

HONESTY AND HOPE- one off message

Sunday, March 5th 2023

- **Today I'm not bringing message in your program- instead talk about something that's been on my heart for some time, that I believe is rooted in scripture, and that was brought into sharp focus yesterday.**
- **A Word- message today is a heavy topic, but one I believe deeply necessary. We began this topic last week, before I had any idea what this week was going to hold- I encourage you to listen if you missed it.**
- **What we're about to talk about may be right where some of you are in your life experience right now- it's very likely many of you have been there. And really, it is necessary because it points us to HOPE. TO LIFE. TO THE LIGHT OF GOD'S GOODNESS, even if this goodness is from a perspective we may not- at least at first- want to hear. SO- with love and humility, let me pray, and we will begin. PRAY**
- **It's a pivotal and powerful scene from the second of the Lord of the Rings trilogy- the Two Towers. King Theoden, Aragorn, and what remains of Rohan's forces are in the innermost ring of Helm's Deep, facing the imminent onslaught of countless Orc's who have overrun the fortress. It is a moment of hopelessness and despair, put to words by Theoden in one of the movie's most stirring quotes:**
- **"So much death- what can men do against such reckless hate?"**
- **Yesterday I spoke at the memorial for a precious young man who tragically took his life just a week ago. Kellen was 16. It is the fifth memorial I've done in less than two years where suicide was the cause of death. As I looked around the room at faces (many of them teenagers) with eyes full of grief, confusion, pain, and even stoic resignation, it brought a version of Theoden's words to mind:**
- **So much death- what can people do against such relentless despair? Where do we even begin?**
- **Friends, as disciples of Jesus, we begin with the reality that IN CHRIST we are created and called to be people of HOPE. As we saw in Colossians 1, through Christ God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the Kingdom of the Son he loves- in whom we have REDEMPTION. In Christ we are people who- by the Grace of God alone- have been brought from death to life! We have been brought into God's New Creation, and this New Life is rooted in the very hope of God.**
- **AND YET- MANY times when many people struggle- profoundly- to understand how this hope works, what it looks like, how it makes a difference in life today.**
- **Consider Psalm 46- it is well known, and there are many other scriptures with a similar message.**

Psalm 46:1-3 *God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. ²Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, ³ though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.*

- **This is powerful statement of hope, trust, and courage. It speaks of an all-powerful God who is not only our refuge, but an ever present help in trouble.**

- *And yet, if we are honest, it brings a question- a dilemma- we shouldn't ignore. IF GOD is our refuge, and ever present help in times of trouble, then where was God for this young man in his time of great trouble? Where is hope for this family?*
- *A gift of scripture is how God recognizes the profound struggle this life can be. God never asks us to pretend that life isn't hard... that we experience pain, hardship, anger, doubt. AND YET, in the midst of such times, time and again we are invited into the hope that God is our refuge.*
- *In scripture, we see this invitation into hope in the unlikeliest of places. The book of laments is an impassioned cry out to God against the injustice of this world. At one point the author looks around at the suffering of his people and cries out...*

"Look, LORD, and consider- Whom have you ever treated like this?"

- *But then, near end of Lamentations there is a confession so different from the rest of the book, that it seems almost out of place. Startling!*

Lamentations 3:18-24 *So I say, "My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD ." I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."*

- *Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.*
- *Church! This is powerful, and it is a revelation of God's nature! But what does it MEAN? How do we understand this in the face of such unrelenting suffering as is present in our world? HOW DO WE ENTER INTO THE GOOD OF THIS HOPE, and how do we share it with others?*
- *Friends, this leads me to my big thought for today. A necessary first step to entering into and experiencing the hope of God... is HONESTY.*
- *We've got to be honest about the reality of life when we hold it up to our profession that God is good- that God is love, that God is a bringer of hope and freedom. Even more, we must be honest about the reality of life when we say things like "God is a provider, and protector, a healer, the God of answered prayer and miracles."*
- *THIS IS CRUCIALLY important because there are things we at times loosely say and throw around in Christian culture, that aren't just weak theologically, they are demonstrably not true.*
- *And perhaps at the top of that list is the idea that we primarily experience God's love, provision, power, presence, blessings, and goodness by his intervention in the circumstantial details of our lives- in response to our sincerity, obedience, and faith.*
- *HEAR! We are called to have gratitude to God IN ALL THINGS. Ultimately God alone is provider of all good things, and I NEVER diminish a person's testimony of God's presence and provision in their story.*
- *HOWEVER- church- we must deeply acknowledge reality that God- in however His sovereignty works- God allows unspeakable evil and suffering.*

- *We try to pretend this isn't the case- at least not to the degree that it is the case. We say things like "Sometimes God allows suffering, in order to teach us, discipline us and grow us." Or, "God doesn't always answer our prayer needs the way we would hope."... as if this were the exception.*
- *Friends, this is not honest. The hard and honest truth is that God allows EVERYTHING. We're not just talking about the consequences of our sin. We are talking about every accidental tragedy, natural disaster that causes mass death and suffering, wars, illness, mental illness, suicide, injustice, violence against innocents, and the historic and current reality of untold human suffering and affliction. GOD ALLOWS ALL OF THIS.*
- *And this is true within community of Christian faith just as much as with the rest of humanity- in fact, at different times and places, even much more. In Matthew 5 we hear Jesus say...*

God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matt 5:45)

- *In this verse the sun and rain are both pictures of God's fundamental provision to all of humanity- and the opposite unsaid is also true- that God allows evil and affliction to impact all of humanity, both the righteous and the unrighteous.*
- *We love to hear testimonies of God's miraculous circumstantial intervention because it reinforces our desire for what we want to be true. But for every testimony of divine deliverance and provision we may hear, there are countless stories of unmet need, ongoing struggle, and chronic affliction.*
- *CHURCH- Over my pastoral career I've worked with many families in places of great crisis, at times chronic. I'm also a student of history.*
- *I tell you: if we define, or seek to evaluate goodness and blessings of God in terms of desirable circumstances and miraculous positive outcomes- AND we do this through the HONEST RECOGNITION of totality of human experience- conclusion will be God is either NOT good or NOT powerful, and majority of people- including believers- have never been blessed.*
- *WHY AM I MAKING THIS POINT? This is not uplifting!*
- *Because CORE to the human condition is that we are prideful, self-centered, and we want to make everything about us. EVERYONE deals with this, and it is the primary attribute of our OLD NATURE that is NO LONGER WHO WE ARE IN CHRIST!*
- *AS SUCH- in our human nature- we want to define God as the one who provides us with circumstantially good things and keeps bad things from happening. If we do our part, God will do his part. A+B=C. You see this in virtually every world religion that has ever existed.*
- *AND THEN, the church says "YES! This is true! If you have faith in Jesus and trust God for your every need, he will provide." This is a staple of VBS.*
- *As a result, the world is full of people (now especially young people)- Christian and non-Christian alike- who are either personally experiencing great suffering, or see it in others- and come to the conclusion that if God is even real, that he is not dependable, not good, or for a variety of reasons has chosen to turn away from their need.*
- *Many have said the primary reason young people are leaving their childhood faith is the teaching of evolution they encounter in high school and college. I don't believe it. A far*

greater reason people give up on God is because in their time of need, it seems like God didn't deliver on a promise God didn't make.

- *If God didn't help my friend in his depression, or if God didn't protect my parent, child, or loved one like I was taught God would do, then why bother? I'll look elsewhere.*

– **SO WHAT DO WE DO WITH THIS? IS THERE NO HOPE IN THIS LIFE, and we just need to hang on – gut it out- until we die and go to heaven?**

- *HEAR ME. Times when we do just hang on by fingernails of faith. God understands this, scripture doesn't sugarcoat it, and we are promised God is with us always, even in the midst of such times.*

- *And yet, the overwhelming exclamation of scripture is that YES- EVEN NOW- THERE IS HOPE! THERE IS PEACE. THERE IS GOODNESS, LIGHT, AND LIFE.*

- *AND THIS HOPE- Biblically- isn't that God will deliver us from the struggle- even the affliction- of this world- RATHER it is the humbling and yet life-giving CALLING of GOD for US TO BRING HIS HOPE AND GOODNESS AND GRACE INTO THE STRUGGLE AND AFFLICTION OF PEOPLES LIVES.*

– **You see, we look around at the darkness of the world- maybe the darkness in our own story- and we cry out... GOD! TURN ON THE LIGHTS! GOD! CHANGE THINGS!**

– **The response of God through scripture is... My children- one day I will, and that is in my time. But until that day, YOU ARE THAT LIGHT. Even in your own struggles, YOU ARE MY PLAN TO BRING LIGHT INTO THIS WORLD. I AM WORKING TO CHANGE THIS WORLD- and I AM DOING SO, THROUGH YOU.**

- *Years ago I heard a talk by the founder of the International Justice Mission- a global Christian ministry working to end human trafficking and the sexual slavery of women and children. The speaker said- when it comes to God's response to this particularly horrific slice of the human condition, WE ARE GOD'S PLAN A- and there IS NO PLAN B. If light is to enter this place of darkness, it will be because YOU- as MY LIGHT- as bearers of my love- chose to challenge this darkness.*

- *Earlier in Matthew 5(14ff) Jesus proclaimed*

"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

- **YOU SEE, CHURCH- reality is God DOES INTERCEDE IN THE LIVES OF HURTING PEOPLE- God IS WORKING to turn on the lights in the darkness of this world- and he is doing so THROUGH US.**

- **SO WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE? Few thoughts.**

- **FIRST. BY FAITH we must know and believe the GOODNESS OF WHAT God has ALREADY DONE- what is ALREADY TRUE OF US IN CHRIST. This is what we talked about last week....**

- **With that foundation... very simply, and empowered by the Love and Grace of God within us... we will seek to make the world a better place- starting with our own circle of influence.**

- **Live out God's goodness and integrity in our own personal lives. Start with your own home, your own marriage. If there is work you know God needs to do, but you've been avoiding it- STOP AVOIDING IT! Surrender, let God do the work of healing and restoration to bring you to a place of health- whatever that journey may look like. Nothing dims our light like our own un-surrendered brokenness**
- **Look for opportunities to show compassion to people. Ask the Spirit to develop within us a desire to improve the lives of those around us.**
- **Seek out opportunities to get to know people different from you. Be a listener. Be a learner. Seek to understand where people are coming from. Be willing to let God challenge your own biases and preconceived notions about people.**
- **Be a friend. Be kind. You never know what a person is experiencing, and your patience and kindness just may be the lifeline they need. Go read God's definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13, and each day look to the spirit... LORD- today enable me to LOVE in this way- and not just those who love me back, but everyone I may encounter- to EVERYONE.**
- **When God presents you with an opportunity to love, to show kindness, to serve- TAKE IT. In my story God has slowly equipped me to love and minister to people in places of great crisis and suffering- so when that call comes, if at all possible, I answer it. This is part of my sense of calling into chaplaincy.**
- **God has likely been equipping you to express his light in different ways. Whatever it is, expect God to use you- be ready to say YES.**
- **GET INVOLVED. Be a volunteer. Find a way to work with children and youth. Serve in a senior's ministry. If you are terrified by interacting with people, then find another way. Drive a van. Cook a meal. Get to be known by your co-workers as a person who can be trusted to show kindness and compassion. Seek to structure your life in such a way that you have the margin, the bandwidth, to be active in some way. In the name and love of Christ, do your part.**
- **SO MUCH HERE WE COULD SAY- but lastly, be ready to give the reason for the hope that you have. People need the hope of the gospel. People need Jesus. FULLNESS OF THE CROSS....**
- **God has uniquely equipped some people to share and communicate message of Christ, but we ALL ARE CALLED to open the gospels door by how we LIVE OUT THE GOODNESS and NATURE OF CHRIST. By how we love.**
- **End with this...**

John 1. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

- **CHRIST IS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD, and WE ARE THE LIGHT OF CHRIST. May we shine brightly.**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *Have you ever struggled with the tension between our profession of God's love and goodness, and the clear pain and suffering in the world? Briefly describe how.*
- *Have you ever read a scripture like Psalm 46:1-3, and then asked... "Yeah, but... how does that line up with people who suffer, especially when it is 'affliction'- suffering that is no-ones fault.*
- *Why is honesty about the reality of evil, suffering, and affliction in the world so important?*
- *What are examples of 'weak theology' we throw around in Christian culture that are just demonstrably not true- specifically regarding what we say about God's 'provision, protection, and blessings' on one hand, and the reality of life on the other?*
- *In the message Pastor Ethan asserted that "we must deeply acknowledge reality that God- in however His sovereignty works- God allows unspeakable evil and suffering." Why is important to distinguish here between the idea that "God allows", and the idea held by some that "God causes". If we believe- as is very common in Christian culture- that ultimately every detail and experience of life is orchestrated by God, what dilemma's does this raise? How are we at time dishonest about the reality of life to protect our religious truisms?*
- *How can our religious formulas and truisms be damaging to people, especially children, who are thrust into great struggle and suffering?*
- *A key point made by Pastor Ethan: "If we define, or seek to evaluate goodness and blessings of God in terms of desirable circumstances and miraculous positive outcomes- AND we do this through the HONEST RECOGNITION of totality of human experience- conclusion will be God is either NOT good or NOT powerful, and majority of people- including believers- have never been blessed." Discuss this statement. Do you agree? What are implications?*
- *Given all this discussion, how do we understand the hope of Christ for this world- in this life? Read Matthew 5:14-16*
- *What are ways you- we- are God's light in this world? What does this look like?*