

Devotions – September 23-29, 2018

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Sunday, September 23, 2018

Text: Jeremiah 11:6

And the Lord said to me: Proclaim all these words in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem: Hear the words of this covenant and do them.

Have you ever been in a situation where you felt like you were about to burst? You had so much to say, you could hardly hold it in. Now that's a good feeling when it's time for good news, or an exciting announcement.

But what if it's not something good? What then? I'm sure Jeremiah was wondering this when God gave him these instructions. You see, the people had once again forsaken God's covenant and Jeremiah had been tasked with reminding them just what that would mean for them. To say the least, it wasn't exactly what I would call good news. But it did, in fact, contain a promise. Although the people had forsaken God; God didn't forsake them. God was ready to once again call them God's people and fulfill the promise made to their ancestors so long ago. A harsh announcement to be sure, but one the people needed to hear—especially the part about God's promise.

We may not have the job of Jeremiah and I don't think we would really want it. But we do have a job that should fill us with enough excitement that we would simply burst if we don't do something about it. God has called us to be messengers too; to proclaim the words of God and the new covenant that we have received through Christ Jesus; to proclaim God's love not just for a particular group of people, but for the whole world.

Now that's a message worth sharing. Now go share it before you burst!

Let us pray: *Holy God, when it comes to sharing your message of love, perhaps the psalmist said it best as we ask that the words of our mouths and the thoughts and meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you. And may they inspire others as you have inspired us. Amen.*



Monday, September 24, 2018

Text: 2 Kings 5:10-13

¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.”¹¹ But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, “I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!¹² Are not Abana and Parpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?” He turned and went away in a rage.¹³ But his servants approached and said to him, “Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean’?”

We like a challenge from time to time, don't we? After all, we've always been told that iron sharpens iron; and of course, when the going gets tough, the tough get going! But what makes some things a challenge and other things not so much?

Is it our skills? Maybe. Is it our readiness? Possibly. Is it our attitude? Oh ya! You betcha! And that seems to be what's happening to Naaman. He had the skill and the readiness to handle just about anything, but not the attitude. He expected others to react to his presence and do for him in ways worthy of someone of his standing.

So when Elisha gave him such a simple thing to do, his attitude couldn't handle it. He couldn't see the challenge for what it truly was. Was the challenge to go wash in the Jordan? No; but Naaman thought it was. The challenge that Naaman missed was to believe that through something as insignificant (at least to Naaman) as the Jordan river, God would heal him. And if not for the faith of a servant with the courage to approach this great man, Naaman might never have experienced God's healing power.

We have also been given a challenge—love our neighbors as ourselves. Now you may think that this is too easy to be a real challenge. After all, we need to change the whole world! We need more and bigger programs! We need armies of disciples! Now that's a challenge worthy of our faith!

But have you really tried loving your neighbor as yourself? When you remember that they are all flawed, sinful human beings just like the rest of us, you may find that it's not quite as easy as you thought.

So what do we do with such a challenge? Perhaps we should do a Naaman and take on this challenge. After all, isn't the Holy Spirit encouraging us much like that faithful servant? Go ahead, take on the challenge and let's see what the power of God's love can do.

Let us pray: *Holy God, you have given us an amazing challenge in loving not just pieces, but all of your creation. Give us the faith, the skill and the readiness to take on your challenge and take it to the world you love so much. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.*



Tuesday, September 25, 2018

Text: 2 Kings 11:21-12:2

²¹ Jehoash was seven years old when he began to reign.

^{12:1} In the seventh year of Jehu, Jehoash began to reign; he reigned forty years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Zibiah of Beer-sheba. ² Jehoash did what was right in the sight of the LORD all his days, because the priest Jehoiada instructed him.

When we read about all the various kings of Israel and Judah it seems that more often than not when we see a new one beginning their reign, the next line tends to read ‘and they did evil in the sight of the Lord.’ But something about Jehoash is different.

Is it his age? Probably not. We’ve seen kings and queens of all ages, both good and bad so age isn’t necessarily the key. Is it the influence of his mother? Maybe, but I don’t think that’s the full answer either. However, as we read to the end of this text we are told that the priest Jehoiada instructed him. And that’s key.

Think back to your own younger days. Who influenced you the most? I think I may be safe in assuming that even if that person wasn’t a teacher by trade, it was someone who taught you something of value in your life.

Now having a good teacher isn’t a guarantee that everything in somebody’s life will turn out fine. Having a good teacher isn’t an insurance policy against future bad behavior. But whether we like to admit it or not, those who teach us the good in life, especially those who teach us about God’s love in what they say as well as how they live, can definitely touch us in ways we may never have thought of.

What about the rest of us? Do our words and actions teach others about God’s love, or are we content to leave that up to the “professionals” and simply go about our business and hope nobody notices?

Let us pray: *God of all that we are, we pray that whether we are teachers by profession or simply someone who longs to sit at your feet, open our hearts and minds to the lessons you give us each and every day. And use us according to your will, to spread the lesson of your grace in all that we say and do. Amen.*



Wednesday, September 26, 2018

Text: John 8:31-33

³¹ Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” ³³ They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?”

There were once two identical twins. They were alike in every way but one. One was a hope-filled optimist who only ever saw the bright side of life. The other was a dark pessimist, who only ever saw the down side in every situation.

The parents were so worried about the extremes of optimism and pessimism in their boys they took them to the doctor. He suggested a plan. “On their next birthday give the pessimist a shiny new bike, but give the optimist only a pile of manure.”

It seemed a fairly extreme thing to do. After all the parents had always treated their boys equally. But in this instance, they decided to try the doctor’s advice. So when the twins birthday came round they gave the pessimist the most expensive, top of the range, racing bike a child has ever owned. When he saw the bike his first words were, “I’ll probably crash and break my leg.” To the optimist they gave a carefully wrapped box of manure. He opened it, looked puzzled for a moment, then ran outside screaming, “You can’t fool me! Where there’s this much manure, there’s just gotta be a pony around here somewhere!” (This story and others can be found at <https://storiesforpreaching.com>.)

Sometimes it just comes down to attitude doesn’t it? In our text, Jesus has offered the Jews freedom from the bondage of sin. Now you might think such an offer would be a no-brainer not to mention a great thing, but there’s a problem: attitude. Now there’s nothing wrong with a little attitude, but just like the twins in our story, attitude can open you up to a new future or keep you chained to the past. For the people listening to Jesus at that time, it seems to be the latter. Even in the face of a bright, new future, they chose to stay in the past. Or another way to look at it is they chose to stay with something they knew, something they were comfortable with.

Do we do that at times? Do our attitudes cause us to stick with the familiar and comfortable even if it holds us back from something better? Not necessarily easier, but better. You can see that our young optimist was willing to go find his pony instead of waiting for it to be brought to him. Why? Because he was more excited about the gift than the effort involved. And even if there was no pony, his attitude would have led him down another exciting path—considering his initial present, perhaps some gardening would be appropriate.

Jesus has called us and presented us with a gift; the question for us may not be whether or not we accept it, but how our attitudes may influence how we see it. Is it an opportunity to grow in God’s love regardless of how it may be packaged, or do we see it as just another way to complicate our lives? I guess it depends on our attitudes.

Let us pray: *Loving God, too often it’s easy to get a bad attitude with everything that goes on in the world. We pray that you would fill us with your Holy Spirit and open our eyes and our hearts to all the amazing things you have blessed us with, especially when our attitudes could use some uplifting. Amen.*



Thursday, September 27, 2018

Text: Exodus 18:13-18

¹³ The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening. ¹⁴ When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?" ¹⁵ Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. ¹⁶ When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God." ¹⁷ Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸ You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.

I wish I had paid more attention to this lesson earlier in life. I was working a very full-time job, taking seminary classes, working as a chaplain intern on Saturdays, and remaining fully involved in my home congregation. My wife tried to play the part of Moses' father-in-law, but unlike Moses, I didn't listen. The end result was an unexpected hospital stay. Not what I would call the kind of vacation I needed, but I got the message.

We are living in a world where things happen 24/7. Where disconnecting from all the stressful things is becoming more and more difficult. We're just not made to keep going like this, taking on everything and then adding even more. There are some of us who don't simply have a full plate; we've taken on the whole buffet table.

Fortunately, God is fully aware of just how much "stuff" we tend to take on and whether we realize it or not, provides relief. In my case I had my wife, co-workers, classmates, and professors who could see better than I could what I was doing to myself. They were there to help, but I was too "busy" to see it.

Who has God placed in your life to help you get everything done? Who has God sent to share the load with you? When things get to the point that you feel like it's all about to fall apart, stop for a moment; take a deep breath; and then look around and see if you're doing a Moses and trying to do it all yourself. And when you find those people in your life who God has provided, don't be afraid to ask for their help. And don't forget to give God thanks for sending them in the first place.

Let us pray: *Loving God, thank you for those you have placed in our lives when life gets to be too much for us. Thank you for those who are willing and capable to help us when we try to do it all. And thank you for the humility to admit it when we need that help. Amen.*



Friday, September 28, 2018

Text: Acts 11:1-3

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³ saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?”

There was once an old stone monastery tucked away in the middle of a picturesque forest. For many years people would make the significant detour required to seek out this monastery. The peaceful spirit of the place was healing for the soul.

In recent years, however, fewer and fewer people were making their way to the monastery. The monks had grown jealous and petty in their relationships with one another, and the animosity was felt by those who visited.

The Abbot of the monastery was distressed by what was happening and poured out his heart to his good friend Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a wise old Jewish rabbi. Having heard the Abbot's tale of woe he asked if he could offer a suggestion. "Please do" responded the Abbot. "Anything you can offer."

Jeremiah said that he had received a vision, an important vision, and the vision was this: the Messiah was among the ranks of the monks. The Abbot was flabbergasted. One among his own was the Messiah! Who could it be? He knew it wasn't himself, but who? He raced back to the monastery and shared his exciting news with his fellow monks.

The monks grew silent as they looked into each other's faces. Was this one the Messiah? From that day on the mood in the monastery changed. Joseph and Ivan started talking again, neither wanting to be guilty of slighting the Messiah. Pierre and Naibu left behind their frosty anger and sought out each other's forgiveness. The monks began serving each other, looking out for opportunities to assist, seeking healing and forgiveness where offense had been given. As one traveler, then another, found their way to the monastery word soon spread about the remarkable spirit of the place. People once again took the journey to the monastery and found themselves renewed and transformed. All because those monks knew the Messiah was among them. (This story and others can be found at <https://storiesforpreaching.com>.)

We're all familiar with the stories of how we should treat strangers, but what about how we treat one another? Sometimes we get so used to the people around us that we forget that those relationships are important too. Closeness and familiarity can sometimes cause little things that bother us to grow into something that stresses those relationships.

But this isn't just families at home that this happens to; it can happen with our faith family as well. Someone makes a suggestion that's different than what we've done in the past. Someone decides to go talk to those new people instead of their long-time friends. Or any of a dozen other little things that irritate us for no good reason.

But if we don't treat each other with the love and respect that God has called us to, then how will we be able to treat others as God has called us to? After all, you never know when God may be among us.

Let us pray: *Ever patient God, help us to love our neighbors as ourselves and help us to love those closest to us just as much. Amen.*



Saturday, September 29, 2018

Text: Matthew 5:14-16

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

If you’ve ever been on a cave or mine tour, you learn just how important light can be. Without it you can find yourself confused and disoriented very quickly. Perhaps the worst thing you can do in a situation is try to stumble around and find your way out of the darkness. It would only take a few steps to get off the safe path and into some serious danger.

But what’s absolutely amazing about those situations is how quickly we are drawn to even the smallest of lights. In total darkness, even the smallest of flames instantly catches our attention and we find the confusion and disorientation caused by the darkness dissipating.

We know that there is darkness in this world. All we have to do is read the news to quickly discover just how dark things can get. We also know that in our baptism we were made part of the family of God and God’s own light was kindled in us. But what, you may ask, can one small candle do in this dark world?

Just like one small candle can push back the darkness in a deep cave and bring a sense of hope and direction, God’s light in each of us can do the same in a dark world. And while we may not seem like much on our own, we really aren’t alone are we?

And what about those times when we feel that our light is being overwhelmed? Perhaps we can go back to the source of God’s light: to God’s Word, to the sacraments, to our communities of faith, and rekindle and renew that light within us. And then, go and show the world a little hope in the darkness.

Let us pray: *Sovereign God, thank you for sharing your light with us through your dear Son, Jesus. As we are filled with this light, let it spill out into the world, drive back the darkness, and lead your people into a place of hope. Amen.*

