

'...because of God'

Mark 2:23-3:6

Intro

Over the last few months, the Men's Group on Thursday mornings has been reading from the book of Exodus. The first 19 chapters or so acted as an important reminder of the God who is able to lift His people from any and all circumstances (even when some of those circumstances are the self-inflicted, 'if this is what it means to be free with God, then we'd rather be re-enslaved by the Egyptians' variety).

Again, it was important, and yes, it was good.

Then we got to the portion of Exodus where God descends upon Mt. Sinai and Moses heads up to receive the 10 Commandments...and chapter after chapter of legal ordinances and (where we finished up this past week) incredibly specific instructions (that would make the direction creators as Ikea smile) for the construction of both the Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle (aka: portable temple), and the cloths that the priests should wear. We still have three chapters before we get to the golden calf part of the story.

It is in that setting that the following question was asked during our conversation: 'why does this all matter?'

At least one of the reasons that it matters is that it sets the context for just how shattered the relationship between humanity and God was. The Israelites, at different points in their history, were able to recognize that they needed God...and that they were incredibly prone to wander from and even out and out run away from that same God. It is in that vein that these ordinances and specific instructions are not only created, but become a part of the Scriptural narrative. Is it God breathed? Yes. Is it still through the very specific experiential lens of the Israelites? Without a doubt.

You read these chapters, you read the specificity and one begins to appreciate (through the story of Jesus) that even this was not able to bridge the chasm between humanity and the Almighty.

And yet the rules and expectations are there, and in the case of the Israelites had been there for a thousand years when the Son of God comes into the world and says that he came 'not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it'...which had to feel an awful lot like he was destroying it.

Cue our opening passage. Jesus broke the law as it was written...and yet in both his actions and his words, Jesus showed the fulfillment of the spirit of that same law. Yes, it may feel like a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma (thank you Winston Churchill), but the truth is still there: a radical dependence on God...no matter what...no matter how...no matter when. The scripture reads this way.

Mark 2:23-3:6

23 One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' ²⁵And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he

gave some to his companions.’²⁷Then he said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.’

³Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ²They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³And he said to the man who had the withered hand, ‘Come forward.’ ⁴Then he said to them, ‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent. ⁵He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

II Corinthians 4:5-12

Intro

Paul takes the perplexing (and yet freeing) reality exhibited through our Savior and applies it to church at Corinth. We are so fragile, and yet (because of God), we are strong. Which part of this identity will we claim as our own? The scripture reads this way.

II Corinthians 4:5-12

⁵For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. ⁶For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. ¹²So death is at work in us, but life in you.

‘...because of God’

In I Corinthians 3:19, we hear Paul proclaim, ‘the wisdom of the world is foolishness in God’s sight.’

As we hear from God’s Word today, that truth is an all-encompassing reality that is tied together by one unbreakable thread.

So let’s go through what we have presented to us.

Jesus breaks the law...and yet he fulfills it. How?

Because of God.

Light shines out of darkness...because of God.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed...because of God.

We are perplexed, but not driven to despair...because of God.

We are persecuted, but not forsaken...because of God.

We are struck down, but not destroyed...because of God.

We are always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies...because of God.

Death is at work in us, but life reigns...because of God.

Any guesses on the unbreakable thread? Thank you very much: God.

The real question is, do we actually believe it? Do we believe it for ourselves, our families, the church?

I would say that in way too many cases, the answer is a clear and definitive...‘not exactly’. We live in a world of hedge, misinterpretation, lack of context and understanding, lies, and just not caring, so when the question is placed before us as to the power of the Almighty, we look at the illustrative example of our life, and we’d like to think so, but we’re not totally sure, so maybe...not?

If you dabble in that realm, you are far from alone, as almost every single individual whom we come into contact with in the scripture doubted, wavered, if not ran away from God (the Israelites in the book of Exodus, anyone? How about the disciples? How about Saul before we came to know him as Paul? Exactly, the crowd is incredibly large). They exhibited and lived out so many of the negative parts of the enigmas just mentioned.

Again, the story of Exodus is rife with illustration after illustration of people who were able to experience the power and glory of God in way after way after way. And time after time after time the Israelites look around and give some variation of ‘what have you done for me lately’ and turn away if not flat out bolt from the God who just rescued them a few verses earlier. It is that dramatic, and yes, it is emblematic of all of humanity (aka: you and me in the here and now).

And yet, it is through so many of these same people that the positive side of the enigmatic equation was ultimately able to reign. Why? Because of God working in and through each of them to accept minute by minute, day after day, year upon year, that they were children of the Most High, loved and received, reconciled and transformed, so as to destroy the impossible and show that in God all things are possible.

Go back to the scripture: Jesus broke the law...and yet fulfilled it to its totality.

How? Because of God. Because Jesus leaned into his heavenly Father, and knowing and trusting the Almighty’s voice, acted in ways that allowed the presence of God to be experienced in the world to the point that the kingdom of God was established just a little more firmly in his here and now.

It isn’t any different today...for us...in our here and now.

And thankfully, Paul is able to provide visual pictures that remind us that even though this really shouldn’t work (in terms of the people who have been led to proclaim faith, actually being the head, heart, and hands of God in the world today), it will...because of God.

Light shines out of darkness; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; we are perplexed, but not driven to despair; we are persecuted, but not forsaken; we are struck down, but not destroyed; we are

always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies; death is at work in us, but life reigns...because of God.

Now what we have to do is begin ask God how He wants us to move...and then submit to the answers that we begin to hear, regardless of how antithetical they may sound let alone feel. We need to pray, in every circumstance, 'God, how would You have me go?', and then learn to trust that still small voice that is whispers.

And if you are wondering if it's the right thing to do, ask yourself: is this some variation of loving God and neighbor? If it is, then step out in faith and trust that God will bless the direction that is being taken.

This absolutely pertains to our lives as individuals, and as families, and very much the church as well.

In a few days, Linda Santa-Lucia and I will be flying out to Grand Rapids, Michigan to take part in the annual meeting of our denomination, the Reformed Church in America (the RCA). Our denomination is small (using one metric, we are under 1000 churches while the Presbyterian Church USA has close to 10,000). By and large, many of these churches have also been shrinking in size as well (and we have experienced our own version of that).

But more than that, especially right now, the denomination seems to be polarized over the issue of homosexuality. There are not so quiet whispers that the RCA, the oldest protestant denomination in North America, might not be able to survive the chasm that exists between the disparate factions.

I know that there are more than a few different perspectives that exist within our congregation, but I very much trust that if we serve the world around us in ways that genuinely exhibit the forgiving love and grace of God, that we are going to be headed in the direction that is of God, and, yes, that is to take place regardless of who someone is sexually drawn too.

It may not make any sense that what a little denomination does or doesn't do, to the point that it exists or doesn't exist, matters in the scope of history such as it is.

And yet, we have before us examples and illustrations that scream to the contrary, that when the whispers of God's Spirit are heard and followed, even the nonsensical is able to bring glory to God...and isn't that one of the remarkable blessings of God when we follow Him? That glory is brought to the creator of all?

Pray for the denominational gathering that will take place, that God's voice might be heard and that no matter the outcome that glory be brought to His name.

Pray for your family and the families around you, that in the midst of our 'go, go, go', that we might be reminded that going is good, if we are going with God...so that might mean that some of that 'go, go, go' necessarily begins to change and develop.

And pray for yourself that we not only put down those things that we carry that are not of God, but then actively ask how the Almighty might have you love those who become a part of the story of your life. You don't have to be perfect, or always get it right to be the head, heart, and hands of God. Think about the list that we have been able to create from our scripture passage today.

Jesus breaks the law...and yet he fulfills it; Light shines out of darkness; We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; We are perplexed, but not driven to despair; We are persecuted, but not forsaken; We are struck down, but not destroyed; We are always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies; Death is at work in us, but life reigns. Why? Because of God.

So ask. Ask, listen, and follow. The impossible will happen...because of God.

After Sermon Prayer

Holy God, so often, the world leaves us in a place where we doubt, or at the very least question, how You will work through us, if at all. And yet, as we are reminded through our passages, You are a God who specializes in making the impossible reality. Open us Lord so that we ask, we listen and we respond thereby becoming Your head, heart, and hands. Lord, this will all happen...because of You. Amen.