

Devotions – March 27 – April 2, 2016

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Sunday, March 27, 2016

Text: Luke 24:25-27

And Jesus said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

Christ is risen; He is risen indeed! Churches throughout the world will be acclaiming the power and truth of the resurrection of our Lord this day. And as well we should! If Jesus Christ has not been raised from the grave, St. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 15:15, “...your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” There’s a lot riding on this resurrection – eternal life and the truth of the Word! A key aspect of being a Christian then is to believe in this historical event that rocked the world, and also believe that it was done for you. And for us personally to better understand why the death and resurrection of the Son of God is so significant, we too need to search and savor the very word of God which pointed to these sacred events.

In Jesus’ first Bible study after the resurrection, he unpacked the Scriptures for Cleopas, his buddy, and later, the disciples. This was to show and prove that the death and resurrection of the Messiah was foretold and promised in the Scriptures, that it wasn’t a fluke. Oh what I wouldn’t give to be there as Jesus “interpreted to them all in the Scriptures...concerning himself”! Just imagine the clarity that was brought to the disciples who *thought* they knew their Bibles; just imagine how indeed those hearts were set ablaze as the meaning of Scriptures unveiled for them!

For many, the Old Testament (what Jesus refers to here as “the Scriptures”) remains too mysterious, too foreign, and so is either ignored or even worse, viewed as insignificant and inconsequential. This is theologically dangerous and an ill-advised viewpoint to have (to say nothing of the early church considering it heretical in the 2nd Century!). Instead, seek for Christ diligently in the Old Testament Scriptures, from Genesis through Malachi, in all of the books of Moses and the prophets. He’s there, waiting to be discovered and when you find him, the Scriptures and God’s plan of redemption will make more and more sense and you too will have your heart warmed by the power of God’s word.

Let us pray: *Heavenly Father, help us to appreciate Your holy word for what it truly is and for what it truly promises. Through Your word, bring us to a deeper love for and devotion to your Son, Jesus our Lord who lived, died, and rose from the grave for us and for our salvation. Amen.*



Monday, March 28, 2016

Text: Acts 7:54-58

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him (Stephen). But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.

Truly preaching the word of God means preaching from the Scriptures, recounting God's deeds of power, recalling God's commands, remembering God's promises. Personal examples and entertaining stories in sermons are okay, but the point of preaching is to preach from the word of God. What is it that the word of God says? That should be our focus in preparing sermons and that should be our focus when listening to sermons. Stephen, the church's first martyr, was killed after preaching a Spirit-filled sermon that was littered with Old Testament quotations and stories, all of which pointed to Israel's rejection of their long waited for and promised Messiah. Their "stiff necks" were preventing them from seeing the beauty of what has been accomplished in Jesus Christ. Israel (not all of the Jews at the time, but quite a few) were missing the point and promises of their own Scriptures. They wouldn't concede that their interpretations were wrong. Though they could see, they were blind to what God was doing right in front of their faces.

All preachers take a risk when opening their mouths for the sake of God's word. Preachers in other countries, like Stephen, have their lives at risk because of what the Lord wants them to say. We should consistently pray for the persecuted church throughout the world. We should also seek to hear and read the word of God even (and especially) when it tells us what we *don't* want to hear. This is why St. Paul, in Romans 1:18, says how the "wrath of God was revealed" – if it wasn't revealed then no one would realize that God's wrath against sin was real. We must remember the word of God is not only meant to bring comfort, joy, and peace (what Luther called the Gospel); but that same word of God is meant to unsettle us, shake us up, convict us (what Luther called the Law), and remind us that He is the Lord of heaven and earth, and we are not.

Let us pray: *Gracious God, you know our secret sins; you know the depths of our hearts. Rescue us from sin, deliver us from the messes we make and find ourselves in. Use Your word to shake us up; use Your word to shower us with your grace and mercy. Amen.*



Tuesday, March 29, 2016

Text: Hebrews 4:12-13

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions

of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

The author of Hebrews, looking at Joshua from the Old Testament, sees the new Joshua, Jesus prophetically promised and anticipated. The rest promised to the Old Testament Joshua and the nation of Israel is only partially fulfilled during that time period. Why? Israel didn't do what God commanded them, but God nevertheless gave Israel the Promised Land. The complete fulfillment of the promised rest will not come to total fruition until the final sacrifice for all sin is made; the sacrifice our Lord Jesus, "our great high priest" (Hebrews 4:14) made for our atonement.

At the end of chapter 4, the author of Hebrews drops this powerful statement on the word of God. The word of God promises, but the word of God also brings judgment; the Word of God is "sharper than any two-edged sword..." The word of God functions in those two ways – bringing life or bringing death. Already mentioned yesterday, Luther and the others reformers termed these uses of God's word as being Law or Gospel and one must be able to distinguish between the two. Why? Because all bad biblical interpretation stems from confusing law and gospel. The author of Hebrews rightly saw the Law and Gospel at work in the story of Joshua and linked that to the story of the new Joshua, Jesus. The Law is the warning of missing out on that rest because of hardness of heart and impenitence – that true warning to Israel is just as true for us today. The long awaited promised rest that was available to Israel pointed towards a much longer, much more restful and eternal reality that is now available through faith in Christ – that's the Gospel promise.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, give rest to our weary souls and awaken our minds and hearts to the power of your promises found in Scripture. Help us to rightly interpret your holy word whenever we are engaged in it. Amen.



Wednesday, March 30, 2016

Text: 2 Timothy 3:14-17

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

The sooner the better! The earlier we have our children in the word the longer they can appreciate the sacred writings. And the longer we ourselves are in the sacred writings, the more we can appreciate the depth and power of the word of God. Biblical literacy doesn't happen overnight. And this is one of the big challenges, ironically, today. In a culture that boasts 99% literacy, we have numerous people who are biblically illiterate. Many of the biblical stories that

we used to think as a given (Noah, Moses, Joshua, Jonah, and Jesus' famous parables to name a few) are no longer given. Increasingly, not only children, but adults do not know the stories – and by extension the teachings – of Scripture. Sadly, there are people in our churches who might not have opened a Bible in years! What's going on?

There are numerous reasons for this for sure, but even more important is this: How do we fix that? In this day and age can it be fixed? Or are we trying to push another “Sisyphean rock” up the hill only to see it fall back down again? Perhaps it is no surprise that the moral authority of the Church (or that the Church thought it had) has waned in tandem with decreasing biblical literacy. Perhaps the “post-modern” mindset of truth being something inside of you, a self-created reality, instead of truth being outside of you is the culprit. Perhaps the emptying of pews over the last 45 years has something to do with brains, hearts, and lives being devoid of the sacred writings of Scripture. If you don't care about the Bible, why go to worship, to church?

For our churches and for we ourselves to be revived and awakened from spiritual stupor we can look no further than the sacred writings themselves. The church Reformers might have been on to something when they peeled back the layers of human tradition and opinions and went back to the Scriptures. These Scriptures – inspired by the Spirit of the living God – are all we need. Faithful, diligent, orthodox interpreters are a most necessary ingredient too!

Let us pray: Gracious God, you have given us Your word for a reason. You have given us the church as a community to interpret the Scriptures in. And You have called pastors to the ministry of the word for the benefit of Your beloved church. Inspire us all with a never ceasing love for Your word so that as we study it, cherish it, imbibe it, our hearts, minds, and lives would be changed too. Amen.



Thursday, March 31, 2016

Text: 2 Peter 3:15-16

“Count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.”

Very early on we have witness to people, or groups of people, in the church who “twist” the Scriptures. Peter here attests to this and Paul himself had to correct a number of misunderstandings that we see in 1 Corinthians. We should state the obvious though: Sometimes the Bible is hard to understand. There are concepts that are hard to grasp; there are meanings of words that may sometime elude us; there is a fair amount of unsaid or assumed background information that is needed to help bring clarity. However, nothing that is easy to attain is worthwhile to strive for, right? There is much to be said about diligently pursuing a goal – in this case, studying and knowing the Scriptures. A prayerful and focused study of the word of God

will never be unprofitable; a consistent mining of the depths and riches of Scripture will never go unrewarded.

It also must be said that the main message of the Bible is very easy to grasp. The three creeds of the Church do such a thing; they crystallize the core message of the Bible in a simple, intelligible, and memorable way: God creates, saves, and sanctifies. The work and the person of the eternal Son of God that became flesh in Jesus Christ “in the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4), is the thread that weaves all the Scriptures together. This is why the creeds devote so much space and wording to Jesus. You get Jesus wrong, you get the Bible wrong. But if you get the Bible wrong, you’ll inevitably get Jesus wrong too.

Let us pray: God of mercy, You have called out to us through Your word. Help us to listen and to understand. Strengthen our wavering faith. Increase our wisdom of Your will and Your ways. Help us to prioritize our lives so that we give due time and focus to the sacred Scriptures. Amen.



Friday, April 1, 2016

Text: Romans 15:4

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

Some of the greatest gifts that the Scriptures provide for us are examples: Examples of faith and failures, examples obedience and obliqueness, examples of holiness and hubris. Part of the beauty of the Bible is that it doesn’t sugar coat things. It tells it like it is. Peter was just as much a betrayer as Judas; Paul was a persecutor; Jonah was a reluctant, complaining prophet; Samson, David, and Solomon all had a weakness for the ladies; Moses was a great leader, yet far from perfect; the nation of Israel was the apple of God’s eye yet also the foremost recipient of God’s judgment. All sorts of examples are provided for us in Scripture. As Paul says above, “...whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction.”

The examples in Scripture can be essentially be divided into two categories: Spiritual and moral. Spiritual examples show how someone did or did not honor the Lord, breaking commandments 1 through 3. A spiritual example might include Moses or Jonah’s reluctance to do what God tells them to do, to lead God’s people and to preach repentance. Included in that list might be Israel’s Golden Calf and the idolatry which ensued, Israel’s trust issues with God in the wilderness, Gideon’s demand for signs from God, and Elisha’s use (and abuse) of his prophetic powers. Moral examples show repentance for sin and, of course, what *not* to do when someone breaks commandments 4 through 10. Famous examples include David and Bathsheba, Samson and Delilah, Ahab and Jezebel, the Rich Man and Lazarus, and so on. However, most often spiritual and moral examples are so tightly interwoven that it’s impossible to say which came first, the spiritual or the moral failure. In regards to spiritual or moral success though, *that* is always attributed to God.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, in the midst of our chaotic and messy lives we pray that You would bring order. Help us to discern Your holy will in all things. Help us to live according to Your ways. Purge the darkness and pride from our hearts so that Your light would heal us and help us to live humbly. Amen



Saturday, April 2, 2016

Text: John 17:14-19

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

The final part of Jesus' farewell address to his disciples in John 17 concerns the word, the holy power of it, and the truth that it is. It is Jesus' prayer for the disciples – and by extension the church – to remain in his word, the word that he received from the Father. As Christians, as the Church, there is nothing we can do to improve on in God's word. All that needs to be known has been revealed. Nothing else needs to be added to it; nothing needs to be taken away from it. It is enough.

But is it enough? Is what God has clearly said in Scripture, and in these last days through His Son (Hebrews 1:2), enough? Heresies of all types have stemmed from people thinking what God has said and done as recorded in Scripture is not enough. Islam – and it's more modern (and very American) cousin, Mormonism – have said no, another revelation must be added. Enthusiasts of all stripes – whether Christian, or quasi-Christian, or non-Christian – have claimed secret or hidden or previously unknown knowledge that God has revealed apart from what's been recorded in Scripture. After all, God couldn't possibly have stopped speaking, right?

All these attempts to add something else to Scripture is an affront to the truth God has already and clearly laid out. God continues to speak, this is for sure, through Scripture and through the preached Word. But the Lord never wearies of teaching and preaching the same thing over and over again. Truth never gets old and if it's true, it cannot be improved upon. Like a child reading their favorite Dr. Seuss book unceasingly, so the Lord teaches nothing new or different that is not in Scripture.

We could also connect this to the awesome gift of Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion. Christ tells us to celebrate and so we do. He says he is present in, with, and under the bread and wine; we believe his word and don't philosophically try to go beyond the clear words of Scripture, "This is my body..." And every week, in many congregations, you receive the same gift over and over and over: His own body and blood in the bread and wine for the forgiveness of you sin. What else could you possibly need?

Let us pray: Lord God, help us to be more than pleased and content with what You have revealed to us already in sacred Scripture. All that we need to know about how to live a faithful and faith-filled life is recorded there, but more importantly, Your unceasing mercy and divine promises fulfilled in Jesus Christ never cease to be old, but are always new, are always for me. Amen.

