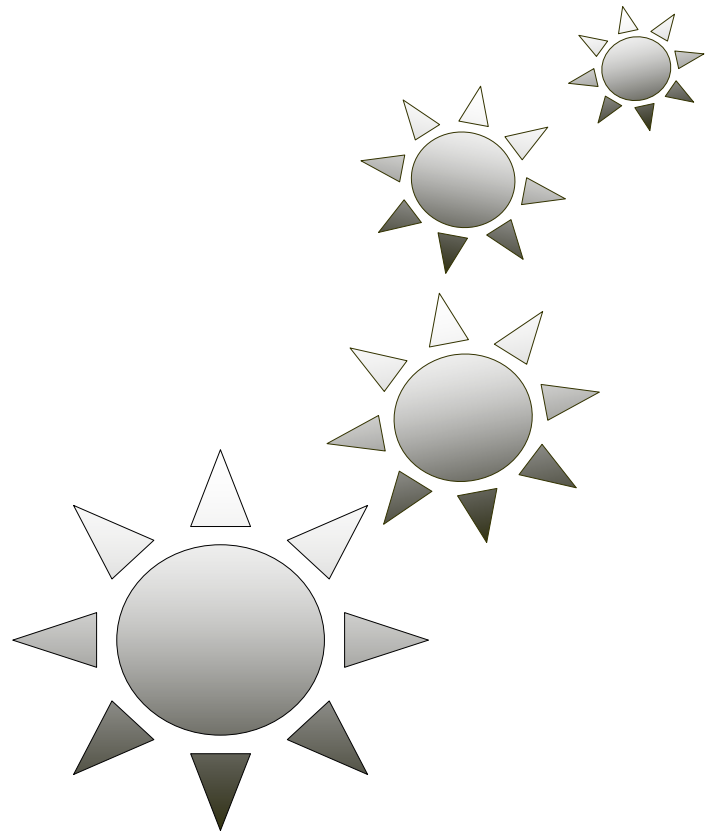


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Reflecting on His Work

Reading and Understanding the Bible as Story



Lent Devotional

Waukesha Bible Church
Dr. Patrick J. Griffiths

Reflecting on His Work and the Storyline of the Bible

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“Why the Rebel Must Die”



Read Matthew 16:24-28

Prayer:

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are [repentant]: Create and make in us new and [repentant] hearts, [so that we may come to see and hate our sin as you do. Thank you for the fullness of the forgiveness secured for your people in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We seek you] through Him who is our Lord and Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.¹

What is Lent? Lent speaks to “springtime” or “renewal”. It is a time to reflect on “first things”. It is almost and always to be a time when the “family gathers” and a spiritual reunion of sorts takes place. **It is a time when we remember and return. Family reunions close the gap created by distance. It enables us to reconnect with our past and hopefully bring clarity to our present.** Lent is like this. It is a time when we remember the *Story* and return to our Christian roots.

Perhaps it has been some time since you’ve remembered and because of this absence have failed to live in the *Story* of God. Maybe you’ve not answered the call or accepted the invitation so the idea of reconnecting with your Christian past seems foreign and maybe a little threatening. Well, there is no time like today.

I would like to invite you into a clearly marked journey that has as its destination the person and work of God. I am inviting you to remember. To think about those early moments when you accepted the call and received Jesus Christ as your redeemer, savior, deliverer and friend.

Inside God’s *Story*, He put in play a forerunner whose design was to prepare the way of the LORD. He came in the spirit of Elijah and was embodied in John the baptizer. John’s message to a divided nation was “repent for the kingdom of God is at hand.” Those who were spiritually hardened resisted such utterance. They believed themselves to be intrinsically righteous and deserving divine favor. On the other hand, there were those who were waiting for the promise of God and in response bent their knees and bowed their heads

in humble confession and repentance. This is where, I trust, His invitation to come finds you and me.

As John's ministry was entering into its twilight, our Lord's ministry was just beginning to dawn. His proclamation was in keeping with John's.

³² "Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. ³³ But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven. ³⁴ Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW; ³⁶ and A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD. ³⁷ He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. ³⁸ **And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.** ³⁹ **He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it**" (Matt. 10:32-39).

There is severity to the extended invitation. Its severity comes as a result of our complacency and forgetfulness. What we must remember and never forget is that we came to God as rebels who led and are a part of an unholy insurrection. Without Christ, we claim no allegiance to anyone but our own angry selves. Without Christ, we are the offspring of evil's alliance. It is for this reason, "The rebel must die." Yet from this crucible of "barrenness" comes birth, new birth to be exact. Listen to how Jesus strikes this same chord in Matthew 16.

²⁴ "Then Jesus said to His disciples, '**If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.**' ²⁵ For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS

DEEDS. ²⁸ Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom” (Matt. 16:24-28).

There is clarity in the simplicity and severity of the note sounded. Paul captures the essence of His Lord’s invitation and speaks of confessing Jesus as Lord.

⁸ “But what does it say? ‘THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, in your mouth and in your heart’ – that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, ⁹ that if you confess with your mouth **Jesus as Lord**, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; ¹⁰ for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Rom. 10:8-10).

This **Lordship** for Paul is placed in the context of Roman rule. It speaks of regal, kingship and monarchical status. Jesus Christ is King, and His kingship is in opposition to any and all other usurpers. His dominion levels all others. No one and nothing compares or competes. When Paul invites us to “confess and believe” **his appeal is to pledge allegiance and uncompromising loyalty.** The means to this end is through the pathway laid before us by John and Jesus – death.

The confusing thing for us is a misunderstanding of the gospel. Our thinking has become diluted and muddled as it relates to what biblical faith and its resultant fruit looks like. There is death, burial and resurrection. Paul speaks of those who have died with Christ who are now walking in newness of life (Rom. 6). This promising and hope-filled resurrection and newness of life is not the resurrection of our life, but His, and we are in Him. It is the Christ-life and NOT the “me” or my-life. This resurrection resulting from repentance is not the “ultimate make-over”. We are not made over. We are killed, destroyed, and annihilated and a new life is resurrected in its place. **The old house is not remodeled; it is removed.** In the words of William Willimon, “His message is not the simple one of the Baptist, ‘Be clean.’ Jesus’ word is more painful – ‘Be

killed.’ The chief biblical analogy for baptism is not the water that washes but the flood that drowns.”²

The Lenten season calls us back to our “first acts”. For some of us we need to wake up and look at our immediate surroundings, habits, patterns, stockpiles, ambitions, goals and attitudes. Perhaps the walls of our souls have been breached and there is an encroaching clutter that is choking. Friend, let us come back to Jesus and let Him have His way in our lives. We must not forget that our enemy is persistent and perennial. The a-theistic (i.e. non-biblical god) world system runs a parallel program. It looks like the one constructed, created and written by God, but it is fake, deceiving, alluring, seductive and deadly. The devil comes with stealth. His attack can be open and obvious, but often he appears as the angel of light. He dulls and deceives, creating callousness and casualty. There is nothing in him that complements or is compatible with God. Our own flesh, the enemy from within, seeks to draw us away by placing us at the center of life. It is appealing and attractive, but hollow and bitter.

Maybe there are some who have never yet come the way of the cross. Maybe, you have never entered into life, His life. Please do not misunderstand. You only come once; but once entered you never forget that pivotal moment or journey when your senses were opened and you saw, heard and felt Christ. Regardless as to whether you are new to this thinking or a seasoned veteran, Lent invites you to remember and return. It bids you to close the gap created by distance. It makes possible for us to reconnect with our past and hopefully bring clarity to our present. As we consider the Lenten season in preparation for the picturing of the Gospel during Passion Week, let us not fear but let us turn ourselves toward God with boldness and confidence. Let us invite the Holy Spirit to purge from us the encumbering weights and the sin that has so easily beset us and let us renew our pursuit of Him with persistent patience as we look to Jesus who is both the author and the finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:1, 2).

¹ <http://www.bcponline.org/>

² William Willimon, “Repent,” in *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003], 8, 9.

“Why the Provision Must Die”

2

Read Isaiah 53:4-6

Prayer:

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: [we thank you for your grace] to all who have gone astray from your ways, and [for] bringing them again with repentant hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.¹

Our initial study noted how “the rebel must die.” The justice of God demanded that the rebel die. The insurrection was put down. The revolt against God would be stopped and the head of the serpent would be crushed. The serpent’s seed would find its demise in the seed of the woman. This study speaks to God’s answer for the rebel’s offense.

It is always easy to presuppose too much and work from a common assumption that everyone knows the same information and means the same thing when they speak. This however would prove unprofitable. In the *Story* of God there is a rebellion against God’s rightful position. As a consequence of this rebellion, the perpetrator of the crime must answer for his transgression. The outcome is his death, both immediate and eternal. God, however, makes a way for the debt to be paid. Through promise and picture, He offers hope of an offering through whom an eternal atonement can be made. It will be through the shedding of blood that forgiveness for the transgression will be secured. The offering made by God will be vicarious, voluntary and victorious. It will be in place of or in behalf of the rebel and will be offered freely. It will also prove powerful in securing the end for which it is designed. The only necessary action from the rebel is an acceptance of his own inability and of the provision’s full and final sufficiency. It is in this great transaction that life comes from death. It is from this back *Story* that we now consider the question, “Why the provision must die.”

Although the insurrection appears as blight on the *Story*, it is not without its purpose. The correction to the insurrection enables a powerful contrast to the fulfillment of the rebel’s death. Yet all of this needs necessary footing. The

created could never do what can only be done by the Creator. Finiteness will always be limited and inadequate. In their rebellion against God, Adam and Eve offended the infinite. There was nothing they could do to remedy the situation. In an attempt to “save face” they clothed themselves with vegetation. Their effort only exacerbated the situation. It went from bad to worse. If they would be restored to communion with God, then He would have to step in.

the *Story* of God is permeated with glory and grace. It is inconceivable that the righteous would die for his enemy (Rom. 5:6-10), yet this is exactly what God does in redeeming the rebel. He saves the sinner by becoming the sin-bearer. God promised and pictures the greater truth (Gen. 3:15, 21). Three words will capture this scenario: vicarious, voluntary and victorious. These three ideas are in attendance in the Garden of Eden and are present every time redemption is marked.

Isaiah 53 is the great atonement chapter in the Old Testament record. It captures the vicarious, voluntary and victorious elements of the offering. Listen to the weight of the burden carried by the sin-bearer.

⁴ “Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. ⁵ But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. ⁶ All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him” (Isa. 53:4-6).

Can you not hear the tone and feel the weight? All of our grieving, our sorrows, our transgressions, and our iniquities, all of this and more, were placed on Him. It fell upon Him. He accepted the load, He took it upon Himself and He felt its crushing blow. He did this voluntarily and freely. But let us not be misled. It was not the sin that He found overwhelming. It was not the cumulative weight that He found vast. It was the consequence of sin and the resultant separation from His Father that compelled Him to cry out,

“My God, My God why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). This was the shocking blow that bowed His head and bent His knee.

Yet this is the *Story* written by God before the world’s foundation was poured (Rev. 13:8). God wrote this *Story*. He did not react, but wrote and wove into the very fabric of the *Story* the lamb who would vicariously, voluntarily and victoriously secure for Himself a people who will love Him and worship Him forever. It is a *Story* written in blood and paved by redemption, deliverance and freedom. This is the *Story*, and this is the wonderment of it all.

¹ <http://www.bcponline.org/>

“Why the Rebel Must Come”

3

Read John 6

Prayer:

Almighty God, who sees that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.¹

the *Story* written by God speaks of a rebel's insurrection against his God, Creator and Master. It is because of this rebellion that the sinner must die. God's justice speaks, and its execution is non-negotiable and direct. Yet God made promises and provided pictures whereby a vicarious, voluntary and victorious sacrifice would enable the rebellious to pass from death to life. Although the magnitude of the provision is inexhaustible, there is still the necessity on the part of the sinner to accept God's provision as his own. If such an invitation is rejected, then all hope is lost. Thus there is a call to obey, to have faith, to believe, and to trust. All four ideas speak to the rebel's necessity to receive the offer freely and graciously extended to him by God.

There is an action to faith that moves it from being mere knowledge. When we say to an individual, “Just trust me” or “Will you not trust me” we are inviting them to accept or act a certain way. This trust on their part is visualized by some action. This same idea comes from the biblical record. Jesus says, “He who believes has eternal life.” This belief will then be visualized when one takes and eats His flesh and drinks His blood. Again stressing the idea that faith is not only knowledge of and assent to, but unreserved trust in.

The gift must be accepted (John 1:12; Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8) and the object must be believed (John 3:16). Yet what does this look like? How might we visualize faith? Both the Old and New Testaments provide such an answer. The New Testament record builds on the foundation laid in the Old Testament text. From the Passover Feast will come the language employed by our Lord and then continued by Paul to speak to and explain “faith”. It is clearly noted in John 6 and then reiterated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. Let us consider John 6.

⁴⁷ “Truly, truly, I say to you, **he who believes has eternal life.** ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, **so that one may eat of it and not die.** ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; **if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever;** and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.’ ⁵² Then the Jews began to argue with one another, saying, ‘How can this man give us His flesh to eat?’ ⁵³ So Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, **unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves.** ⁵⁴ **He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.** ⁵⁵ **For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink.** ⁵⁶ **He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.** ⁵⁷ As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live because of Me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever.’ ⁵⁹ These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum. ⁶⁰ Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this said, ‘This is a **difficult statement;** who can listen to it?’ ⁶¹ But Jesus, conscious that His disciples **grumbled** at this, said to them, ‘Does this cause you to **stumble?**’ ⁶² As a result of this many of His disciples **withdrew** and **were not walking with Him anymore.** ⁶³ So Jesus said to the twelve, ‘You do not want to go away also, do you?’ ⁶⁴ Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. ⁶⁵ We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.’ ⁶⁶ Jesus answered them, ‘Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?’ ⁶⁷ Now He meant Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray Him” (John 6:47-71).

Now let us consider several ideas from John’s narrative.

First, the text invites the audience to believe who Jesus is and what He is saying. The two cannot be separated. What He speaks embodies who He is. To “accept Christ” without “accepting His words” is unreasonable. This is the

primary thought contained in the text. You can see the parallel ideas in the text.

- He who **believes** has **eternal life** (v. 47)
- So that one may **eat** of it and **not die** (v. 50)

To believe in Him is to have eternal life. To “eat” Him is to have eternal life. The two ideas are working synonyms in this text.

Second, Jesus uses the imagery of bread to explain what believing looks like. It is more than mere intellectual assent. There is an “ingesting” of who He is and what He says (vv. 53-56). The implication is one of life and death. To the normal person such thinking is repugnant. Yet the invitation is clear; we must eat His flesh and drink His blood, if we will have eternal life.

Paul speaks to this same idea in 1 Corinthians 11. It is not always possible to understand the immediate question that solicited the response, but it is something that dealt directly with the Lord’s Supper.

²³ “For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; ²⁴ and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘**This is My body, which is for you**; do this in remembrance of Me.’ ²⁵ In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, ‘**This cup is the new covenant in My blood**; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.’ ²⁶ **For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes**” (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

Each and every time we partake of the elements we are signifying our faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We must not allow those who differ with us to keep us from accepting the thought as it is noted in Scripture. The partaking of the elements simply visualizes saving faith. It is not one’s faith in the object, in what those earthly elements speak to, that saves. It is the object of faith, not faith itself that has the power to save.

Third, although belief appears ethereal, it is concrete and it is an either-or proposition. We either believe or we do not believe. We either eat or we do not eat, but there is no middle ground. We can not say we receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and NOT eat His flesh or drink His blood. Faith is seen in the accepting of His proposal. If we say we trust someone, but fail to follow them, then our affirmation of trust is invalidated by our action of distrust. The same is equally true of saying we believe and trust Jesus but fail to follow Him. We are not a follower of Jesus unless we partake of Jesus.

Fourth, the idea of believing/eating Jesus for some is repugnant and therefore dismissed, and yet fully accepted by others. Many found His statement “difficult” (v. 60), and “grumbled at” (vv. 61) what Jesus declared. Jesus knew what He asked would cause some to “stumble” (v. 61). And “as a result of this many of His disciples **withdrew** and **were not walking with Him anymore**” (v. 66). Was Jesus encouraging “**physical** cannibalism”? Was He implying “spiritual cannibalism”? Most assuredly, Jesus said to those who would follow Him, “You must eat my flesh and drink my blood or you will perish.” Let us push past 2,000 years of theological debate concerning spiritual presence, transubstantiation, consubstantiation, and symbolism and let us sit with His original audience and listen to what He is saying. Although Peter has a strong propensity of putting the proverbial “foot in mouth,” he also often gets it right. Listen to how Peter understands what Jesus is saying, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know You are the Holy One of God” (vv. 68, 69). BINGO, Peter gets it. What if we replaced the idea of believing with that of eating? Listen to how this text would then read.

“Lord, whose flesh would we eat and whose blood would we drink? You have words of eternal life. We have eaten your flesh and drunk your blood and have come to know you are the Holy One of God.”

Peter took the plunge and fully entered into what Jesus meant. When we eat and drink we are openly stating we are full followers. What is interesting is how many “disciples” turned back (vv. 60, 66, 70, 71). Simply because

someone looks like a “Christian” or professes Christ this does not guarantee they are followers of Christ. Only those who eat His flesh and drink His blood have denied themselves, taken up their cross and followed Him (Matt. 16:24). For those who find such thinking repulsive, then they must do what Paul suggests in 2 Corinthians 13:5, 6.

⁵ **“Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!** Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you-- unless indeed you fail the test? ⁶ But I trust that you will realize that we ourselves do not fail the test” (2 Cor. 13:5, 6).

One of our struggles is the idea that salvation happens only once, and indeed this is a true idea. But the difficulty lies in our thinking that once we are saved the gospel is never revisited. Often when speaking with someone who struggles with their profession of faith, it is often because they made a profession of faith at a very young age and cannot remember what they actually said. It is almost as if they have faith in their faith, or their salvation rests on their prowess in remembering. As believers we are marked by belief. We do not simply believe at a point in time and then never believe again. We believed and are to continue in that belief. Believing is a continuous and daily activity. We fully understand justification happens in a point in time moment. But we are also convinced that justification happened and continues to happen. We are not worried about losing what grace gains, but we are worried that we will forget what grace gives, and in forgetting I simply fall away. We neither deny nor address the issue of eternal security at this time. The issue is direct: Do you believe the gospel? What might we do to protect ourselves from this lethargy of unbelief? A means of reminding ourselves of this believing is found in the regular celebration of the Lord’s Table. Each time we partake we are saying, “I believe Jesus is the one and only offering for sin and in His provision and sufficiency I rest.” May we lay aside a spirit of indifference or mechanical compliance and may we once more in receiving His body and blood say, “I come to you denying myself, shouldering my cross and following you.”

I do find it dreadful that we partake of the elements without ever remembering the gospel. I find it unfortunate that we can take the elements so casually without any affirmation of faith. When we partake of the elements without forethought of its significance and to what it speaks, we are desecrating the sinless offering of God's own Son. Friend, unless and until the rebel comes to Jesus, he will continue to identify himself in the unholy alliance and face the full wrath of God. Jesus made a way that is vicarious, voluntary and victorious, but unless and until we come all is for naught.

The Bible says in Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8, 9). If you've never accepted His invitation to believe, then I would invite you to do so today. What does this internal faith look like? It looks like what Jesus said in John 6 and Matthew 26.

²⁶ "While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, '**Take, eat; this is My body.**' ²⁷ And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸ for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins'" (Matt. 26:26-28).

So today I ask you, will you believe in Jesus, will you accept His words and will you visual your faith by eating and drinking?

¹ <http://www.bcponline.org/>

“Why the Church Must Gather”

4

Read Hebrews 10:19-25

Prayer:

*Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*¹

God has ordered that His people should gather in geographically definable assemblies with a biblical structure and mission. It is in the context of the collective gathering that the church remembers, returns and restores. The liturgical calendar is a means used by the church to birth an answer to the question, “Why must/does the Church gather?”

The Scripture clearly speaks of the body of Christ as a consequence of His person and work. In fact, the entire Trinity is involved in the formation of this body. It is the Father who calls the body into existence, and it is the Son through whose activity the body finds basis, and by means of the Holy Spirit each member is intentionally placed into the whole (Eph. 1; 1 Cor. 12).

Because His body is both historic (i.e. apostolic) and global (i.e. catholic or universal), there is an authentic “in time” witness to the greatness and goodness of God. Yet despite the body’s best intentions, there is equally and always the persistent pull away from the *Story* by the serpent’s seed. Satan’s ilk is embodied by an antichrist worldview and by fallen flesh. In the church’s defense, she has created means so that she might remember the *Story* in which she lives. It is this annual reminder that enables those who have forgotten to return and to be restored through the renewing of their minds in the *Story* of God.

Yet many refuse to engage the means established by God and His church to embolden His people in their pursuit and journey. This refusal shows its face by failing to align individually with a biblical community, or in coming they fail to participate in the life of the community of faith. One is marked by

absence and the other by indifference. Even a casual reading of the New Testament narrative shows the significance and importance of aligning oneself with a geographically defined assembly that seeks a biblical structure and mission. The historic and global church has always been made up of geographically distinct assemblies in various regions of the world. There are those who never align themselves with any local church or who attend various and multiple churches without ever fully identifying themselves with any one church. This is unfortunate and causes spiritual harm to themselves and their families. Are there those who appear to prosper spiritually in the absence of local church alignment? Yes, but these are the exception and not the pattern. The New Testament consistently places individual believers into geographically defined communities of faith who follow the oversight of the Elders who lead distinct flocks in the carrying out of God's mission of advancing His kingdom.

It is these local assemblies that are both historic and global that helps us remember the *Story*. Oh what a privilege is ours to sit with our brothers and sisters in Christ to hear and to see the *Story* through song, study and story (i.e. ordinances). This is why the Church gathers. She gathers to remember once more the one *Story* from God that makes sense of all our stories.

The church gathers to hear the *Story*, to remember that God created for His glory and in creating He put into play a rebellion against Himself, against whose backdrop His greatness and grace would be publicly displayed. God would crush this unholy insurrection and in crushing provide the only means whereby the rebel could be restored as His people.

The church gathered is a consequence of God's redemptive activity. It is a part of His *Story* and thus intentional and planned. The historic and global church gathers on Sunday, and in gathering, they retell the *Story*. This retelling follows an intentional pattern of Advent, Lent and Pentecost. Neither the day nor the means are primary. It is the *Story* and its retelling that is preeminent, for it is the *Story* of God in three persons who creates and gathers worshippers for His glory who then will enjoy Him forever. By whatever means, the church gathered is to verbally and visually retell the *Story*.

One of the great passages of the Bible noting and thus celebrating this truth is found in Hebrews 10:19-25. The larger context provides the setting for this scriptural gem. Hebrews 1:1-10:18 speak of our Lord's priority in God's *Story*. What follows in Hebrews 10:19 are the consequences of His cross-work. Time and space, however, limit us as to depth and width of study. It is enough to note how the book is written to encourage those who face persecution for faith. The author of Hebrews reminds them of the larger *Story*. God is its author, and He has written each part for His glory and their good. In the midst of this, they are to lay aside every weight and sin that would hinder them in their flight with and toward God. It is because of the woman's seed having crushed the head of the serpent that His people are now called upon to join together in their common search of their uncommon God.

It is because of the vicarious, voluntary and victorious provision (9:11-10:21) that we are to draw near (v. 22), hold fast (v. 23), stir up (v. 24), and not neglect the gathering for the purpose of mutual edification and encouragement (v. 25). All such activities are built on and flow from His activity. We can do nothing apart from Him (John 15:5). All such activities are to continue and increase because the *Story* is coming to its closure "in time". All of these activities are for His people in order to shield and enable His people to put off and resist sin (10:26). What is of interest is how each of these activities is done in community: "Let us". Is it possible to pursue Christ apart from community? Sure, but why? Why would anyone separate themselves from the community of faith? It is on the heels of this exhortation we encounter the great "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11. It reminds us of the "apostolic and catholic (universal)" witness. And from this gathered witness (Heb. 12:1), we are to "lay aside every weight and sin and run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). Oh what glorious and weighty truth is found in the common pursuit within the community of faith as we look to Jesus! What problem can be so significant for one to withdraw from the community of faith?

For the sake of our souls, we are called to gather with His people for the purpose of pursuit. If we do not identify with a community of faith, then do

so. If we are already attending, then engage. If we are already engaged, then continue and encourage others in their pursuit. Why? Because “we have a great priest over the house of God” (Heb. 10:21). Amen and Hallelujah!

¹ <http://www.bcponline.org/>

“Why the King Must Come”

5

Read Mark 11:1-11

Prayer:

Almighty and ever-living God, who, of your tender love towards mankind, has sent your Son our Savior Jesus Christ to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should [see and savor Him]: Mercifully grant that we may both follow [Him], and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.¹

Everything we have considered thus far in the unfolding of God’s *Story* takes a macro-view by presenting the *Story*’s primary peaks. Now we enter into the micro-view of the *Story*. This is the unassailable mountain of God’s mystery. It is bathed in mercy and grace yet clothed in the garment of God’s justice. Protocol demands silence. We speak in hushed tones and bow our heads in shamed reckoning. We are wrong; God is right. Yet we continue to cry out for blood. It is our voices mixed with that of the crowd. We join in hoping to be heard and fed and served. Oh may we fully joy only after having tasted and seen the unfolding and fulfilled drama of His Passion. Let us consider Jesus Christ as the One, the Messiah, the King of kings and Lord of lords, and let us wholly sense the call to either accept Him for who He is, or reject Him, but let us shun neutrality. Our week begins with what is now called “Palm Sunday”.

Throughout the *Story* written by God there are descriptive words employed concerning the One who is to come. Such words are used to paint for the reader an image of what the coming One will look like and how He will function. Isaiah speaks of the One in the following way.

⁶ “For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this” (Isa. 9:6, 7).

The language is political. The coming One is a Prince, a King who institutes an administration and government. He upholds justice and executes His rule in righteousness. For millennia this word and the hope generated by such promises and pictures enabled and empowered the audience to endure. Now in fulfillment of such promises, comes the One. His name is Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary. All that He is stands in direct contrast to and in conflict with the present powers both political and religious. Mark has carefully lain before the reader the clear claim of the one of whom he writes. Listen as a picture of contrast is painted for us by reliving those historical moments.

“According to recent scholarship [by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book *The Last Week*], on this day Pontius Pilate also rode into Jerusalem. With a vast host of chariots, cavalry, foot soldiers, clanking armor, and gleaming weapons, Pilate had his own parade almost two thousand years ago.

And he did so for two reasons. For one, Pilate did not live in Jerusalem. While Jerusalem was the capital of Israel and the center of Jewish religious and cultural life, their Roman oppressors chose to live elsewhere, about sixty miles to the west on the coast of the Mediterranean.

But, and here comes the second reason, during significant Jewish festivals, like the Passover which often stirred up so much ethnic pride that it would lead to rebellion, if not rioting, the Governor would ride in from the coast to remind everyone who was in charge. Under Pilate the Hebrew people were insignificant, powerless gnats in the vast hierarchy that was the Roman Empire. The people had beaten into them, with seemingly innocuous parades and undoubtedly much more insidious means, that they were losers and their lives, their stories, their opinions, were worth nothing. Rome is right and Rome is might and all you need to do is sit down and shut up. The people, just when they were about to celebrate that fateful night when they were released from bondage in

Egypt so many generations before, the people were reminded that they lived in bondage yet again.”²

Jesus is not a competing King among equal or lesser kings; Jesus Christ is the King of kings and Lord of lords. Rome is the usurper. They are only pawns, players in the *Story* of God. It is Jesus Christ who has every right to sit upon the unbroken foal and accept the misguided accolades of the gathering crowd. He has every right to make creation bow before Him in the cursing of the fig tree. He can make creation bend to His will and fulfill its calling. He has the authority to cleanse His Father’s house. Since it is His Father’s house, it is equally His. All who enter are guests and/or usurpers. Many have entered into the fold of the sheep without claim. “They have climbed up some other way, and they are thieves and robbers” (John 10:1). He is just in throwing them out. But now He rides in. The King must come, and it is fulfillment of His Father’s will. He is doing the work to which He was called and for which He came (John 4:34; 17:4).

Even until the last, He extends the invitation to all who will to receive the offer of eternal life. It is there in Him, and it is available to all who come. Now begins the final ascent on the thin aired heights of God’s mountainous cross. Now the Lamb will vicariously and voluntarily lay His life down for the sins of His people in obedience to the Father’s will. May we sit in silence as we consider this sacred event.

¹ <http://www.bcponline.org/>

² <http://benrobertson.blogspot.com/2008/03/sermon-9-march-2008-palm-sunday.html> (Borg, Marcus and Crossan, John Dominic, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’ Final Days in Jerusalem*, HarperOne, 2007).

“Why the Church Must Celebrate”



Read Mark 16:1-8

Prayer:

*Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ overcame death and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life: Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of the Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by your life-giving Spirit; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the same Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*¹

Resurrection . . . one word and everything changes. In this one word, hope is reinstated. There can be no doubt as to the overwhelming sense of bewilderment and confusion present at the empty, EMPTY tomb. There is absolutely no way of explaining it away or dismissing it as the outcome of some radical fringe. Without each element within the *Story*, its “Good News” is sterile. It is the resurrection, HIS RESURRECTION that punctuates the atonement with an exclamation point. Let us consider some salient features from Mark’s narrative.

First, the Jewish day of rest is over and a new day of “work” begins (Mark 16:1). From faith comes work. The two “activities” are always and forever tied together. One without the other is void of its import.

Second, despite significant confusion and fear, those who love Him continue to follow Him (vv. 1a-3). This is what enduring faith looks like. It stands fast in the face of significant adversity. It bears up and carries on. Those mentioned were willing to face the insult and alienation offered by those who rejected Him. It must be remembered that His death is perceived as the outcome of a failed coup. Jesus Christ came as the King, thus the inscription (Mark 15:26, “THE KING OF THE JEWS”). He would overthrow all kingdoms that stood in conflict with His. Those who joined Him were part of His rebellion. From all perspectives, His attempt to establish His kingdom, His reign, failed. Why one would risk aligning themselves with a failed attempt is really beyond human reason. Yet here we see those who loved Him coming to anoint His body for the grave.

Third, there is no reason to believe that anything had changed from His death on the cross until now (vv. 3, 4). Those who came wondered how they would roll away the stone from the entrance of the tomb since it was extremely large. The words “extremely large” speak to the impossibility of those who came to roll it out of the way. They were not in any way mentally processing the thought of bodily, physical resurrection. And if they were, they were not applying it to this moment. They came fully expecting His body to still be in the grave.

Fourth, they were met by an empty tomb and a divine messenger (vv. 4, 5). The combination of the two caused them to be amazed (vv. 5, 6, 8). The word “amazed” speaks of someone who is “out of sorts.” It appears only Mark uses this word (Mark 9:15; **14:33** [Jesus in the Garden]; 16:5, 6 [the noun is used only in Acts 3:11]). It speaks of being emotionally, spiritually, physically disheveled. It has the idea of being overwhelmed in every way. Verse eight continues to unpack their disheveled experience. “Clearly and naturally their emotions were mixed. They said nothing to any one. This excitement was too great for ordinary conversation. Hushed to silence their feet had wings as they flew on; for they were afraid (imperfect tense). The continued fear explains their continued silence.”² They “quaked with fear” and “were displaced of mind.” Although here it is used in a negative way, there is something majestic and mysterious about this moment that should leave us emotionally and physically “unkempt”. We must not allow our knowledge of this moment to make us placid and indifferent.

Fifth, it is very clear that God’s *Story* did not end at the crucifixion. Not only does it contain, “He is risen; He is not here” but it also contains “go, tell”. The gospel is more than what happened in this moment. It is preceded by a significant and necessary prelude and is followed by an enormous postlude. The historical fact of His death and burial is affirmed by the divine messenger; still there is more. “He has risen; He is not here,” Oh my, what wonder and joy is contained in such a simple declaration. “He has risen” - He is not dead; “He is not here” - He is elsewhere waiting for you in fulfillment of past promises

and pictures. Everything will slowly come into focus and you will see and believe.

Sixth, the gospel is good news for everyone who has ever failed (v. 7). Oh my friends, how thankful I am for, “But go, tell His disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He told you.’” Remember, His disciples would sleep while Jesus agonized in the Garden (Mark 14:32-42). Remember, “They would all leave Him and flee” (Mark 14:50). Remember, it is Peter whose betrayal sits in dark contrast to his professed faithfulness (Mark 14:66-72). And it is Peter who would weep bitterly at his flagrant failure (Mark 14:72). Yet Jesus calls out with warm and embracing tones. For all those who betrayed Him He says, “I am waiting for you.” Even in writing this there is deep emotion of soul and spirit. God calls us to call out and invite all those who have failed Him. This is a day of great repentance and confession. It is a day marked by wholeness, hope and healing. He cries out to all who are weary and heavy laden, “Come to Me, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30). Oh the kindness and mercy of God. Oh what joy is ours as we see the waiting and welcoming Christ. All of His promises He will keep (“there you will see Him, just as He told you”). Oh friend, may we not doubt the goodness and grace of God.

Where does this leave us? Why must the Church celebrate? Let us not continue to hold onto our hurt and anger. Let us lay aside our fear and trembling and let us flee to the cross. Let us embrace His resurrection. Today all that He is calls out to us and says, “Come to Me, and I will give you rest.” Do we not have just cause to celebrate and then to go and tell? Oh may today be that day for us, when we come to Him and find our rest in Him both now and in the life to come.

¹ <http://www.bcponline.org/>

² A.T. Robertson on Mark 16:8.