Genesis 29-49 August 19, 2018

*He Was in the Beginning, Part 10 (Final)*

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The first and the last sermons in a sermon series are always the hardest for me. In the beginning I want to get you hooked so that God can reel us all in to see what he wants to show us. At the end, I want to reflect with grateful hearts on all we have learned. Usually I’ll go back and do a review for the last sermon. I can’t do that today. It’s too much. It’s too big. It’s too expansive! I hope if you haven’t been here each week that you have taken the time to read or watch each message. It’s been quite the journey, and I’m grateful to Gary and to Laurie for their part in preaching it with me, and I’m also grateful to author Nancy Guthrie who wrote the book “The Promised One,” which we used as our primary resource beyond the Bible.

I think many of us come to the Bible, and to the church building, with an individualistic view of Christianity. What is this going to mean to me? How is this going to help me deal with stuff going on at school, at work, at home, in my head, and in my heart? How is being a Christian going make things better for me? I get that. If something isn’t going to somehow improve my life, why invest in it, right? So, what’s in all of this for me?

The Bible is a book about people, individuals who followed God then didn’t follow God then followed God then didn’t, etc. The Bible is a book about individual people who were asking many of the same questions we ask today, and we see how God spoke to them, and was patient with them, and spoke to them again, and brought them into a new place of faith and devotion that transformed their lives. Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph… God is about the individual. He is about you personally. He loves you with an everlasting love. His plans for you are real and right, and when you follow him, your own life will be transformed in a way you could never imagine. BUT, (you knew that was coming, didn’t you), at the heart of the story of the Bible is God’s work not just with individual people, but with a people – a family of people he has called and is calling to himself out of all the peoples of the earth. In Genesis God provided us with a history of the origins of his people, his covenant people. The rest of the Bible is not a general history of the world, but a history of God’s people, ending with a picture of the future of God’s people.

It started with Abram. God called Abram away from his own people in order to begin to establish God’s own people. Genesis 12:1-2a, *“The LORD has said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation…”.* God called Abram away from something into something else. He called him from something that gave him temporary satisfaction into something with eternal weight and glory – into the messy, marvelous, mysterious, and did I say messy? nation of true believers – those for whom the gift of righteousness has been graciously given! God is about individuals, YES! But ultimately God is about his chosen people – his nation within nations – his kingdom of Christ-followers – now known as the Church! *“Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”* (1 Peter 2:10)

From Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to … Jesus … all the way through – fast forward – to you and me - God’s plans and God’s promises to build a great nation with his people is continuing to be accomplished! This is why, folks, for someone to say, “I believe in Jesus, but I don’t believe in the church, I don’t need the church” – makes NO biblical sense! Oh, it might make sense if we are just focused on ourselves and what we want from God, but it makes no sense if we are focused on what God wants for the world through his covenant, connected people. We are called, like Abram, away from that individualistic, isolated “I can be a Christian all by myself” way of thinking, into this family, into becoming part of a people, a nation of truth, and light, and of love through our common faith in Jesus Christ.

Some, not connected to the Church, might hear those words (truth, light, and love) today in light of the horrific abuses that have come out against Catholic priests in our state this past week and say, “See. I knew there was nothing good going on in organized religion. Those people only want more money and more power. They are nothing but hypocrites. Now, look at the harm they’ve done.”

Many years ago, I think it was the first time we went to The Romero Center in Camden, NJ for a summer mission trip, we met a young priest-in-training, Allain Caparas, who was part of our leadership for the mission. He was hilarious. So. Much. Laughing. I am connected to him now on Facebook and love watching what God has done in his life after ordination. Currently he is serving as the principal of St. Joseph High School in Hammonton, NJ. After the news broke last week about the thousands of abuses in our state alone, he wrote the following (and he is not prone to such wordy posts), *“There is absolutely no excuse nor justification whatsoever for what had happened. It is spiritual incest and diabolic, plain and simple. True contrition must be followed with a firm purpose of amendment — action and change. Unless we resolve to change and convert not only our hearts, but also work to change the structures within the Church that continue to allow injustice, indignity, and evil to flourish, true justice will never be fully realized. Nothing escapes God’s providential plan and I know that His providence will guide us through these difficult times. Jesus promised His Church that the gates of hell will not prevail against His Church. I believed that before. I believe that now. But it is now up to the rest of us clergy — especially the leaders of the Church, and the entire People of God alike — to cooperate with God’s grace, and live and witness to the Gospel with courage, holiness, and integrity of life, so that we can be true agents of conversion for others and for society, and eradicate the evil that has plagued the Church for too long. Conversion requires action — often painful, but necessary. It’s not going to go away. It’s not something we can sweep under the rug. God is calling us to repent and to act, now! Yes, let us continue to pray for the victims and the Church, but let us also resolve to battle and work to change those structures within the Church that diminish the witness of the Christian Faith. It’s the right thing to do. Saying sorry is not enough. Prayer alone is not enough. Prayer without works is dead, as St James reminds us. It’s the only way we can do justice for the victims, and for the People of God, who deserve no less!”* I agree with all of this, but want to add that it is God himself who deserves our best efforts to be a Church that expresses God’s love and righteousness to bring healing to a hurting world.

As Laurie taught last week, it is surprising that the Promised Offspring, Jesus Christ, did not come through Joseph after all the time spent recording the history of his life in Genesis. But we must remember that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and his ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55). God ordained that Jesus would come through one of the other sons of Jacob, Judah. Judah’s life was a mess, folks. Just read the story. His life was a mess. But God chose him and changed him. Just like God chooses us in our messiness and wants to change us – again not just as individuals – but even more importantly in the BIG PICTURE – how he chooses and changes us in our messiness as his people, as his nation of people, as the Church of Jesus Christ. It’s been his intention all along shown clearly through the choosing of Judah! When Jacob gave his blessing to Judah he said this, *“Judah, your brothers will praise you. You will grasp your enemies by the neck. All your relatives will bow before you.* ***9****Judah, my son, is a young lion that has finished eating its prey. Like a lion he crouches and lies down; like a lioness—who dares to rouse him?* ***10****The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from his descendants, until the coming of the one to whom it belongs, the one whom all nations will honor.”* (Genesis 49:8-10). It is clear that the Offspring promised to Adam & Eve, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob would now come not from Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Gad, Asher, Joseph, Benjamin, Dan or Naphtali, but come from Judah. Jacob said (49:18), *“I wait for your salvation, O LORD.”* Like Abraham, Jacob saw what couldn’t be seen with his physical eyes – he saw the day of Jesus Christ – and he died in peace surrounded by his twelve sons, along with Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, who also received a blessing from him.

Do you think it is just coincidence that Jesus, the Promised Offspring, chose twelve to be the number of his disciples? Definitely not! Twelve sons of Jacob that turned into the twelve tribes of Israel, and then Jesus chose twelve disciples – all part of the fulfillment of the plan, folks. All part of the plan.

In choosing twelve disciples Jesus is making a statement that he is now establishing a new people for God. All those who thought the promises of God to Abraham were only for Abraham’s physical descendants were rocked by this, bigtime. But Jesus is not abolishing what was done through Abraham, he is just bringing to fruition what God had promised all along to make Abraham’s descendants, by faith, be as numerous as the stars of the sky. Just as Abraham established a new family for God by obeying God’s call on his life, so the disciples established a new, ever-expanding family for God, the Church, by responding to Jesus’ call to follow him.

And though it was messy, it’s always messy when us sinners are in the mix, they followed him all the way to cross. And then they wondered. How could Jesus have been the lion of the tribe of Judah? He was a slaughtered lamb. A suffering servant. It was so hard for them to understand. That they hung in there, that they were still there, together, three days later, is a testament to the influence Jesus Christ had on them in those three short years of his earthly ministry. We have the incredible blessing, the incredible luxury, of seeing all of this from this side of history – if we would only have eyes to see! But what about our future as the people of God? Do we have the faith to believe what we cannot see with our physical eyes as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did?

The Apostle John saw what lies ahead for us as recorded in the book of Revelation. *“Then I saw a scrollin the right hand of the one who was sitting on the throne. There was writing on the inside and the outside of the scroll, and it was sealed with seven seals.****2****And I saw a strong angel, who shouted with a loud voice: “Who is worthy to break the seals on this scroll and open it?”****3****But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll and read it.* ***4****Then I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll and read it.”* (Rev. 5:2-4)

  The search is on for someone worthy to open the scroll that contains God’s sovereign plans for history. Someone pure enough, wise enough, loving enough to bring God’s plan for his people to its glorious fulfillment. We think about the messiness of the sons of Jacob, the failures of the apostles, the brokenness of the Church, the frailties of our own faith. Who is worthy? “***5****But one of the twenty-four elders said to me, “Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the heir to David’s throne,has won the victory. He is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals.”*

The Lion of the tribe of Judah! Jesus Christ the Holy One! Jesus Christ the worthy One! Jesus Christ, the one before whom, we all bow with grateful, singing hearts: *“Worthy! Take the scroll, open its seals. Slain! Paying in blood, you bought men and women, bought them back from all over the earth, bought them back for God. Then you made them a Kingdom, Priests for our God, Priest-kings to rule over the earth”* (Rev. 5:9-10).

Jesus is populating the family, his family, his Church, with imperfect but repentant people – people who say, “I know I’ve failed,” and who have been forgiven. We bring nothing to the table that makes us worthy. He has done it all. The One in whom, through whom, and for whom all things were created, the Promised Offspring who will crush the head of the serpent, the Door of Salvation, the One who scatters and gathers us to make His name great, the Lamb of God who dies in our place, who gives to us the gift of righteousness if we would believe in him, the Ladder, providing the Only way to our heavenly home, the suffering yet victoriously resurrected Savior in whom we can trust no matter how tough life may be right now in the pit.

Revelation 21:10-14 pulls it all together for us. *“****10****So he took me in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God.****11****It shone with the glory of God and sparkled like a precious stone—like jasper as clear as crystal.****12****The city wall was broad and high, with twelve gates guarded by twelve angels. And the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were written on the gates.****13****There were three gates on each side—east, north, south, and west.****14****The wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”*

When we are building a structure, a good foundation is necessary if we want that structure to last. On the twelve foundation stones in the future holy city where all God’s people will be gathered forever and ever is written what? Your name? My name? Our church’s name? The names of all the different denominations we’ve created? The names of the popes? The names of U.S. presidents? The names of great singers like Aretha Franklin? Great athletes like Saquon Barkley? Great movement leaders and preachers like The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. or the Rev. Dr. Billy Graham? No! On the twelve foundation stones were written the names of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ. Profoundly flawed men who were so transformed from the inside out by their experience with Jesus Christ, that they spent the rest of their lives telling the world that Jesus was the Promised One sent by God to save us, once and for all. The message that they proclaimed is the foundation of our eternal security, brothers and sisters!

From my early elementary school years, the Church has been a family to me – a place full of people who have loved and encouraged me in every season of my life. And the truth is, if you have put your faith in Jesus Christ, if your sure foundation is in him, we are family. And do you know what? Wherever our family members go, when we encounter others with the same foundation, we find more family members. We know it. We see it in their eyes and in their lives. We feel it in our hearts. And no matter how far we go, we find them. It makes us realize how expansive and diverse and wild and wonderful is the great nation that God continues to build with his people. God told Jacob, *“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and through your offspring.”* And it’s true. If we are doing our part to be a healthy, truth-bearing, mercy-extending, love-expressing extension of the Body of Christ in the world, peoples in the north, the south, the east, and the west will be blessed through us – so blessed, in fact – that they want to join the family. And isn’t that the point? It isn’t enough to just be the family of God, we need to be devoted to expanding the family, being fruitful & multiplying disciples, day by day, just as Jesus did. May we, as part of this great nation of believers, not grow weary or lose heart because of the opposition we face. Let us be gloriously grateful for our heritage, folks, as the people God has chosen for his mighty nation within the nations. *“For we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession – that we may declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light”* (1 Peter 2:5)! By the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, may Christ’s light shine ever brighter in the darkness through you, and through the whole Church in every corner of the earth, so that one day *soon*, every knee would bow, and every tongue would confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.