, scriptural propagandists, or eloquent persuaders. Our culture is sick to death of those kinds of people and will likely reject their evangelistic efforts. What we need to say to people is what Jesus said to these two disciples of John the Baptist: "Come and see."

In some form or fashion, we communicate to modern people, "Come and see." Come and see if Jesus is really the way, the truth, and the life. Come and see if he makes sense to you and brings a new dimension into your life. Come and see if the church is a community of loving people who will embrace you and welcome you with open arms. Come and see if the Bible, for all of its strangeness to modern people, speaks to your deepest needs. Don't just take my word for it; come and see for yourself. Give the Christian Way a try and see what happens.

Whether we're talking about the best enchiladas, barbecue, or coffee in town, we won't be convinced until we taste them for ourselves. The same is true for books, cars, music, movies, and nearly anything else where we have a wealth of choices. Opinion polls and online reviews might help a little, but until we try those things for ourselves, we won't know for sure what we think of them. One personal experience is worth at least a thousand reviews.

So Jesus' invitation is a stroke of genius. It's one that we Christians need to offer our world every chance we get.

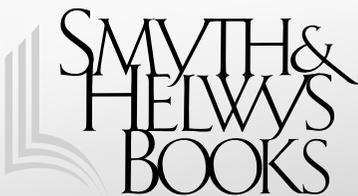
Conclusion

I mentioned earlier that some scholars believe that the unnamed man in this episode is actually John. One of those is William Barclay. In his *Daily Bible Study*, he wrote:

So John who wrote the gospel finishes the paragraph—"It was about four o'clock in the afternoon." It may very well be that he finishes that way because he was one of the two himself. He could tell you the hour of the day, the very stone of the road he was standing on when he met Jesus. At four o'clock on a spring afternoon in Galilee, life became a new thing for John. (*The Gospel of John*, vol. 1 [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955], 71)

Of course, we'll never know for certain whether this theory is true. But it does make for an interesting speculation. One thing we know for certain is that John the Apostle did become one of Jesus' twelve disciples and that he developed a special relationship with Jesus. We'll spend the next three Sundays looking at passages from John's Gospel that make this plain.

Give us wisdom, God, as we try to decide what we're looking for in our lives. And give us experiences that will help us come and see who you want us to be and what you want us to do. Amen.



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REMAINING AT JESUS' SIDE

John 13:18-30

Introduction

In John 13:1-17, Jesus gathers with his disciples in an upper room and, in an intimate gesture of humility and service, washes their feet. When he finishes—and after quelling Peter's objections to this gesture—he asks:

Do you know what I have done to you? You call me teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example that you should do as I have done to you. (13:12-14)

Jesus would soon be crucified between two thieves and would no longer be physically present with his disciples. But he wanted them to remember what he had repeatedly told them: that they were to be a community marked by humility and service. There should be no pushing and shoving for position among them. Or, if there was, it should be pushing and shoving to see who could get to the *bottom*.

But as Jesus well knew, his disciples were not particularly good listeners. On more than one occasion, they had proven to be adept at not hearing him at all. So before he dies, he gives them a visual reminder of this truth about humility and service. He gets down on his hands and knees and washes their feet. Even if they can't hear his message, maybe they will be able to see it.

Our focal passage for this week picks up the story at that point. In John 13:18-30, Jesus goes on to tell his disciples some sobering news: "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me" (v. 21). It's a shocking revelation, but none of the disciples spring into action to prevent it from happening. Confusion and indecision seem to carry the day, and Judas, who will soon betray Jesus, quietly slips into the night. When our passage comes to an end, Judas is gone, and the remaining bewildered disciples are trying to concentrate on other truths Jesus wants them to know.

Let's explore these verses by considering (1) the disciples' fearful awareness that they all had the capacity for betrayal, (2) John's unique

relationship with Jesus, and (3) the disciples' baffling inability to hear and understand what was happening.

The Possibility of Betrayal

John records that when Jesus told his disciples that one of them would betray him, they "looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking" (v. 22). The Gospel of Mark is a bit more straightforward: "They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, 'Surely, not I?'" (Mk 14:19). We get the distinct impression that all of those disciples knew that they were capable of betrayal—that, given the right set of circumstances, any one of them could have been Jesus' betrayer.

Of course, two of them were indeed capable of betraying or denying Jesus—and he predicted both incidents before the fact. Here in John 13 he predicts that Judas will be the one who betrays him. In the very next chapter, he predicts that Peter will disappoint him, too: "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times" (Jn 14:30). But Andrew, John, Nathanael, and the rest knew that they could have been the culprits as well. Their "Surely, not I?" gives them away.

There's an old quip about being able to resist everything but temptation. Many of us can resist most temptations, but many of us also have a few temptations that we give in to most of the time. We have our vulnerable spots, and if something or someone hits one of these, we crumble. For Judas, John implies it is love of money. For Peter, it was fear of the authorities. For us, it might be a lust for power, a hunger for fame, a craving for sex, or a fear of failure. Whatever it is, we all have our weak spots, and we would be foolish to act as if we're above temptation.

It's really not surprising that the first story in the Bible is a temptation story. Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent, they give in to that temptation, and the rest is history. The rest of Scripture is filled with other temptation stories. Nearly all of the heroes of the Bible—Noah, Moses, Saul, David, Job, Solomon, Jonah, Peter, and Paul, to mention just a few—face temptations. Some of those heroes conquer their temptations; others are conquered by them.

So it may be that the disciples' fear that they might betray Jesus is a healthy thing. At least they are honest enough to recognize that they are not above temptation. After all, the people most vulnerable to temptation are those who don't know that they are vulnerable at all.

The One Whom Jesus Loved

In this unit, we're looking at four passages in John's Gospel that give us a peek into John's special relationship with Jesus. This passage in John 13 gives us three subtle clues that hint at their relationship.

First, there is the title given to the person reclining beside Jesus: "the one whom Jesus loved" (v. 23). Who is this unnamed disciple? Several people have been suggested through the years. Perhaps it was Lazarus, some have proposed, because it is said that Jesus loved him in John 11:36. Or maybe it was the rich young ruler because it is said that Jesus loved him, too (Mk 10:21).

In Christian history and tradition, the most common opinion has been that this beloved disciple is none other than John himself. In an attempt not to inject himself too much into the Gospel story, the theory goes, John chose to remain anonymous while at the same time revealing how the love of Jesus gave him his truest and best identity.

Second, there is the fact that this disciple reclined at the table next to Jesus. Jews in the first century didn't generally sit at a table; they reclined on the left elbow, leaving the right hand free to handle the food. The host reclined in the center of a low, U-shaped table. Typically, the host's closest friends would be to his left and right.

In John 13, the disciple whom Jesus loved seems to be on Jesus' right and Judas on his left. Perhaps Jesus had invited them to sit at these places of honor because he had specific things to say to each of them. Certainly, in this arrangement he could have whispered words to them that no one else in the room would hear. But the fact that the disciple whom Jesus loved is right beside him at least hints at the close relationship they shared.

Third, there is the fact that Peter asks this disciple whom Jesus loved to inquire about the identity of the betrayer: "Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking" (v. 24). Did Peter ask John because he was seated closest to Jesus? Or did he ask John because John had the most intimate relationship with Jesus of all the disciples? John takes the hint and whispers to Jesus, "Lord, who is it?" (v. 25). Jesus says it is the one to whom he will give a piece of bread. Then he hands the bread to Judas. The fact that Peter thinks John is the best one to ask Jesus about his betrayer may say volumes about the kind of relationship John had with his Lord.

Of course, all of these are just subtle hints about that relationship, but if John truly did refer to himself as "the one whom Jesus loved," that in itself speaks volumes. Of all the things he could have said about

himself, of all the descriptive phrases he could have used to define the essence of his being, John chose this one. Above all else, he was the one whom Jesus loved. That meant more to him than anything else in his life.

Ears to Hear

One of the baffling aspects of this passage is the disciples' lack of response and action to what Jesus has just told them. After Jesus announces that one of them will betray him and then reveals the identity of the betrayer by giving the bread to Judas, not one disciple springs into action to prevent this from happening. When Jesus tells Judas to do quickly what he is going to do, "no one at the table knew why he had said this to him" (v. 28).

It is possible, of course, that they simply didn't hear what Jesus said. Perhaps his conversations with both Judas and John, reclining next to him, were spoken in hushed whispers that no one else could hear.

But John's account seems to indicate that they heard him...but didn't really hear him at all. They assumed he had told Judas, the treasurer of the disciples, to buy something for the Passover festival or make a gift to the poor. Whatever happened in that upper room, there was a definite breakdown in communication. Jesus said one thing, and the disciples heard something else.

Occasionally in the Gospels, after Jesus tells a parable or challenges his listeners, he concludes by saying, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (Mt 11:15; 13:9; Mk 4:9, 23). He knew that not everyone who heard him speak would actually hear what he was saying. Some were distracted. Some didn't agree with him and tuned him out. Some didn't have the spiritual maturity to understand him. Some even took what he said and twisted his meaning. Jesus knew that his words were being received by many people who heard but didn't listen.

In Mark 4:1-9, Jesus tells a story about hearing and listening. In the parable of the sower, a farmer plants seed, and it falls into four kinds of soil. Some falls into hard soil, some into rocky soil, and some into thorny soil. In all of these cases, the seed never takes root. Only the seed that falls into the good, prepared soil takes root and produces fruit. If we use that story as our guide, three-fourths of the people we talk to are not listening to us! Jesus knew that was true for him as well. He concludes his soil parable with the declaration, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen" (v. 9).

In light of the chaos and confusion in the upper room, and in light of the number of times we experience a breakdown in communication in

our own relationships, perhaps our daily prayer should be: “God, give me ears to hear today so that I might truly listen.”

Conclusion

When we read John 13, it becomes obvious that Jesus knew his disciples well. In this chapter, he predicts that Judas will betray him in a matter of hours. The events leading to his arrest and crucifixion have now been set in motion. For that reason, John 13 is a dark chapter. When John concludes our passage with the words, “And it was night” (v. 30), it isn’t hard to see that he is speaking both literally and figuratively. It was dark outside, but it was dark in that upper room as well.

In next week’s passage from John 19, it will still be night. John will stand at the foot of the cross, watching Jesus die. But in our final lesson, the sun will finally shine again. In John 21, Jesus is alive and appears to his disciples, including John. We will walk with John out of the darkness of crucifixion into the glorious light of resurrection.

God, in light of our passage this week, we ask for three things:

First, forgive us for the times we too have given in to temptation and betrayal.

Second, thank you for loving us and declaring us to be ones whom Jesus loves.

Third, give us ears to hear so that we can listen to you and to the people in our lives.

In the name and spirit of Christ we pray. Amen.



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A NEW FAMILY

John 19:25b-30

Introduction

In our verses this week, John tells us that four women stood at the foot of Jesus' cross:

- There was Mary, Jesus' mother, faithful to her son to the bitter end.
- There was Mary's sister, who is not named in this passage. But the parallel passages in Matthew 27:56 and Mark 15:40 identify her as Salome, the wife of Zebedee and therefore the mother of James and John.
- There was Mary, the wife of Clopas, of whom we know nothing.
- And there was Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus had cast seven demons (Lk 8:2).

All four of those women were taking a risk by standing at the cross. It was dangerous to stand in support of someone whom the Roman government had declared to be a criminal and whom the religious authorities said was a heretic. But there they stood, defying all the civil and religious authorities to declare their love for Jesus.

Someone else was also there at the foot of the cross. John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was there as well. When Jesus sees John with the women, he says to his mother, "Woman, here is your son" (Jn 19:26). Then he says to John, "Here is your mother" (v. 27). From that hour, John takes Mary home with him, and Mary has a new family.

That seems strange because we know that Mary had other sons who could have taken care of her. But Jesus wanted her to live with John, which certainly cements the truth that Jesus and John had a special relationship. Beyond that, it also raises questions about some of the things Jesus teaches about family in the four Gospels.

Let's use this passage, then, to consider Jesus' relationship with John and also his surprising teachings about family.

Jesus and John

Jesus and John were cousins. Their mothers, Mary and Salome, were sisters. It is possible that Jesus and John had known each other all their lives. When Jesus called John and his brother James to be in his band of

disciples, he may have been calling people he knew like family—because they were!

Two obvious details in this passage underscore the closeness Jesus and John must have had. First, the fact that John stood at the foot of the cross speaks volumes about his devotion to Jesus. As I mentioned, showing allegiance to a convicted criminal and despised heretic was a dangerous thing to do. It was dangerous for the four women, and it was dangerous for John as well.

But if you've spent your life with someone, if that someone has called you to be his disciple, and if you've observed the remarkable way he loves people, you'll do anything for that person. Simon Peter had buckled under the pressure of the authorities and denied Jesus three times. By contrast, here is John boldly risking his own future to stand with Jesus as he dies on the cross. Other disciples might have been there, too, but John is the only one mentioned. His presence there speaks more eloquently than any words he could have uttered.

Second, the fact that Jesus chooses John to take care of his mother shows the kind of faith and trust he has in his cousin and friend. We can only speculate as to why Jesus chooses John over his own brothers to take care of Mary. John 7:5 tells us, "For not even his own brothers believed in him." Perhaps their lack of belief in him led Jesus to choose John as Mary's new "son." Whatever the reason, Jesus saw John as trustworthy and loving and entrusted his mother into his care.

Years ago, my wife Sherry and I had a hard decision to make. Our two children were young, and we felt the need to ensure that someone trustworthy would take care of them should something happen to us. We decided to have a will drawn up that would specify, among many other things, who would take care of Stacy and Randel in the event of our deaths. It was not an easy decision. We wanted someone who knew our kids, loved our kids, and would treat them like their own. After much thought and discussion, we decided on a couple we knew well and trusted explicitly, and we put them in the will.

Whether Jesus had given Mary's care any thought before his death or if he simply made a split-second decision on the cross, he knew the person he could trust. He knew the person who could best take care of his mother. It was John, his cousin, friend, and disciple. It was John, the one whom Jesus loved.

As John stands at the foot of the cross, he can only assume that this will be his final encounter with Jesus. His heart must be heavy and his eyes filled with tears. His cousin, friend, and mentor is breathing his last

breath. But, as we will discover in next week's lesson, John will indeed see Jesus again. A risen Jesus seeks him out and assures him that he is alive and well. John's grief at the cross is swallowed up by joy at the resurrection.

Jesus and Family

This passage also reminds us of some of the surprising things Jesus says about family. John doesn't mention them in his Gospel, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke record Jesus saying things about family that might catch us off guard. If we think of Jesus presenting us a picture of family as warm, cozy, and loving, we're shocked to read some of what he actually says.

For example, in Matthew, Jesus says:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; for one's foes will be members of one's own household. (Mt 10:34-36)

He goes on to say that anyone who loves family more than him is not worthy of him, and anyone who loves son or daughter more than him is not worthy of him either. So much for notions of a warm, cozy family with no problems!

Then in Mark, we read about a time when Jesus' mother and brothers come to see him as he teaches. Some in the crowd inform Jesus that his mother and brothers have arrived and want to see him. Here's the way Mark describes the scene. Jesus replies:

"Who are my mother and brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (Mk 3:33-35)

That encounter makes Jesus seem rude and dismissive of his family members, who have come simply to check on his welfare.

Then in Luke, we read about some would-be followers of Jesus who come asking to join his band of followers. One says he is ready to follow Jesus as soon as he buries his father. Jesus says to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Lk 9:60). Another says he will be ready to follow Jesus as soon as he bids his family goodbye. Jesus tells him, "No one who puts his hand to

the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (v. 62). Those seem like reasonable requests, though, don’t they? Burying a father and bidding farewell to family members seem like logical, loving family duties. But instead of praising those people for putting family first, Jesus rebuffs them.

We shouldn’t draw too many conclusions from a few isolated texts in the Synoptic Gospels, but it seems we can at least say two things about Jesus’ understanding of the family. The first is that *family doesn’t come first*. The passage from Matthew says unmistakably that we are to love Jesus more than we love our family. The passage from Mark says that our true family consists of those who do the will of God, not necessarily those who bear our last name. And the passage from Luke says that following Jesus takes priority over burying a father or telling family goodbye. The point in all of those passages is that family doesn’t come first; Jesus does. Family might be high on the priority list, but it is not the top priority.

The second inference we can make from those passages is that *family might not be our best source of love and support*. That seems to be the point Jesus is trying to make when his family shows up in Mark 3. His true family, he says, consists of those who share his passions and dreams—those who, like him, want to know and do the will of God.

Though all of us would like to receive love and support from our biological families, we might discover that we find that love and support elsewhere: in people who share our own passions and dreams. People who don’t share our last name might prove to be our best sources of joy. Kindred spirits, wherever we can find them, are a blessing not to be taken for granted. Some people will know us better in the first hour we meet them than some family members will know us in a lifetime.

Certainly we can say that Jesus was concerned about his family. He loved his mother and wanted John to take care of her. Family was important to him. But from those other passages, we also have to conclude that, for Jesus, family came below the things of God.

Conclusion

After Jesus asks John to take care of Mary, he says that he is thirsty and is given some wine. After receiving the wine, he speaks three final words from the cross: “It is finished” (v. 30). Those words may have been heard in different ways by those who were present that afternoon. The common people in the crowd might have interpreted Jesus’ words to mean, “My suffering is finished; my agony is finally over.”

Jesus' loved ones might have thought to themselves, "It's true. Our dream is finished. Our fondest hopes have been nailed to this cross and destroyed forever."

The religious leaders might have heard these words and thought, "Thank goodness, it is finished. Our troubles with this rabble-rouser are finally over for good."

But Christians today hear these words with different ears. We filter them through the resurrection, the New Testament story, and over 2,000 years of history. So we hear this final cry from the cross as one of triumph. Picture a famous artist working on his masterpiece. He labors for years, getting the color and shading and mood just right. And then one day, he puts the final touch on it, steps back, and declares, "It is finished."

That's the way we should feel about these last words from the cross. God's masterpiece of salvation for humanity has been completed. After centuries of planning and working, God has put the final touch on this masterpiece. No one would have imagined that God would have painted the divine signature here, on a Roman cross outside of Jerusalem on a Friday afternoon.

We know that four women were present to see it, and we know that the disciple whom Jesus loved was there too. They didn't understand it all that day, but soon it became clear to them. Their tears of grief became songs of joy as Jesus danced out of death into new life beyond the grave.

Thank you, God, that we can also call ourselves disciples whom Jesus loves. Thank you for our families—and those beyond our families—who give us love and support. And thank you for the cross, your masterpiece of salvation for the world. Amen.

THE BELOVED DISCIPLE'S TESTIMONY

John 21:20-25

Introduction

The Gospel of John closes by shining the spotlight on two of the heroes of the early church: Peter and John. In John 21:15-19, Jesus gives Simon Peter the opportunity to affirm his love for him. Peter had denied Jesus three times; now he is given the chance to pledge his loyalty to Jesus three times. This was one of the kindest things Jesus could have done to remove Peter's guilt and give him a new start.

Then, in our focal passage this week, the spotlight shifts to John. After reaffirming his love for Jesus, Peter sees John and asks Jesus what is going to happen to him. Jesus replies, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" (Jn 21:22).

The Gospel writer then tries to squelch a rumor that must have been circulating in the early church that John would not die but would live until Jesus returned. The writer reminds his readers that Jesus did not say that.

The passage ends with two stirring declarations. First, everything written here is true and trustworthy. Second, if everything Jesus said and did was written down, the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

We can use these final verses in the Gospel of John to remember three things: (1) the place of Peter and John in the early church, (2) the individual calling each of us has received, and (3) the universal human tendency to garble communication.

Peter and John

By shining the light on Peter and John at the end of his Gospel, the writer—whether it was John himself or one of his disciples—gives us an opportunity to remember the unique role each played in the early church. In his commentary on John, William Barclay writes:

So, at the end, this gospel takes two of the great figures of the church, Peter and John. To each Jesus had given a function. It was Peter's function to shepherd the sheep of Christ, and in the end to die for Christ. It was John's function to witness to the story of Christ, and to live to a great old age and to come to the end in peace. That did not make

them rivals or competitors in honor and prestige; that did not make one greater or less than the other; it made them both servants of Christ. (*The Gospel of John*, vol. 2 [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955], 333)

When we look back at the heroes of the early church, three names come quickly to mind: Peter, John, and Paul. Not surprisingly, those three wrote most of the letters in the New Testament. They each had a unique role to play. Peter was the shepherd, taking care of the flock of Christ. Paul was the missionary, traveling all over the ancient world to spread the gospel. John was the witness, living in Ephesus until he was old and testifying to what he had seen of Jesus. Each had a role to fill, and each was true to his calling.

Every Christian's Job

Jesus wanted to make sure that each of these heroes of the faith would listen to the still, small voice of God and be true to its commands. When Peter asks Jesus what is going to happen to John, Jesus says, in effect, "Don't worry about John. Your job is to follow me. Your job, Peter, is to be true to who I will call *you* to be and what I will call *you* to do."

That message is now addressed to all of us who follow Jesus. We each have an individual calling that we need to hear and obey. Like Peter, we tend to become overly concerned about the Christians around us, especially those who seem to be different from us. This is not a new problem, and we see it in spades in the church at Corinth in the New Testament. Paul wrote two letters to the Corinthians to remind them to be true to the calling they had been given and not to be critical of those with different callings. As he tells them in 1 Corinthians 12, the church is a body with eyes, ears, hands, and feet, and every part is essential.

When we read Paul's letters to the Corinthians, we get the idea that there must have been at least four groups vying for power in that church:

- *The Enthusiasts*. These Christians were on fire for Christ, emotional in their worship, speaking in tongues on occasion, and wondering why the other members of their church were so lifeless.
- *The Intellectuals*. These Christians focused on learning the Bible, studying ancient texts, dialoguing in discussion groups, and wondering why the other members of their church were so theologically ignorant.
- *The Mystics*. These Christians zeroed in on practicing the spiritual disciplines such as prayer, worship, and silence; listening for the still,

small voice of God; and wondering why the other members of their church were so spiritually shallow.

- *The Workers*. These Christians believed that the church is primarily an action corps, called to feed the hungry, visit the sick, and take care of the poor. They spent a good bit of time wondering why the other members of their church were so inattentive to the needs of others.

Now listen to Paul's familiar words to those groups in the Corinthian church:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels (*the Enthusiasts*) but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge (*the Intellectuals*), and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains (*the Mystics*) but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast (*the Workers*), but do not have love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor 13:1-3)

Do you see what Paul has done? He has addressed all of those groups in the Corinthian church and shown them that without love, their church is doomed to fail. The Enthusiasts, Intellectuals, Mystics, and Workers all have a vital role to play, but their role must be undergirded by the kind of love Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13.

Paul was telling the Corinthians basically what Jesus tells Peter in our passage for today: "Don't worry about others. Be faithful to the calling you have been given by God and live true to your calling."

The Game of Gossip

The third thing to notice in this passage is the instance of garbled communication that the writer wants to correct. Two weeks ago, we saw this same phenomenon at work in the upper room as Jesus talked to John and Judas. No one seemed to hear what was said between them, and the disciples had no idea that Jesus had pinpointed Judas as his betrayer. Important words were spoken, but no one heard or understood them.

In our passage this week, some in the early church have apparently heard reports of Jesus' words to Peter and interpreted them to mean that John will not die, that he is destined to continue living until Jesus returns.

Therefore, the Gospel writer gently reminds his readers that what Jesus actually said to Peter was, "If it is my will that he remains until I come, what is that to you?" (v. 23). Jesus wasn't saying that John would

never die. He was just reminding Peter to focus on his own calling. It's a classic case of a small mishearing turning into a big, and false, rumor.

When I was a boy, there was a party game we played from time to time called "Gossip." It was a simple game in which someone whispered a message into the ear of someone else. That person then whispered the message to another person. And that continued from one person to the next until the last person in line heard the message. Then that person announced the message to the whole group. Invariably, the final message bore little resemblance to the original one. As the message was whispered from one person to another, it changed dramatically. Everyone in the group was trying to tell it right, but that almost never happened.

That made for a fun party game, but when communication gets garbled in families, churches, classrooms, and offices, bad things happen. False rumors, passed from person to person and accepted as truth, do significant damage to innocent people. We all can probably think of personal experiences where gossip was anything but a party game. It was a destructive weapon that hurt someone terribly.

John ends his Gospel by trying to squelch a false rumor circulating in the early church. We should try to do the same whenever we can.

Conclusion

When we began this unit on the Gospel of John a few weeks ago, I mentioned that this book is quite different from the other three Gospels in the New Testament. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are often called "the Synoptic Gospels" because they look at Jesus from a very similar point of view. They describe many of the same events, offer us the same parables, and follow the same basic timeline. It is generally believed that Mark was the first Gospel written and that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a primary source when they wrote their own Gospels.

It is also generally believed that John was the last Gospel written. If so, the writer may have had the other three Gospels at his disposal but chose instead to include mostly new material in his account of the life of Jesus. He wanted to tell new stories, teachings, and events that were not included in the other accounts of Jesus' ministry. The Gospel of John is a completely different rendering of the story of Jesus. Most of the material in John is not found anywhere else in the New Testament, and we are indebted to the writer for giving us this unique material on Jesus' life.

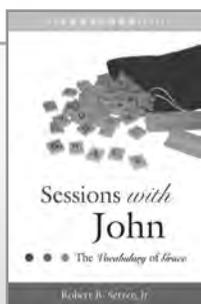
But the newness and freshness of the material could have caused an initial hesitancy on the part of its first readers. After all, the early church had the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which all told the same

story and sang the same tune. Compared to them, John's story is unique, sung in a completely different key. Perhaps that is why he ends his Gospel the way he does.

He concludes by asserting two things. First, he asserts that he is a true disciple of Jesus and is telling a true story. The material might be new, but it is truthful and trustworthy: "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true" (v. 24). In essence, those who read this Gospel should not doubt its authenticity.

Second, he asserts that the new material he has offered the church is but a drop in the bucket of all he could have written about Jesus: "But there are also many things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that could be written" (v. 25). This Gospel might have new insights and new material to offer about Jesus, but the writer actually knows far more than he has written. The story of Jesus is even bigger and better than he has said.

God, we are grateful for the Gospel of John that gives us distinctive insights into the life and ministry of Jesus. May we use this passage today to remember again our own calling and to be faithful to it. We thank you once again that we, like John, can see ourselves as those whom Jesus loves. In his name and spirit we pray. Amen.



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HOSEA'S MARRIAGE

Hosea 1

Introduction

This week we begin a five-week study of the book of Hosea. Hosea was one of God's four spokesmen known as the eighth-century prophets. The others were Amos, Isaiah, and Micah. Hosea and his contemporary Amos prophesied to the northern kingdom, usually called Israel in the Old Testament. Isaiah and Micah prophesied to the southern kingdom, usually referred to as Judah.

Since Amos and Hosea both spoke to the northern kingdom at about the same time in history, the messages of the two prophets have much in common. They both predict the fall of Israel as a sign of God's judgment, but they also emphasize God's redeeming love that will one day lead to a united Israel (see Hos 1:11, 3:5; Amos 9:11-15). The book of Hosea has two basic sections: his marriage (chs. 1-3) and his message (chs. 4-14).

Our focus this week is on Hosea 1, which tells of God's strange call to the prophet to "take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD" (v. 2). Hosea does precisely that and marries a prostitute named Gomer. They then have three children, two sons and a daughter, who are given names that depict both the sins of Israel and God's coming judgment.

It is worth taking a closer look at the names of those children because they hint at sins that still plague us and our country. The names might seem strange and irrelevant when we first hear them, but closer scrutiny reveals that they have something timely to say to us today.

The Valley of Regret

The first child born to Hosea and Gomer is a son. God says to Hosea, "Name him Jezreel; for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel" (vv. 4-5).

Jezeel was a valley known for its fertility and fruitfulness. In fact, the name Jezeel literally means “God sows.” The Valley of Jezeel was so lush and beautiful, the people thought that God must have planted it.

But the beautiful valley of Jezeel came to be known for something else, too. It came to be synonymous with bloodshed and violence. In 1 Kings 21, we read of Jezebel spilling Naboth’s blood there, and in 2 Kings 9–10, we read of Jehu spilling the blood of Ahab’s house there.

So now in Hosea, God tells the people that divine judgment is coming on the house of Jehu and that the nation of Israel will be defeated. And where will all of this happen? “On that day, I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezeel” (Hos 1:5). The lush and fruitful valley of Jezeel has been transformed into the bloody and violent valley of Jezeel. What was once a scenic valley of grass, trees, and flowers has become a place of death and destruction.

So God tells Hosea to name his firstborn son Jezeel to remind the people of Israel that their relationship to God is like that infamous valley. At one time, Israel had a beautiful and loving relationship with God. God had called them to be his people, and they had responded with joy and obedience.

But not anymore. Now Israel chases false gods, commits blatant sins, and never once thinks of repenting. What had been a beautiful relationship has become ugly and tainted by infidelity. Every time the people of Israel see Hosea’s oldest boy, they are supposed to remember that they had a golden opportunity, but they wasted it.

Just about all of us who live long enough will eventually visit the valley of Jezeel. It is the place of regret, the place where we remember what could have been. It is the place where we remember how we blew it, how we squandered a wonderful opportunity and turned a blessing into a disaster.

Maybe it was a marriage that went bad, a job that turned into a nightmare, or a friendship that soured into animosity. Whatever it was, we look back at our own valleys of regret and wish for a do-over. And we don’t need a boy named Jezeel to remind us of our sins and mistakes. They are ever with us, and our biggest challenge is learning to accept the amazing grace and forgiveness of God.

Beyond God’s Forgiveness

The story continues: “She conceived again and bore a daughter. Then the LORD said to him, ‘Name her Lo-ruhamah, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them’” (v. 6). The girl’s name means “not

pitied.” It is God’s way of telling the people of Israel that he has run out of patience with them. God will still have pity on the house of Judah, the passage goes on to say, but not Israel. And this second child of Hosea’s will be a constant reminder of that. Every time the people see her, they should remember how they turned their backs on God and earned God’s wrath.

The sad but inevitable truth is that God can’t forgive us unless we want to be forgiven. God won’t relate to us unless we desire the relationship. In short, God is not one who barges into human lives. There is a verse in the book of Revelation where Jesus says, “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” (Rev 3:20). But what if we don’t open the door? What if the divine knock goes unanswered? Jesus seems to be implying that he will join us at the table only if he is invited.

The people of Israel to whom the prophet Hosea was preaching had decided not to let God into their lives. God had been knocking on their door for centuries and getting no response. The people had even decided to invite other gods to the table. They forsook the commandments God had given them and opted for sin over sanctity. Hosea was told to name his daughter Lo-ruhamah to remind the Israelites of the day God decided to quit knocking, the day God turned and walked away from them.

If nothing else, Lo-ruhamah is a wake-up call to all of us who hear her name. She reminds us how crucial it is to open the door when God comes knocking. We have opportunities all through our lives to either let God in or block God out, to be faithful to the divine call or to turn away from it. As we will soon discover as we reach the end of this chapter, God is always willing to forgive, but our hard hearts limit and blunt this divine forgiveness. Lo-ruhamah reminds us that only a fool keeps rejecting the overtures of a loving God.

Forsaken by God

There is still one more child to consider. Verse 8 says, “When she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said, ‘Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God.’” In Hebrew, Lo-ammi means “not my people.” This boy was to remind everyone who saw him that the people of Israel had walked away from God and that God had let them go.

I once read a descriptive phrase that aptly captures the kind of relationship Israel had with God. The writer described the history of Israel as a “saw-toothed history,” which vividly pictures the up-and-down

spiritual journey of the Israelites. Like the jagged teeth on a saw, sometimes they were up—faithful to God, worshipping together, following the commandments, and taking care of the poor and needy. And sometimes they were down—chasing other gods, failing to worship, forgetting the commandments, and living with greed. Theirs truly was a saw-toothed history.

Sometimes our personal spiritual history can be the same way. At certain times, we're spiritually "up." We attend church regularly, read the Bible daily, try to minister and witness for Christ, and feel as if God is very near. But sometimes, we're "down"—filled with doubt, neglecting worship and study, doing little to minister to others, and feeling as if God is far, far away. Most of us, sadly, tend to run spiritually hot and cold.

The Israelites in Hosea's day had been cold for a long time. Perhaps the only way God could get their attention was to walk away from them and let them experience life without him. Absence doesn't always make the heart grow fonder, but sometimes it does.

Conclusion

By the time we get through the first nine verses of Hosea 1, we may be thoroughly depressed. These verses are about as dark as it gets. The nation of Israel has been adulterous in its relationship with God, a fact driven home by Hosea's marriage to a woman who knows all about adultery. His life and marriage mirror the unfaithfulness of Israel.

Then Hosea names his children in such a way that they bear witness to this tragedy. Imagine having to go through life with those names and having to be living object lessons to an entire nation. Their names say it all:

- Israel is like Jezreel, filled with regret and wasted opportunity.
- Israel is like Lo-ruhamah and no longer receives God's pity and compassion.
- And Israel is like Lo-ammi, forsaken by God and no longer God's people.

If Hosea ended with verse 9, we would be drowning in sorrow. But, thank God, it doesn't. After this dark diatribe about the hopelessness of Israel, Hosea surprisingly and thankfully adds a word of hope. In verses 10-11, he says that Israel is not going to vanish from the face of the earth. Its people shall one day be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered.

Don't think that Israel is going to bear these three awful names forever. One day they will be called "children of the living God." There is even coming a day when Judah and Israel will be reunited under one leader and take possession of the land. The last line in Hosea 1 says, "great shall be the day of Jezreel." Once again, the valley of Jezreel will be fertile and fruitful and filled with beauty.

When we look at Hosea 1 in its entirety, it reads like a compelling story about a loving parent and a rebellious child. God, the Parent, is shocked and dismayed that this beloved child could have behaved so badly. God had no idea that the child would act this way and do these things. So out of great disappointment and heartbreak, God erupts in anger. God tells Israel that they have blown it big time. God doesn't feel sorry for Israel at all. God even says that they are no longer a part of the family. Verses 1-9 give us the text of this diatribe of disappointment.

But verses 10-11 tell us the rest of the story. God is not finished with Israel after all. In fact, God thinks Israel has a bright future and will someday make God a proud Parent. There is coming a day when God and Israel will be reunited in love and live together in harmony and peace. Whatever disputes divided the family in the past will be gone. And they will have a jubilant party and bountiful picnic in the blossoming valley of Jezreel.

God, there have been times when we have had all the names of Hosea's children: times when we have lived in the valley of regret, times when we have locked you out of our lives, times when we have been up, and times when we have been down. We ask you not to give up on us. We are your people, even though we don't always act like it. In the name and spirit of Christ we pray. Amen.

ISRAEL'S REDEMPTION

Hosea 2:14, 16–3:5

Introduction

Disaster was coming for the people of Israel, and Hosea knew it. He saw very clearly that the Israelites would soon be conquered and have to live as a captive people. And that is exactly what happened. In 721 BC, Assyria overran Samaria, Israel's capital, and brought the nation to ruin.

Both Hosea and his contemporary Amos saw this coming captivity as a sign of God's judgment. The people of Israel had forsaken their God, and God would allow them to reap the consequences of their unfaithfulness. The prophets also saw hope beyond this catastrophe. As we learned in our study last week, Hosea's message is an intermingling of judgment and hope. Yes, the people of Israel have turned their backs on God and will have to suffer for it. But God will not forsake them forever. Throughout the book of Hosea, we read passages brimming with hope for the future.

Our study this week focuses on one of those hope-filled passages. In these verses, God woos Israel again and remarries her (2:14-20), gives her a new name (2:21-23), and has Hosea renew his covenant with Gomer as a symbol of God's faithfulness to Israel (3:1-5).

Because of this coming courtship and remarriage, Israel has three reasons for hope: (1) God will one day make all things new for them, (2) God will one day change their identity, and (3) God will love them with a stubborn and relentless love.

All Things New

In Hosea 2:14-20, Hosea pictures God wooing and winning Israel in the future. God will bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her, the prophet says. Israel will forsake all other suitors and call God her husband. Furthermore, God will make a covenant with wild animals, birds, and other living things to keep Israel safe. The bow and the sword will be laid aside, and the people will live in peace. God and Israel will be married forever. They will live together in justice, steadfast love, and mercy.

It is more than likely that these hopeful words sounded like "pie in the sky by and by"—wishful thinking—to the Israelites who first heard

them. When the Assyrians roared through the land, pillaging everything in sight and leaving death and destruction in their wake, Hosea's words must have seemed like the ridiculous rantings of a street-corner preacher. After all, words are cheap and easy. Burning homes and wrecked futures speak much more clearly than pious prophets. One disaster nullifies the hopeful words of even the most eloquent preacher.

Have you ever noticed how much easier it is to have faith in the goodness of God when everything is going well? When we're healthy, have plenty of money, and are living in good relationships, it's not hard to quote Romans 8:28 about all things working together for good to those who love God. It's easy to have faith, quote Bible verses, and preach uplifting sermons when all is going well.

But when the Assyrians show up, that's a different matter. Maybe for us the Assyrians take the form of a sickness, job loss, divorce, a problem child, depression, or the death of a loved one. Whatever our invading enemy happens to be, it sucks the life out of us and makes it almost impossible to quote those Scripture verses that come so easily in good times. When the Assyrians show up, even our pastor's most stirring sermons leave us cold. They sound good from the pulpit, but out here in the real world, the Assyrians are relentlessly brutal.

The writers of the Bible, though, are just as relentless in proclaiming that God has the power to make all things new.

- David says, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me" (Ps 23:4).
- Isaiah says, "Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint" (Isa 40:31).
- Jesus tells us to look at the way God takes care of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field and "to strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt 6:33).
- Paul insists that not only are all things working together for our good but also that "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom 8:31).

The list of biblical passages proclaiming that God can and will make all things new is impressively long. But reading those passages and believing those passages are very different things. We don't know how

Hosea's audience received his words of hope in the midst of their darkness. We do know that he, like many other writers in the Bible, offered this truth to them as their last and best hope: God will see you through this disaster and get you to the other side.

A Restored Identity

In Hosea 2:21-23, the prophet says that God will one day restore to Israel its former identity as God's beloved people.

Last week, we saw how God told Hosea to give his children names that depicted the sins of Israel. These names were to be a reminder of the people's unfaithfulness to God. The first son was named Jezreel because the valley of Jezreel had once been a fertile and fruitful meadow until it was spoiled by bloodshed and violence. The boy's name was to be a constant reminder of how Israel had spoiled its once loving and faithful relationship with God.

The second child, a daughter, was named Lo-ruhamah, which means "not pitied." She was to remind the people of Israel that God would no longer pity them because they had turned their backs on him. They had constantly rejected God's overtures of love, and God would grant them the freedom to go their way without him.

The third child, a son, was named Lo-ammi, which means "not my people." This boy's name was to remind the people that they were once the beloved people of God but had forfeited that title by their consistent sin and rebellion.

But in today's passage, Hosea promises that there is coming a day when God will rescind those names and restore to Israel its place of honor. Jezreel will once again be synonymous with fertility and beauty. Lo-ruhamah will once again be pitied and loved by God. And Lo-ammi will once again be seen as a child of God. What the people of Israel had forfeited will be restored, and they will once again be the people of God. In effect, God will give them a new name to match their identity.

The truth expressed in these three verses is the life-changing hope that God will not give up on sinful people. Even if at some point we abandon our love for God, we can still receive divine forgiveness. Though our sins may be scarlet, they can still become white as snow. Though it is hard to conceive of that kind of forgiveness, the biblical writers insist that God is more than willing to give it to us.

Years ago, Carlyle Marney, the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Austin, Texas, preached a sermon titled "God's Strong Hands." It was a sermon about Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus and then hanged himself

in grief and regret. Marney proposed in his sermon that Judas's worst sin in that whole episode was to believe that he was beyond God's forgiveness, that God's strong hands would not reach out to him because of his awful betrayal. Marney said that had Judas not despaired and given up on his future, Jesus would have forgiven him, just as he forgave Simon Peter. Jesus would have embraced him, and Judas could have lived in grateful awe for the amazing grace he had received.

The new identity Hosea speaks of in these verses was intended to keep the people of Israel from a despair of their own. They were called to believe that God had not given up on them, that they would receive a new name, and that they had a future they should embrace.

A Stubborn Love

In Hosea 3:1-5, God once again tells Hosea to love an unfaithful woman as a symbol of Israel's unfaithfulness to God. It is impossible to tell if this is a repetition of the same command in chapter 1 or if this is a different woman and a different relationship. Either way, the point is the same as the command in chapter 1. Hosea is to love this woman, a known adulteress, as a way of depicting God's abiding love for an unfaithful Israel.

The promise in verse 5 is confusing, however. Hosea writes that "the Israelites shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king; they shall come in awe to the LORD and to his goodness in the latter days." That verse presents two major problems. First, the ten tribes of Israel to whom Hosea was prophesying never did reunite as a nation. They are commonly called "the ten lost tribes of Israel" because they assimilated into other peoples and lost their national identity.

The second problem is Hosea's assertion that the people will seek David their king. When Hosea was proclaiming these words, David had been dead for several hundred years. There is no way these ten tribes could literally return to a kingdom governed by David. So this is a puzzling verse that bears no easy interpretation. The people never did reunite to seek the Lord, and they never lived under the reign of King David.

Perhaps the best way to interpret Hosea's intention here is to acknowledge our ignorance and postulate that maybe this is a prophecy that has yet to be fulfilled. Even yet, the Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God, and they will find the Lord in the lineage of King David—in Jesus the Christ. They shall come in awe to the Lord and

to his goodness in the latter days. And they, like the rest of creation, will bow in awe before Jesus Christ.

But once again, the main thrust of chapter 3 is the stubborn love of God that will not let Israel go. Hosea is to love this adulterous woman with a relentless love to remind Israel that God will never stop loving her. Israel doesn't deserve God's love, but Israel will always have it.

Conclusion

Our passage this week is about a God of second chances. Israel had been a prostitute in her relationship with the divine Lover, but God would not let her go. And this storyline is repeated throughout the pages of the Bible.

- Adam and Eve disobeyed God, but God wouldn't let them go.
- Moses didn't want to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt, but God wouldn't let him go.
- David was a murderous adulterer, but God wouldn't let him go.
- Solomon was a blatant materialist, but God wouldn't let him go.
- Jonah ran away from God, but God wouldn't let him go.
- Peter denied Jesus three times, but God wouldn't let him go.
- Paul called himself the chief of sinners, but God wouldn't let him go.

It is probably not stretching the truth to say that Scripture is the story of God's relentless love, a love that seeks people out and loves them even though they don't deserve it. Hosea knew that and tried his best to get the people of Israel to believe it. We don't know if they believed him or not. But the more pressing question is, do we?

Lord, increase our faith so that we dare to believe that you are the kind of God who will not let us go. Forgive our sins. Fill us with hope. And give us the strength to live for you all of our days. Amen.



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GOD'S INDICTMENT

Hosea 4:1-11a

Introduction

Reading the book of Hosea is like taking a wild roller coaster ride. We sink to the depths of sin and condemnation at some points, and then we rise to the heights of forgiveness and restoration. Hosea is capable of both denunciation and celebration. Reading his message can be a jolting experience.

Last week, we soared to the heights as Hosea spoke of God's coming redemption of Israel. This week, we take a dizzy dip into the depths of Israel's sin and unfaithfulness to God.

There should probably be a disclaimer at the beginning of Hosea that reads, "CAUTION! Anyone who reads this book is likely to suffer emotional vertigo." So let's strap on our seat belts as we move into chapter 4 and hear Hosea lambast Israel for their sinful ways.

The first three chapters of Hosea focus on his marriage to Gomer and how that marriage is a symbol of God's relationship to Israel. The rest of Hosea is a series of messages he delivers to the people. Chapter 4 begins with the words, "Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel" (v. 1). The remainder of the book is God's word to the people as understood and proclaimed by the prophet Hosea.

Our verses this week are an indictment against the Israelites for their sins, which Hosea will describe in detail. In Hosea 4:1-3, we hear about those sins and how they have unleashed devastating ripples in the land. In verses 4-6, we read Hosea's condemnation of the priests and prophets of Israel and the part they have played in Israel's demise. And finally, in verses 7-11a, we hear of the punishment coming for those unfaithful religious leaders.

The Ripples of Sin

In the first three verses of our passage, Hosea describes the sins of Israel and how those sins have devastated the land. "The LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land," he says in verse 1. Then he proceeds to give the specifics of that indictment: "There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land." He goes on to say that Israel is guilty of swearing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery, and

bloodshed. Because of her sin, “The land mourns, and all who live in it languish” (v. 3).

As if that wasn’t bad enough, “The wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing” (v. 3). The problem with sin is that it inevitably makes devastating ripples. Sin is seldom if ever solitary and contained. It is nearly always public and contagious. My sin doesn’t just affect me; it affects other people and even the created world around me.

If we want to learn about the ripples of sin, we don’t have to read Hosea. We just have to look within and around us. We know from personal experience that what Hosea is saying is true. Sin inevitably has consequences. One act of adultery can destroy a family. One moment of anger can wound a person for life. One word of slander can destroy a person’s reputation. Sin hurts, and it hurts not just the sinners but those around them.

We also know from experience that sin can hurt the created order that we are supposed to be nurturing and protecting. As Hosea says, the wild animals, the birds, and the fish of the sea are all affected by human sin—as are the trees, oceans, flowers, mountains, and everything else in nature that God has entrusted to human stewardship. When we ignore our call to be stewards of the earth, our sin has profound implications both for the created order and for the generations that will come after us.

Hosea is telling the people of Israel something we have already learned—or should have: the wages of sin is death. Sin makes all kinds of things die: relationships, human bodies, hope, freedom, the miracles of the natural world, and personal happiness, to mention just a few. Hosea’s description of the consequences of sin summarizes them well: “The land mourns, and all who live in it languish.”

The Priest and the Prophet

In verses 4-6, Hosea turns his attention to the sins of the priests and prophets of Israel. In his mind, they deserve special blame for the demise of Israel’s relationship with God. The people, Hosea asserts, “are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” And why don’t they have knowledge of God? Because the religious leaders have “rejected knowledge” and “forgotten the law of God.” Their assignment was to teach the people the way of God, and they have failed miserably.

Modern-day pastors, priests, and prophets have to wear many hats to do what is demanded of them. They must be preachers, counselors, administrators, peacemakers, supervisors, and writers. On top of that,

they have to keep an institutional ship afloat, which means they're expected to have some business and financial expertise. Most of us who have tried to wear all of those hats haven't succeeded very well.

When you're trying to wear all the hats, it's easy to forget your main calling. Hosea gets it right: pastors, priests, and prophets are supposed to remind people of God, to teach them God's ways, to keep ever before them the eternal dimension of human life. Left to their own devices, most humans will forget God. They will get wrapped up in family, sports, jobs, money, and all the other things people get wrapped up in. They need someone to remind them that it is possible to gain the whole world and lose their soul. They need someone to keep God ever before them.

But what if the modern pastor, priest, or prophet gets so caught up in running an institution that he or she "forgets the law of God"? What if, in trying to wear all the ecclesiastical hats, the modern religious leader forgets his or her primary calling: to remind people of God, to teach them biblical truths, to tell them that they should seek first the kingdom of God and everything else will take care of itself? What if the modern religious leader becomes like those ancient priests and prophets in Israel?

Well, when that happens, it's time for them to read Hosea 4 and be convicted to get back on track. It's time for them to repent and focus again on their main calling as heralds of God to a world prone to forget him.

Listen to Your Life

In verses 7-11a, Hosea says that those negligent priests and prophets will be punished for their sins. "Like people, like priest," he says in verse 9. Like the common people in Israel, the religious leaders will not escape the coming judgment. "I will punish them for their ways and repay them for their deeds," God says.

The punishment for their sins will not be the kind of punishment we would expect, though. We might expect God to send plagues upon them or inflict them with some kind of physical malady. Instead, their punishment will be an overwhelming sense of futility: "They shall eat, but not be satisfied; they shall play the whore, but not multiply; because they have forsaken the LORD to devote themselves to whoredom" (4:10-11a).

The religious leaders will feel like people who eat but never get full or prostitutes who have many sexual relationships but never bear children. In short, the priests and prophets of Israel will become frustrated and disillusioned because of the futility of their work. They will experience

a growing emptiness, and they will join the preacher in Ecclesiastes in declaring, “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (Eccl 12:8).

If those religious leaders have any self-awareness at all, they will see that God’s punishment could lead them to a renewed sense of purpose and passion. Their emptiness and futility could lead them to make necessary changes and start doing what they were called to do in the first place: remind people of the presence of God and train people in the ways of God. If they could listen to their lives, they could make a dramatic change in the way they do their priesting and prophesying.

That, of course, is true for all of us, not just religious leaders. We all have to develop the ability to listen to our own lives. In his book *Listening to Your Life*, Frederick Buechner writes:

If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2009, 8)

Sometimes, when we pay attention and listen to our lives, we discover that we are joyful, enthused, and fulfilled, and we know that God is speaking an affirming word to us. We are where we’re supposed to be, doing what we’re supposed to do.

But sometimes we find ourselves where Israel’s ancient religious leaders eventually found themselves—frustrated and disillusioned—and we know that God is speaking a corrective word to us. We are wasting our lives in unproductive work and need to make some serious changes.

Conclusion

There are many words in the contemporary religious vocabulary that are in need of reclamation. Words like “preacher,” “sermon,” “saved,” “righteous,” and “evangelism” have all come to be seen in a negative light. But if I had to pick the one word most in need of reclamation it would be the word “repent.”

That word conjures up images of a street-corner preacher holding a sign with one word scrawled on it: REPENT! Anyone who sees that preacher and his sign crosses the street to keep from having to deal with him. Let the modern preacher post on the sign in front of the church a sermon title with the word “repent” in it, and people will stay away.

But the word “repent” is actually one of the most positive words in our religious vocabulary. It means we can assess how we are living, make necessary changes, and start to live joyful, productive lives. It means we can realize that we are walking down a road that leads to nowhere and choose to get on a road that leads to somewhere. Any time we are stuck in a miserable, futile situation, we ought to hear the word “repent” as a word of hope.

The book of Hosea is all about repenting. The people of Israel have forsaken God and are experiencing the fruits of their sin. The religious leaders of Israel have forgotten their calling and are destined to experience the futility of empty work. So what do these people and religious leaders need to do? Here is Hosea’s invitation to them:

Come, let us return to the LORD; for it is he who has torn, and he will 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 appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth. (Hos 6:1-3)

Though Hosea never uses the word “repent” in that passage, that is what he was offering the people of Israel. It was good news of hope when he spoke it to ancient Israel, and it is still good news of hope to us today.

God, give us the discernment to listen to our lives and the courage and wisdom to repent. Come into our lives like the spring rains that water the earth so that we can experience the abundant life you want us to have. Amen.

GOD'S TENDER COMPASSION

Hosea 11

Introduction

Sherry and I have just returned from a trip to Oregon. For years, we visited Oregon every summer to escape the Texas heat for a month. But we haven't been back in several years, so it was enjoyable to return to familiar places, breathe that cool Oregon air, and see some old friends.

As we always do on those trips, we took a lot of pictures. We typically put them on the screen saver on our computer so that they can scroll by us all year and remind us of our cool, restful trip to the Northwest.

I suppose taking all of those pictures in Oregon put me in mind of picture-taking, so as I studied our passage this week it reminded me of a picture album. It struck me that Hosea is giving us picture after picture of God's tender compassion and relentless love. He begins chapter 11 by giving us some snapshots that remind us who God is and how God relates to us.

Divine Snapshots

The first four verses give us four pictures to consider:

- Snapshot #1: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (v. 1). This picture captures God as a Parent loving a child. God so loved this child, Israel, that God once rescued him from slavery in Egypt. This is a snapshot of God, the loving Parent, taking care of a beloved son.
- Snapshot #2: "The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols" (v. 2). This is a picture we wish wasn't in the album. God loves Israel, but Israel keeps rejecting God and chasing other gods. When we look at this picture, we clearly see God's love being spurned by a rebellious son.
- Snapshot #3: "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them" (v. 3). Every parent can relate to this picture. A little baby is learning to walk, but the parent has to stoop and take the baby by the hand or he will fall. And when the child does fall, you scoop him up in your arms and give

him a kiss. This is a tender snapshot of God taking Ephraim, a poetic term for Israel, and lovingly teaching him to walk. Sadly, the baby is not old enough or wise enough to appreciate the Parent's love.

- Snapshot #4: "I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them" (v. 4). Once again, this is a picture of grace. We see God as a divine Mother humbling herself to feed the child. When we look at this fourth snapshot of God, it reminds us of that passage in Philippians 2:6-11 where Paul says Jesus emptied himself and became obedient to death. Here in Hosea, God the Almighty One bends down to serve and feed a hungry child.

In the first four verses of our passage, Hosea gives us one picture after another of God's tender and persistent love for Israel. As these pictures scroll by, we are reminded of that amazing love and also of Israel's rejection of it.

Relentless Love

As we continue to read Hosea 11, we hear more about Israel spurning this amazing, tender love of God. Hosea underscores the way Israel has repeatedly rejected God. He has God lament that "they have refused to return to me" (v. 5), and "my people are bent on turning away from me" (v. 7).

But still, God will not let go: "How can I give you up, Ephraim?" God says. "How can I hand you over, O Israel?" (v. 8). Then God says that he can't let Israel become like Admah and Zeboiim, two cities destroyed along with Sodom in the book of Genesis. No, God will rescue Israel: "My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender" (v. 8). In spite of Israel's obstinate rejection of God, God responds with an obstinate, breathtaking love.

It is interesting and instructive to recall that Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1 in telling the story of Jesus' infancy. Mary and Joseph take the baby Jesus to escape Herod's wrath, and Matthew says this happened so that Hosea's prophecy might be fulfilled: "Out of Egypt I have called my son" (Mt 2:15).

How fitting it is that Matthew connects Hosea 11, a resounding declaration of God's relentless love, to the birth of Jesus. Talk about a picture of relentless love! If ever there was a picture of this kind of love, it is the picture of Jesus. Some in his day accused him of being possessed by a demon, and some accused him of being drunk. Some mocked him, and

some spit on him. Some beat him, humiliated him, and tortured him. Some finally nailed him to a cross. And, in return, Jesus asked God to forgive them and died for their salvation.

One person who was profoundly moved by Jesus' love in the face of evil was Simon Peter. As you might remember, Peter was known to be rather volatile and tempestuous: the kind of person who would attempt to walk on water or cut off somebody's ear in the garden of Gethsemane. Peter was quick to act and quick to retaliate.

So he was amazed at the way Jesus responded to the evil he endured on the cross. In 1 Peter, he writes of Jesus,

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; and when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (2:23-24)

Peter saw up close and personal that Jesus is the ultimate example of relentless love. As we flip through this biblical photo album in Hosea 11, we don't see Jesus up close and personal, but we can do what Matthew did and connect Jesus to these pictures. The kind of amazing love Hosea is describing in Hosea 11 became flesh and blood in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. We can celebrate that God is like these pictures in Hosea 11 and—even better—that God is like Jesus.

A Second Exodus

In the last few verses of Hosea 11, the prophet pictures a coming day when the people of Israel will return to their homeland. This will be a second exodus, and they will come home from the west, from Egypt, and from Assyria. Their exile will be over, and they will dwell at home with the God who loves them.

By the time we reach the end of Hosea 11, we're probably feeling two things: identification and gratitude. First, we identify with the back-sliding ways of the people of Israel. We, too, sometimes forget God, stray away from God's love, get our priorities confused, and live as if God doesn't even exist.

We can't honestly read Hosea and throw stones at the people of Israel, because we are not without sin ourselves. Should we feel inclined to look down on Israel, Jesus would probably say to us what he once said to those Pharisees who wanted to throw stones at a woman caught in adultery: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn 8:7).

Sometimes we sing an old hymn that includes the words, “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love.” Most of us can sing that line with a certain amount of conviction because it is so true of our own saw-toothed walk with God.

But the second thing we probably feel when we reach the end of this chapter is gratitude. It reminds us of a message that runs from beginning to end in the Bible: that God will never abandon us. That message takes root in the Old Testament and blossoms into fullness in the New Testament. As Francis Thompson put it in his famous poem, God is the “Hound of Heaven” who will keep searching for us until he finds us.

The most obvious manifestation of that pursuing love, of course, is Jesus himself. Here’s the Apostle Paul’s epic celebration of that amazing love in Romans 8:

Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ’s love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture. None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I’m absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God’s love because of the way Jesus our master has embraced us. (Rom 8:35-39, *The Message*)

Because of how Jesus has embraced us, we keep having exoduses of our own. We may wander away from God, but we keep coming back, certain that nothing can get between us and God’s love. Like the prodigal son, we always get greeted with a hug and a party when we come back home.

Conclusion

When our grandson Anthony was two years old, he came to spend a weekend with us. We took him to a local mall to play in a playroom. It was a big room with a bunch of bouncy inflatables to jump on. But the place also had some basketball goals where kids could shoot baskets. They shoot the ball, and if they miss, the ball rolls back to them down an incline so they can shoot again.

At two years of age, Anthony couldn’t shoot a basketball, but he did understand that the idea was to get the ball through the hoop. So he got it in his mind to climb the incline and dunk it. Well, there was no way. The incline was steep and slick and would have been almost impossible to

climb even if he had had two free hands, much less while trying to carry a basketball! So Anthony would climb a little bit, slide back down, and then try it again.

We tried to help him, but he wanted to do it all by himself. We sat there amazed and amused at his tenacity. It had to be exhausting to keep climbing that incline. Our amusement eventually turned to agony as we watched him try in vain to dunk that basketball.

Would you believe that he finally did it? He got to the top of that incline, dunked the ball, and looked back at us with a proud smile on his face. We gave him a high five, celebrated with him, and bought him a Slurpee.

That happened ten years ago, but I remember it like it was yesterday. I still have to smile when I think about him refusing to give up and the satisfaction on his face when he dunked that basketball. That was a picture of tenacity if there ever was one, and it is indelibly imprinted in my memory.

When the prophet Hosea thought about God, he had some images in his mind that he wanted the people of Israel to see. One after another, he gave them some pictures of God that showed them God's tenacity. He gave them snapshots of a God who would never give up on them, a God who would never let them go.

They were some amazing pictures, really. Even when we look at them all these years later, they fill us with both wonder and joy.

Thank you, God, for being relentless in your pursuit of us. Forgive us for being inattentive to your overtures of love. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who is the best picture of relentless love we have ever seen. Amen.



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ISRAEL'S RESTORATION

Hosea 14

Introduction

We've come to the last of our lessons from the book of Hosea. If it seems as if we've been repeating ourselves in this study, it is because the prophet Hosea repeats himself, too. He has basically two themes in his prophecy: (1) Israel has forsaken God and needs to repent, and (2) God's love for Israel is relentless, and God will never abandon them. We can sum up the entire book of Hosea with those two statements.

We shouldn't be surprised that the final chapter of Hosea repeats these themes. In my Bible, the first three verses of Hosea 14 have the heading "A Plea for Repentance." In these verses Hosea encourages Israel to return to God and even tells them what they should say to God. They should ask God to take away their guilt, acknowledge that the Assyrians will not save them, and confess that God is bigger and better than anything they can make with their own hands. In Hosea 14:1-3, Hosea gives the people of Israel a cue card to use when they offer their apology to God.

In my Bible, the final six verses of Hosea 14 bear the heading "Assurance of Forgiveness." In these final verses, the prophet tells Israel how God will respond to their repentance. He says that God will heal their disloyalty, love them freely, and turn God's anger away from them. In the shadow of God's favor, they will prosper and thrive. They will no longer serve idols because they will know that God is like an evergreen cypress tree that offers them shade and comfort. They will affirm that "the ways of the LORD are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them" (Hos 14:9).

Hosea 14 gives us the message of the entire book in a nutshell. It is both a plea for the people of Israel to repent and a word of assurance that God will forgive them if they do.

It might be wise this week to use this final, summary chapter to probe some questions the book of Hosea nudges us to consider. As we've moved through the book, we've uncovered old truths that can engender questions that are relevant for people in any age.

What Is My Name?

The book of Hosea begins with God telling the prophet to give his children names that signify Israel's relationship with God (ch. 1). These three children get negative names because they are meant to remind the Israelites of their sin against God. Their names are more than just names. They have a deeper, spiritual meaning.

When we read that part of Hosea, it can prompt us to ask ourselves: What is my name? Regardless of what my given name might be, what do I call myself? Do I call myself Fearful, Incompetent, Unlovely, or Failure? Am I, like Hosea's offspring, stuck with a negative name?

One thing is certain: the name I call myself will go a long way in determining who I actually become. The names we give ourselves are always self-fulfilling. That is why the Bible is filled with occasions where people come face to face with who they are and have their names changed. Sometimes, God gives them a new name to give them a new future. Hosea is not the only book in the Bible where people have a name that is changed to signify a new identity.

It is hard to imagine going through life saddled with names like those of Hosea's children. Imagine having a name that means "place of violence and regret," "no compassion," or "forsaken by God." Those kids were doomed from the start. But sometimes we do the same tragic thing to ourselves. We decide that our name is something negative and inferior and travel through life living up to the name we have given ourselves.

It might be time to see if God has a new name for us.

Will I Let God Change My Name?

Hosea's notion that names have significance was not new to the people of Israel. After all, the nation itself was named for a man who had his name changed. In Genesis 32, Jacob has an epic nighttime wrestling match with a mysterious stranger. In the midst of the tussle, Jacob tells the man that he will not let him go until he offers Jacob a blessing. The man asks Jacob his name, and Jacob tells him. Then the man replies, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed" (Gen 32:28). After Jacob had this life-changing encounter, he received a new name to signify that he had become a new person.

Prior to this, Jacob's grandfather Abram had a similar experience. He has a profound experience with God in Genesis 17 where God says to him, "You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I

have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations” (17:5). God also changes Abram’s wife’s name, Sarai, to “Sarah.” So in Genesis 17, two very senior adults get new identities. Abram becomes Abraham, which means “ancestor of a multitude,” and Sarai becomes Sarah, which means “princess.” They receive new names to mark their new identities.

What Hosea did in giving his children symbolic names didn’t shock the people of Israel. They knew that names had significance and symbolic meaning.

They also knew that God had given some of their most famous ancestors new names. The question Hosea wanted them to consider was whether they wanted God to give *them* a new name. Did they want to be known forever as people separated from God, people who had forsaken their covenant with God?

Hosea had a new identity for them to consider, and he wanted them to embrace it. They were the Beloved of God. They were the people who had wandered away from the God who had called them, but they didn’t have to hold on to that identity. They could become the Beloved of God, and God would embrace them once again as God’s people. Like their famous forefathers, Abram and Jacob, they could receive a new name.

The really good news tucked away in the book of Hosea is that this can happen to any of us. Here we are, perhaps, living out an identity that is taking us far away from the abundant life we crave. Somehow, quite unintentionally, we’ve grown disillusioned with both God and life. But it’s never too late to remember our real name, Beloved of God. It’s never too late to become who we really are.

Am I Willing to Repent?

The word Hosea uses to describe this process of remembering our true name is the word “repent.” As we saw in an earlier lesson, contrary to popular opinion, the word “repent” is one of the most positive words in the English language. It means we don’t have to stay stuck in non-productive, life-sapping ruts. It means we can recognize we’re moving in a negative direction and turn around and go the other way. It means that, like the nation of Israel, we can move from “Jezreel,” “Lo-ruhamah,” and “Lo-ammi” to “Beloved of God.”

In his book *Seculosity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019), David Zahl uses an intriguing illustration to capture the dilemma of modern life. He says that we often experience spiritual and emotional “riptides.” Ocean riptides, he says, are much bigger risks to beachgoers than sharks are. Riptides account for about a hundred deaths every year along the

US coastline. When a riptide hits, most people naturally panic and swim against the current toward the shore. But that is exactly the wrong thing to do. The force of the water not only exhausts their energy but also drags them under.

Surprisingly, Zahl says, the key is not to resist but to go with the flow. The trick to surviving a riptide is to give in to it and let it take you out to sea. The tidal forces will settle after a minute or two and dump you in a safer spot. In other words, your life depends on being willing to let go of control. Then Zahl draws this spiritual parallel:

A similar dynamic applies to the secularity in which we are currently drowning. Our attempts to engineer our own salvation backfire, and do so dramatically. When our initial strokes get us nowhere, instead of reevaluating or giving up, we start paddling in a different direction, with the same results. I hate to say it, but the only life raft capable of reaching a world drowning in secularity will not be inflated with anything we do or don't do, but what God himself has done or is doing. (187)

In short, the only kind of repentance that will save us has nothing to do with our own frantic efforts. Our best efforts and finest intentions are nothing more than swimming against the riptide. Ironically, we are saved when we realize that we are helpless and decide to let the divine currents take us out to sea. Zahl goes on to remind us that

For this reason, a grace-centered Christianity would not balk from heralding—at full volume and without fingers crossed—the good news that *nothing needs to be done that hasn't already been done*. It would emphasize the counterintuitive announcement that enoughness is a gift, given freely to those who insist on paying and at great cost to the giver. The only scorekeeping that matters has come to an end, regardless of how we might feel at the moment. (191)

Because the book of Hosea was written some 800 years before Jesus lived, died, and rose again, the prophet knew nothing of those historical events. But the repentance he describes in his prophecy is about returning to the same love of God. The people of Israel had forgotten that they were God's beloved, and they needed to reclaim their rightful identity. The repentance Hosea preached was not a checklist of good deeds they needed to do but a return to that first love they had forgotten. Had he known of Jesus and his cross, Hosea could have made his plea even more compelling.

Too often, when we think of repentance, we think of a list of things we need to change and improvements we need to make. Our tendency is to swim against that riptide with all the strength we can muster. But the only repentance that will save us is the willingness to relax into the amazing grace of God and let God take us out to sea.

What will save us when the riptides of life come roaring at us? Let's let the Apostle Paul answer that question for us: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:8-9).

Repentance is not so much about making changes as it is about receiving a gift.

Conclusion

Because this last chapter of Hosea provides a concise recap of the entire book, this lesson gives us the ideal opportunity to review our previous studies and think about some of the key questions Hosea wanted his readers to consider. The people of Israel needed to look long and hard at themselves and their relationship to God. Hosea spends fourteen chapters trying to get them to do just that.

His message to the people of Israel in the eighth century BC was not complicated at all. Those two headings in my Bible's rendering of Hosea 14 capture his message perfectly: "A Plea for Repentance" and "Assurance of Forgiveness." Those two phrases are easy to read and understand. They are not so easy to believe and live.

Give us, God, the capacity to see ourselves clearly and the courage to repent. We long for a faith that is both honest and joyful, a faith that can withstand the storms of life. We relax into your sovereignty today and thank you for your grace. Amen.

A CHEERFUL HEART

Proverbs 15:13-15; 16:23-24; 17:22

Introduction

Many think of the Bible as a somber book filled with divine warnings and commands. When we need a good laugh, we don't ordinarily think of the Bible as the first place to turn. And when we think of people who might make us laugh, we think of Ellen DeGeneres, Whoopi Goldberg, or Jimmy Fallon—not Moses, Deborah, or Paul.

Generally speaking, that's an accurate assessment. The Bible is not always fun reading, and it requires a lot of careful study to read it correctly. But as we'll see in the next four lessons, the Bible does have lighter moments and injunctions to have a cheerful heart.

Our first study is from the book of Proverbs, where, among other things, the writer reminds us that a cheerful heart is good medicine. Then next week, we'll dip into the book of Ecclesiastes, where the Preacher cautions that not all laughter is good medicine and that it is sometimes the laughter of fools. After that, we will look at two psalms that remind us that joy comes in the morning and that those who go out weeping can return with shouts of joy. Finally, we will turn to the famous story in Genesis where Abraham and Sarah learn that they will have a child late in life and spend a good bit of time laughing together. They even name their son "Isaac," which means "laughter."

As we begin this study, it might be wise to remember the words of that great theologian, Charlie Brown of "Peanuts" fame, who once observed that joy is the most infallible proof of the presence of God. Most of us would probably put another word in that sentence. Instead of joy, we might say that commitment, love, righteousness, service, or holiness is the most infallible proof of God's presence in our lives.

But let's assume, as we begin this study, that Charlie Brown is on to something and that people will know we are Christians by our joy. The writer of Proverbs would probably agree with him. In three passages from Proverbs, he reminds us of three truths about joy that we need to consider.

A Cheerful Heart Has a Continual Feast

In Proverbs 15:13, the writer reminds us that "a glad heart makes a cheerful countenance, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is broken."

He concludes this brief passage by declaring that “a cheerful heart has a continual feast” (v. 15). Those who develop a cheerful heart sit at a banquet table every day and feast to their heart’s content. By contrast, those with a downcast spirit are destined to eat meager fare.

And how exactly do we avoid this downcast spirit that makes for poverty of life? How do we find our way to the continual feast? Well, we do that by avoiding a condition known in the Middle Ages as “acedia.” We might call it “sloth” or “indifference” today. The most obvious symptom of acedia is a repeated shrug of the shoulders. When we are affected with this condition, nothing matters much. Cars go unwashed, beds unmade, books unread, children undisciplined, and bread unbaked. When we settle into sloth, life becomes a meaningless treadmill.

When acedia gets in its advanced stages, we are powerless to do much of anything. We become so apathetic that we fail to notice all the treasures that surround us daily. Sunsets bring no awe; good music stirs no heartstrings; and puppies evoke no chuckles. The medical examiner would never declare it, but when we get to that point, we are dead—emotionally and spiritually.

The only antidote for the deadly disease of acedia is caring. The only way to get to the banquet table of life is to start caring now about things: old books, baseball cards, vegetable gardens, classical music, or anything else that catches our fancy. The point is to let something inspire us so that we have a corner of the world to run to where we can find delight.

In *Bed and Board* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), Robert Capon writes:

The tinfoil collectors and fancy ribbon savers may be absurd, but they’re not crazy. They are the ones who still retain the capacity for wonder that is the root of caring. When a little boy finds an old electric motor on a junk heap, he is pierced to the heart by the weight, the windings, and the silent turning of it. When he gets home, his mother tells him to throw it out. Most likely he will cry. It is his first and truest reaction to the affluent society. He usually forgets, but we shouldn’t. He is sane; society isn’t. He possesses because he *cares*. We don’t. (116)

Only people like that little boy—the ones with wonder and fascination, the ones who truly care—experience life as a continual feast.

Pleasant Words Are Like a Honeycomb

In Proverbs 16:23-24, the writer connects joy and speech. Wise people speak judiciously, he says, and that makes them more persuasive. Pleasant

words are like a honeycomb that add sweetness to the soul and health to the body. In other words, words matter. They determine whether our lives are sweet like a honeycomb or bitter like brussels sprouts.

This truth about the importance of words has two applications for Christians. First, it reminds us that it is important how we hear the words of our gospel. If we hear them only as a list of “oughts” and “shoulds,” we will become somber, discouraged religionists. But if we hear these words as the announcement of our freedom in Christ, we will become free and joyful people, celebrating incredibly good news.

It’s sad that Christians sometimes forget this good news and instead live and teach something that sounds like bad news. The best news ever proclaimed on planet earth somehow comes out as dry, dusty doctrine that no one wants to touch with a ten-foot pole. I fear that the modern church has so garbled the good news that most people now think of Christianity as the boring memorization of a set of religious rules. We have succeeded in making the Christian life a somber march instead of a joyful dance.

So when we hear the writer of Proverbs talk about words being like a honeycomb, we can remember that the words we hear in our gospel are precisely that and that sweeter words have never been spoken.

Second, this passage can also remind us that it is important how we speak to others. Are the words we speak typically sweet or bitter? Do we build people up or tear people down?

As children, we sometimes chanted, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Even as we said it, though, we knew it wasn’t true. Words can hurt us—even more than sticks and stones. When we hiss our anger or scream our rage at someone, we unleash an explosive force that can inflict untold damage. “Those were just words,” we say in an attempt to rationalize one of our verbal explosions. But when we say that, we are being naïve. Words can wound and even kill.

The people of the Old Testament thought of words as arrows that could never be retrieved once loosed into the air. And like arrows, words have the power to wound and even kill. So be very, very careful, they cautioned, before speaking a word. Our words can either help or hurt. Either way, they are extremely powerful.

The writer of Proverbs leads us to think of words as a honeycomb. Both in the words we hear in our gospel and in the words we speak to the people around us, we can use those words to “give sweetness to the soul and health to the body” (v. 24).

A Cheerful Heart Is a Good Medicine

In Proverbs 17:22, the writer of Proverbs wants us to know that “a cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.” Something life-giving and vibrant is unleashed within us when we have a cheerful heart, and something life-draining and destructive is unleashed when we don’t. Our emotional and spiritual health invariably affect our physical health.

Years ago, Norman Cousins wrote a fascinating book titled *Anatomy of an Illness* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979) in which he detailed his recovery from a serious disease. He decided to take his recuperation into his own hands and tried something medically heretical. He shunned ordinary treatment and opted instead for big doses of vitamins and regular times of laughter. Every day he watched funny movies that made him laugh. An unexpected thing happened: he made remarkable progress!

Tests were run “before laughter” and “after laughter,” and they always showed a marked improvement following Cousins’s gleeful sessions at the movies. He became convinced that laughter was literally releasing a healing potion into his body and that it was a key factor in his recovery.

We shouldn’t shun medical advice and rely solely on self-healing, but even so, I suspect that Cousins was on to something. I think there is power in laughter, that the writer of Proverbs was on target when he said that a cheerful spirit is like a good medicine. Positive emotions make for healthy bodies, and negative emotions make for sick bodies. Modern medicine is now acknowledging that truth.

As a corollary to this truth, Christians need to make sure that church is a place where people can come to get well. A famous poet went to church one Sunday and wrote in his journal, “Wonder of wonders! I have been to church today and am not depressed.” Sadly, church is sometimes a place that depresses us and makes us sick, a place filled with tension and divisiveness. But it can be a place where people come to laugh, experience grace, and be welcomed with open arms. May it be so—in your church and mine.

Conclusion

In his book *Letters to Malcolm* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1963), C. S. Lewis wrote some words that all “serious Christians” need to read:

I know that my tendency to use images like play and dance for the highest things is a stumblingblock to you. You...call it “heartless.” You feel it a brutal mockery of every martyr and every slave.... Dance and

game *are* frivolous, unimportant down here; for “down here” is not their natural place. Here, they are a moment’s rest from the life we were placed here to live. But in this world everything is upside down.... Joy is the serious business of heaven. (92-93)

If Lewis is right and joy really is the serious business of heaven, we shouldn’t be surprised that the Bible has a lot to say about it. Nor should we be surprised that the writer of Proverbs, in offering us his pearls of wisdom about successful living, would have something to say about the blessings of a cheerful heart and about hearing and speaking pleasant words. Proverbs is a collection of wise, witty sayings about the good life, and the good life certainly has joy in it.

In fact, for most of us, joy is the one essential ingredient in the good life. We know we can live the good life without money, fame, pleasure, or achievement, but we cannot live it without joy.

Joy, it turns out, is not only the serious business of heaven. It is also the serious business of our individual lives.

God, you know that we all yearn for joy, but we aren’t always good at finding it. We often look for joy in all the wrong places and end up disappointed and disillusioned. Lead us to those truths, people, and experiences that will give us what the writer of Proverbs calls a cheerful heart. We pray this in the name of the one who came to give us life more abundant, Jesus Christ. Amen.



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LAUGHTER AND SORROW

Ecclesiastes 7:1-6

Introduction

The writer of Ecclesiastes, often referred to as the Preacher, has earned a justifiable reputation as a cynic. The recurring phrase in Ecclesiastes is “All is vanity” (see Eccl 1:2, 14; 2:1, 11, 15). That’s not exactly the power of positive thinking, is it?

The Preacher seems to be the kind of person who, if you tell him what a nice day it is, will tell you that a storm is on the way. If you ask him how he feels, he will tell you he’s okay for now, but his ulcer could start acting up at any moment.

And if you tell him that you are studying about humor in the Bible, he will tell you that “Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad” (7:3). He goes on to add, “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth” (v. 4). In other words, he will pour cold water on all the things the writer of Proverbs told us last week about having a cheerful heart.

Perhaps because of this cynicism, the Preacher is typically ignored in today’s church. We have enough cynicism within and around us as it is. We don’t want to read his jaded words, lest we sink even deeper into the darkness. It’s probably been a while since any of us heard a sermon from Ecclesiastes.

One person who did not ignore the Preacher was a fourth-century saint named Gregory of Nyssa. He delivered a series of sermons on Ecclesiastes that have come down to us through the centuries and can still be read today. He begins his series by saying that the book requires much labor in interpretation but that much benefit can be obtained from it. In other words, we can find truth in what the Preacher says, but we’ll have to work hard to find it.

This week we strive to interpret the first six verses of Ecclesiastes 7, which seem to be odd verses for a study of humor in the Bible. These verses counsel us to avoid “the house of feasting” and “the laughter of fools.” They imply that mourning, not merriment, should be our goal. The heading over these verses in my Bible is “A Disillusioned View of Life,” and I think that pretty well sums them up.

But the word “disillusionment” is not necessarily negative. The best way to find true joy is to get rid of our illusions. Perhaps we can approach these verses this week by asking the question, “What illusions do I need to get rid of so that I can live more abundantly?” Three phrases from this passage can shed light on that question.

The House of Mourning

In verse 2, the Preacher says, “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting.” Then in verse 4 he says, “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning.” People in the Preacher’s day knew exactly what he was describing. At news of a death, they would tear their garments, cut their hair, throw dust on their heads, and sit on the ground for days. The house of mourning was not a fun place to visit, then or now.

In his book *Against the Grain* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2005), Ray Waddle describes what the house of mourning feels like for us today:

The house of mourning is where you sit and wait without glancing at your watch, because the hours no longer matter. You plan nothing, you take control of nothing—not time, not your schedule. Your head swims. Grief, relief, exhaustion all keep returning, doubling back all at once. After a while, you think you are over it. No. The rambunctious emotions fly hidden in the clouds, then dive-bomb from a dozen directions. (99)

We’ve all spent time in the house of mourning, and, frankly, we have no desire to go there again. What on earth is the Preacher thinking to say that the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting? We’ve been to both places, and we’ll take the house of feasting every time. The Preacher is either a masochist, wanting to inflict pain upon himself, or he knows something we don’t about suffering and grief.

Or maybe we do know the truths that suffering and grief can teach us. After we have been in the house of mourning for a while, some unexpected gifts descend upon us. We find a surprising strength, what the Apostle Paul refers to as “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” (Phil 4:7). We also gain new clarity about the things that matter. Sitting in the house of mourning reminds us that only the good stuff matters: good books, good work, good relationships, good fun, good times with family and friends. In the house of darkness, we start to see very clearly how frivolous and useless most human pursuits really are.

In that sense, maybe the Preacher’s words make sense. We can learn truths in the house of mourning that we can’t learn in the house of

feasting. And, ironically, the truths we learn in the darkness can teach us about living in the light.

Waddle goes on to write:

You don't move permanently into the house of mourning. You rent space there. It contains one room, cavelike, unplugged, and that's where work gets done.... The house of mourning is a school of adulthood, the place to plot the next steps ahead, with the wind of the ancestors pushing from behind. Moving on will mean moving out of the house of mourning but always carrying something of it with me. (99–100)

We would be foolish to want to visit the house of mourning. But we would also be foolish not to learn the lessons it can teach us.

The Rebuke of the Wise

Not only does the Preacher say that it is better to go the house of mourning than to the house of feasting; he also says, "It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools" (Eccl 7:5). Most normal people are not happy about being rebuked, but the Preacher is not a normal person. He would rather endure the rebuke of a wise person than to receive the praise of a fool.

Most of us can't honestly say that. A rebuke implies that we might be wrong about something, and we simply don't want to admit that. If the hardest words to utter are "I'm sorry," the second hardest must be "I was wrong." Occasionally, I have had to say those painful words to my wife Sherry, and I sometimes then say, "I think I was wrong one time before, back in 1975." It's a joke, of course. Or is it?

Not only does being rebuked imply that we might be wrong about something; it also implies that someone—the rebuker—is superior to us. Very few people are good at rebuking someone else. Rebukers typically come across as condescending and condemning. Often, we respond more to the spirit of their rebuke than to the rebuke itself.

It is painful to acknowledge that some people know more than we know and are further along the journey than we are. If we really think about it, though, we should thank God that there are knowledgeable people—doctors, dentists, financial advisors, spiritual counselors, lawyers, and others—who can rebuke us at times and point us in a better direction. It is foolish to think we are experts in all areas of life, and a little humility is a sure sign of wisdom.

The Laughter of Fools

A recurring word in this passage is “fools.” The preacher writes about “the heart of fools” (v. 4), “the song of fools,” (v. 5), and “the laughter of fools” (v. 6). You get the impression as you read Ecclesiastes that the Preacher doesn’t suffer fools gladly. It’s no surprise to hear him castigating fools in these verses.

In fact, the reason the Preacher comes across as so negative and cynical in Ecclesiastes is because he sees so much foolishness around him. There was a famous country song titled “Looking for Love” where the singer lamented the fact that he had been looking for love in all the wrong places. When the Preacher looked around him, he saw a nation of people looking for love, God, meaning, and joy in all the wrong places. The words he used to describe their futile search were “vanity” and “foolish.”

He saw people looking for ultimate satisfaction in things like wine, work, sex, and money and knew those people were destined for frustration. Those people were fools, he said in no uncertain terms; they were looking for love—and every other good thing—in all the wrong places. They were investing their lives in futile pursuits and chasing fool’s gold.

In this sense, the Preacher is a forerunner of Jesus, who later addressed these same issues. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (Mt 6:25).

He goes on to tell his listeners to look at the birds of the air and the lilies of the field and notice how God takes care of them. If God takes care of birds and lilies, won’t God also take care of them? Therefore, Jesus says, don’t worry about material things, but seek first the kingdom of God. Those words echo the sentiments of the Preacher, and Jesus joins him in telling the people in his generation that they were looking for love in all the wrong places.

When people spend their lives pursuing temporal treasures, both Jesus and the Preacher would call them fools. Those people might have good times, drink fine wine, and live in expensive houses. They might even have parties where everyone breaks out in riotous laughter. But both Jesus and the Preacher would hear that laughter for what it truly is: the laughter of fools.

Conclusion

There are two ways of approaching the book of Ecclesiastes. One way is to see it as an ancient book written by a grumpy naysayer who wants to rain on everyone's parade. Even if we don't feel the freedom to say such a thing publicly about a book of the Bible, we might feel that way privately. That might explain why the church today tends to avoid Ecclesiastes like the plague.

The other way to approach the book is to see it as one writer's attempt to be honest, to dispense with pious platitudes and tell the truth. Those who take this view see the Preacher's cynicism as an honest attempt to impart wisdom. He might be disillusioned, but it is the kind of disillusionment that, ironically, can lead to joy.

If we could go to the house of mourning and honestly face our own mortality, wouldn't that, in the long run, makes us happier, more confident people? If we bore the rebuke of the wise, wouldn't that put us on a truer path and take us closer to a life of joy? And if we heard the laughter of fools, wouldn't that show us the futility of so many of our modern pursuits? Wouldn't the laughter of fools make us want to try another path, one that would take us to deeper joy?

If we are willing to take this second view of the book of Ecclesiastes, we can understand why we would study it in a unit on humor in the Bible. As incongruous as that seems at first, the Preacher's disillusioning words might help us get rid of some illusions that are keeping us from true joy.

Like the Preacher, we want to have an honest faith, God. We're weary of pious platitudes and easy answers. We want a faith strong enough to withstand the storms of life that we will have to face. Lead us to truth so that we might laugh the laughter of the wise. Amen.

MOURNING INTO JOY

Psalms 30; 126

Introduction

In 1934, Admiral Richard Byrd wanted to establish a weather station deep in the Antarctic, near the South Pole. A team of hardy men was supposed to occupy a Boston-built hut there, but the team disintegrated, leaving Admiral Byrd to settle into the hut alone. He stayed there four and a half months as temperatures outside dipped to 83 degrees below zero.

It was a dark, cold, quiet, and lonely vigil, the kind of experience most people could not endure. When Admiral Byrd came out of his frozen cocoon, people were eager to hear what he had to say. Early on, he said, he felt lost and depressed. But then he settled in and adjusted to the solitude. “My thoughts seem to come together more smoothly than ever before,” he said. “I am better able to tell what in the world is wheat for me and what is chaff.”

Both of the psalms we look at this week are reports from people who have sat in the darkness awhile. Psalm 30 is a psalm of David that comes out of a dark, depressing time in his life. He writes of God lifting him out of the depths, of weeping in the night, of mourning and sitting in sackcloth. David was obviously in an emotional and spiritual tailspin when he wrote Psalm 30.

Psalm 126 is one of the “psalms of ascent” (Pss 120–34) that the Israelites sang as they journeyed to their religious festivals in Jerusalem. Written by an unknown psalmist, it too implies a time of suffering and darkness but celebrates the fact that God has delivered the people of Israel from those times. Their tears have been turned into joy, so they will sing of the amazing transformation that has taken place in their national psyche as they march together to Jerusalem.

Both Psalm 30 and Psalm 126 are statements of gratitude and celebration for the ways God turned wails of weeping into shouts of joy. People of faith have been reading these two psalms for a long time and letting them bring light into their own darkness. Studying these passages this week gives us an opportunity to remember the times when our own mourning has been turned into dancing.

Doing and Being

One of the disappointing things about both of these psalms is their silence about exactly how the psalmist moved from mourning to joy. David tells us that his weeping has turned to joy, but he doesn't spell out how that happened for him. The unnamed writer of Psalm 126 tells us that Israel's mouth was filled with laughter and its tongue with shouts of joy, but he doesn't give us the specific steps Israel took to make that transformation happen.

We wish for something more definite, like "Three Steps to Joy in the Morning" or "Five Foolproof Remedies for Defeating Darkness." What we want is a plan, a strategy for banishing tears and conjuring laughter. We want a checklist of changes we can make so that we can become more joyful people.

But neither psalm gives us the plan we desire. They are both more passive than we want them to be. The phrases they use to describe their transformation make God the subject of the action: "God brought me up," "God has turned my mourning into dancing," "the LORD restored the fortunes to Zion," "the LORD has done great things," and so forth.

There is no plan for constructing a victorious life in either psalm, just a willingness to wait on God and to be grateful to God. Neither psalm spells out what we have to do to achieve joy, but they both celebrate the fact that God will give us the joy we crave if only we will wait upon God.

In that sense, both Psalm 30 and Psalm 126 are in the spirit of Isaiah 40:31: "Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." If we will patiently wait upon God, Isaiah promises, our strength and joy will be renewed. Our mourning will eventually be turned into dancing. But it won't be because *we* did something; it will be because *God* did something.

Those psalms are also in the spirit of Paul's counsel in Romans 5:3-5, where he says that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given us." That entire progression begins with waiting—with endurance. The other traits will come in time, but the progression depends on a willingness to wait, to sit awhile in the darkness.

I'm not sure that sounds like good news to most of us. In fact, it might sound like bad news because our joy is not in our hands but in God's. We like to make things happen. Words like "earn," "buy," "sell,"

“work,” and “climb” appeal to us as we think of building our lives. We like to be proactive and want to make something of ourselves.

But waiting is not a matter of doing; it’s a matter of being. Words like “stop,” “sit,” “pray,” “watch,” “listen,” and “trust” are the operative words in a life that waits upon God. According to the psalmists, Isaiah, and Paul, if we come alive and experience joy, it won’t be because of anything we do. It will be because of something God does in us.

These biblical writers are suggesting to us that, as we wait upon God, we will change. Like Admiral Byrd sitting in the darkness of the South Pole, we will learn what is wheat and what is chaff in our lives. In our waiting, listening, trusting mode, we will learn what it takes to live a life of joy. We will discover that our strategy for joy is unique and personal, not some mass-produced formula for happiness. The Spirit will tell us to *be* something, not to *do* something.

As we wait upon God, our tears will turn into laughter and our mourning will turn into dancing.

Memory and Expectancy

Though they don’t spell out foolproof formulas for finding joy, Psalms 30 and 126 do give us two tools that can help us. Both psalmists use memory and expectancy in their hymns of gratitude. These two qualities are key components in any life of joy.

First, there is *memory*. David remembers times in the past when his enemies didn’t rejoice over him, when he cried to God for help and God delivered him, when he boasted “I shall never be moved,” and when his mourning was turned into joy. In Psalm 30, David shares some of the experiences he has in his memory, and he uses these memories to find hope as he thinks about his future.

The first three verses in Psalm 126 do the same thing. The psalmist looks back at a time “when the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,” a time when “our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” Even other nations noticed how blessed the people of Israel were and how God was doing great things for them.

That shouldn’t surprise us because most of us know from personal experience that hope and joy live out of memory. That’s why we take so many pictures and like to reflect so much about past events. When we look at those pictures and remember the people and events in our past, we remind ourselves of who we are and where we’ve come from. Our memories, both good and bad, have made us who we are. Those memories are a source of much of our joy.

Sherry and I recently celebrated a significant wedding anniversary. As part of our celebration, we got our wedding pictures out of the closet and took a walk down memory lane. We remembered parents and grandparents who have been gone from us for a long time. We remembered friends we haven't seen in ages and other friends who have aged as much as we have. Mostly, we relived the excitement of our wedding day and reminded ourselves how blessed our lives have been. Like the psalmists, we used memory as a tool for building joy.

Second, there is *expectancy*. Today's psalms are also filled with excitement about the future. Armed with his memories of how God has rescued him in the past, David is filled with hope. You get the feeling as you read Psalm 30 that David can hardly wait for tomorrow to see what new thing God will do for him. David ends the psalm by exulting, "O LORD, I will give thanks for you forever." Needless to say, David faced his future with eager expectation.

The writer of Psalm 126 is as exuberant about the future as David was. After remembering how God had blessed the people of Israel in the past, he looks forward to what God will do for them in the future. The psalm ends with this ringing endorsement of the future: "Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves" (v. 6). The future is bright for Israel, and the psalmist brims with optimism.

Expectancy is always a key ingredient in a life of joy. No less an authority than Charlie Brown, in the comic strip "Peanuts," once observed that happiness is having three things to look forward to and nothing to dread. I think Charlie Brown might be right. If we can build things to look forward to into our busy schedules, we will be taking a giant step toward joy.

Those three things to look forward to don't necessarily have to be big things, either. In fact, joy is typically the result of a bunch of small things we do that put expectancy into our lives. A cup of coffee and the newspaper every morning. Thursday night supper at our favorite restaurant. Always having a good book by the bedside. Tending the tomatoes in the backyard garden. We each have our unique three things to look forward to, and those small, seemingly insignificant traditions are crucial to our joy.

Those two qualities, memory and expectancy, are part and parcel of both of our psalms this week. The psalmists remembered what God had done for them in the past and used those memories to face the future

with great expectancy. As we wait upon God and try to sort the wheat from the chaff in our lives, those two tools can still help lead us to joy.

Conclusion

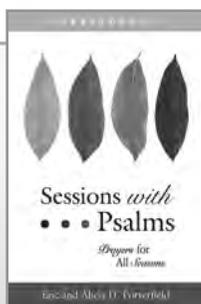
Psalms 30 and Psalm 126 are psalms of joy. They invite us to look at our lives and see how much joy is there. They challenge us to wait upon God and let God turn our mourning into dancing.

Years ago, there was a popular song that would be an appropriate theme song for these two psalms. The words go:

I hope you never lose your sense of wonder.
 You get your fill to eat but never lose that hunger.
 May you never take one single breath for granted.
 God forbid love ever leaves you empty handed.
 I hope you still feel small when you stand beside the ocean.
 When one door closes, I hope one more opens.
 Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting chance.
 And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance,
 I hope you dance. I hope you dance. (Mark Sanders and Tia Sillers,
 "I Hope You Dance" [Nashville: MCA Records, 2000])

Wouldn't it be fine if we came to the end of our lives, and it could truthfully be said of us, "He kept the faith," "She never quit loving us," "He always bounced back," "Through all of the ups and downs of life, she kept dancing"?

As we have read these psalms, God, we have been reminded of times when tears became laughter and mourning was turned into dancing. Thank you for your faithfulness to us all of our days. Amen.



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GOD HAS BROUGHT ME LAUGHTER

Genesis 17:15-17; 18:9-15; 21:1-8

Introduction

We have three passages from Genesis this week, all focusing on the surprising announcement that Abraham and Sarah would have a son. That in itself is not particularly newsworthy. But to discover that Abraham is a hundred years old and Sarah is ninety makes the birth announcement newsworthy indeed.

A recurring word in all three passages is the word “laughter.” In Genesis 17, Abraham falls on his face laughing at the thought that he and Sarah could possibly have a baby. Would Sarah have their child in the maternity ward or the geriatric ward? It all seemed hilariously ludicrous.

In Genesis 18, the laughter continues. Sarah overhears Abraham talking to three mysterious men in a tent, and one of them tells Abraham that Sarah will soon give birth to a son. Sarah can’t help but laugh at the thought of such a thing. Later, she denies laughing at the news she heard, but she is assured, “Oh yes, you did laugh” (v. 15).

Finally, in Genesis 21, the birth of the baby takes place. Not surprisingly, they name him Isaac, which means “laughter.” After the birth, Sarah says, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me” (v. 6).

These passages give rise to some interesting questions for us to consider. How do we respond when life throws us unexpected twists and turns? Do we laugh or cry? Are we embarrassed by our laughter like Sarah was? Or do we need to laugh more than we do? And finally, can we, like Abraham and Sarah, declare ourselves to be blessed beyond measure? And then laugh in joy for all of our blessings?

The Twists and Turns of Life

I think it is fair to say that everyone gets surprised by life. Abraham and Sarah’s surprise at the announcement in Genesis 17 that they will have a son is just the way life works. Sometimes life’s twists and turns are positive, and we are surprised by joy. And sometimes the twists and turns are negative, and we are surprised by tragedy or grief. No one goes from cradle to grave without experiencing these surprises. We all eventually have to deal with some kind of “Plan B.”

When we look at the ministry of Jesus, one of the things that stands out about it is how unpredictable it was. It seems Jesus never knew from day to day who or what he would encounter. Some days were filled with delightful things: laughing with children, telling stories to rapt listeners, eating with friends, healing sick people, or escaping to be alone and think and pray. But some days were filled with frustrating things: dealing with disciples who couldn't comprehend his message, fending off the attacks of the scribes and Pharisees, walking for miles in sweltering heat, or, at the end, facing an unjust death on a cruel cross.

Evidently, Jesus got up every morning not knowing who or what he would have to face but determined to be faithful to God in all situations. His message at the end of the Sermon on the Mount could have been his own motto for life. He tells the story of two houses, one built on rock and one built on sand. When the inevitable storm comes, one house stands and the other collapses. Same storm but different foundations. Jesus must have faced the world every day not knowing what storm was brewing but, at the same time, confident that his foundation was secure.

There is a story told about Francis of Assisi that I hope is true. The story goes that a band of robbers fell upon him as he journeyed through the woods and robbed him of his meager possessions. Imagine their surprise when they released him and heard him go singing through the snow.

What those robbers didn't know was that Francis's real treasure was untouchable. They could take his coat and coins, but his trust in God and his experience of grace were eternally locked in his heart. When you have that kind of treasure, you can sing no matter what happens. And when you have that kind of foundation under your life, you can withstand any storm that might come.

Without a doubt, the storms will come. And without a doubt, so will the serendipities that surprise us with joy—like what Abraham and Sarah experienced in Genesis 17. But through all the twists and turns we face, if our foundation is secure, we will survive both the good and the bad.

We will also spend a good bit of time laughing.

Afraid to Laugh

In Genesis 18, there is a strange sidelight to this story. After hearing the conversation between Abraham and the three visitors about her coming pregnancy, Sarah breaks out laughing. But when asked later if she laughed, she denies it. She doesn't want anyone to know she was laughing

because “she was afraid” (v. 15). We have to wonder, though, afraid of what? What made her afraid to admit she had been overcome with joy?

The passage doesn’t really give us the answer to that question, but Sarah’s fear of laughter makes her the patron saint of all of us who should laugh more than we do, those of us who tend to be uptight, serious Christians. Many of us can relate to the unnamed monk in Nebraska quoted by John Killinger in his book *Bread for the Wilderness, Wine for the Journey* (Waco: Word, 1976):

If I had to live my life over, I’d try to make more mistakes next time. I would relax, limber up. I would be sillier than I was this trip. I know of very few things I would take seriously. I would be less hygienic. I would take more chances. I would take more trips. I would climb more mountains, swim more rivers, and watch more sunsets. I would eat more ice cream. I would have more actual troubles and fewer imaginary ones.

You see, I am one of those people who lives prophylactically and sensibly and sanely, hour after hour, day after day. Oh, I have had my moments and, if I had it to do over again, I’d have nothing else. Just moments, one after another, instead of living so many years ahead of each day. I have been one of those people who have never gone anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a gargle, a raincoat, and a parachute. If I had to do it over again, I would go places and do things and travel lighter than I have.

If I had my life to live over again, I would start barefooted earlier in the spring and stay that way later in the fall. I would play hooky more. I wouldn’t make such good grades except by accident. I would ride on more merry go-rounds. I would pick more daisies. (69)

That unnamed monk speaks for many of us, I think, who have made our faith into something somber, serious, and sad: those of us who, like Sarah in Genesis 18, are afraid to laugh. Maybe it’s time to loosen up, lighten up, and let grace run rampant in our lives.

Blessed Beyond Measure

In Genesis 21, the long-awaited baby is born and given the name “Isaac,” which means “laughter.” Sarah says she chose that name because she wants everyone to join her in laughing at the incredible thing God has done. She and Abraham know that they have been blessed beyond measure. They want to spend the rest of their days celebrating this blessing. I have this image of Abraham and Sarah dancing and singing with joyful abandon like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. And every time they see their son “Laughter,” they want to dance and sing some more.

There is an old hymn that invites us to count our many blessings, to name them one by one. For most of us, that would be an impossible task. We have so many blessings in our lives that we couldn't possibly count them all. When we take stock of our lives, we realize that the positive twists and turns far outnumber the negative ones. And even the negative ones have become fodder for joy because, with God's help, we survived them and learned with Paul that we can do all things through Christ who gives us strength (Phil 4:13).

So, shouldn't we join Abraham and Sarah in singing and dancing for joy? There is another old hymn titled "Marching to Zion." In light of our many blessings, let's rename it "Dancing to Zion" and sing it at the top of our lungs. The Christian pilgrimage is not a march; it is a dance. And discipleship is the art of learning how to kick up our heels and dance for joy.

In his book *Between Noon and Three* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), Robert Capon wrote some words that all of us "serious Christians" need to hear:

Indeed, grace is the celebration of life, relentlessly hounding all the noncelebrants of the world. It is a floating, cosmic bash shouting its way through the streets of the universe, flinging the sweetness of its cassations to every window, pounding at every door in a hilarity beyond all liking and happening, until the prodigals come out at last and dance and the elder brothers finally take their fingers out of their ears. (73-74)

It's time for all the prodigals to dance and all the elder brothers to take their fingers out of their ears. It's time to live as if the good news is truly good.

Conclusion

In *The Downward Ascent* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979), Edna Hong writes, "The Word sometimes tolls like a funeral bell in my mind and sometimes does a ragtime jig" (17). That's true, isn't it? The Bible sometimes sounds like a funeral bell, enumerating our sins, calling us to repent, showing us an angry God, and pronouncing judgment on our false gods. Very few people think of the Bible as lighthearted, "feel-good" reading because in many places it is not.

But we do need to remember that the Bible is also a ragtime jig, filled with parties, offers of divine forgiveness, babies being born to senior adults, delightful parables, and, finally, an empty tomb. There is a reason

we call the message about Jesus “the gospel.” At its heart, it really is good news.

I once had a book in my personal library with an interesting title: *Jesus Makes Me Laugh* (David A. Redding [Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1977]). I bought that book, I think, because I needed to laugh more myself, to join Abraham and Sarah in making merry. But I also bought that book because I had never really thought of Jesus as someone who could make me laugh.

I grew up as a “serious Christian,” checking every box on my offering envelope to prove I was a 100 percent follower of Jesus. When I thought of the things Jesus might make me do, laughing was never on the list. Jesus might make me pray, witness, worship, serve, study, preach, give, or repent. But laugh? I never thought of Jesus as someone who might make me do that.

The older I’ve gotten, though, the more I’ve realized that laughter might be the truest indicator of my relationship with Jesus. Certainly, all of those other things on the list are important and necessary. No doubt, Jesus does want me to pray, witness, worship, serve, study, preach, give, and repent.

But lately I’ve added another spiritual discipline to that lengthy list: Jesus also wants me to laugh. The more I can do that, the deeper my faith and the more convincing my witness will become.

Thank you, God, for the good news of the gospel. Forgive us when we turn it into something heavy, serious, and forbidding. Today we join Abraham and Sarah in laughing at the incredible good news we have received. Amen.

FORMATIONS

SCOPE AND SEQUENCE FOR SEPT-DEC 2020

Parables in Luke

- Sept 6 *The Man in the Ditch* Luke 10:25-37
Sept 13 *The Guest List* Luke 14:15-24
Sept 20 *Two Frantic Searchers* Luke 15:1-10
Sept 27 *The Persistent Widow* Luke 18:1-8

God's Good Gifts

- Oct 4 *The Earth Is the Lord's* Psalm 24
Oct 11 *Every Perfect Gift* James 1:13-18
Oct 18 *Honor God with Your Substance* Proverbs 3:5-20
Oct 25 *Serve the Lord Christ* Colossians 3:12-17, 23-25

The Ark of the Covenant

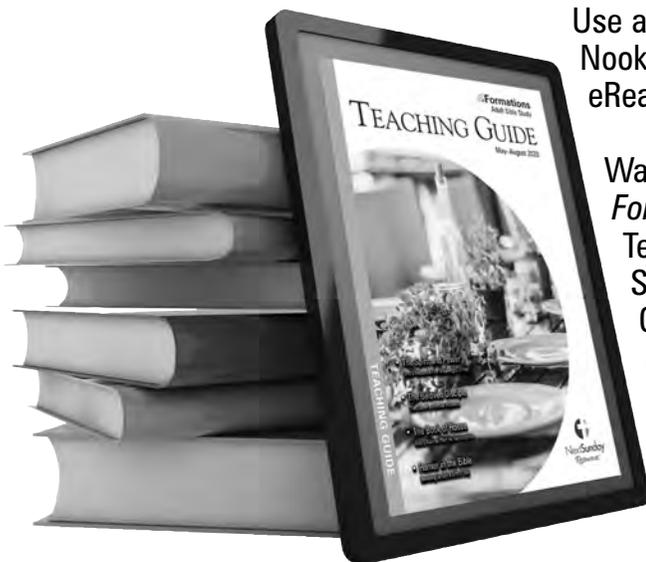
- Nov 1 *Building the Ark* Exodus 25:10-22
Nov 8 *The Glory of God* Exodus 40:16-21, 30-38
Nov 15 *The Day of Atonement* Leviticus 16:2-5, 15-18
Nov 22 *The Ark in Jerusalem* 2 Samuel 6:12b-23

The King Is Coming

- Nov 29 *God Is For You* Ezekiel 36:6-11; Colossians 3:4-11
Dec 6 *Prepare the Way* Malachi 3:1-4; Mark 1:1-8
Dec 13 *Rejoice with Joy and Singing* Isaiah 35:1-2; Philippians 4:4-9
Dec 20 *A Child Has Been Born to Us* Isaiah 9:2-7; Matthew 1:18-25
Dec 27 *Return, O Soul, to Your Rest* Psalm 116; Acts 7:54-8:4

* Titles and Scripture passages are subject to change.

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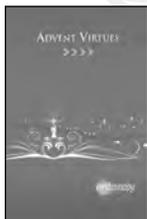
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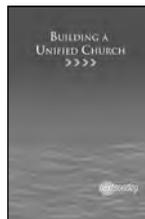
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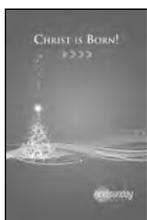
Advent Virtues



The Birthday of a King



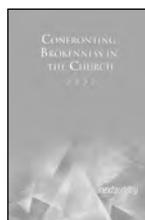
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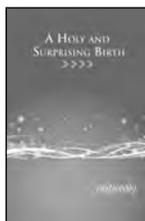
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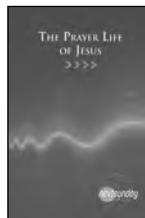
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