

Sermon

Sunday, November 3, 2019

Charleston, SC

8:00 am & 10:30 am Sermon ~ 2 Kings 17:9-15, Matthew 22:34-40

American Idols

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Do you remember where you were on 9/11? The day the towers fell? Eighteen years ago I was driving with my sister in MN and I remember the exact stoplight we drove by as we heard the news. And of course we would never be the same. It was the defining tragedy of our age

This morning we look at the nation of Israel and the tragedy that defined their world. In the year 722 BC they were overrun by the armies of Assyria. And we're talking cataclysmic devastation. 9/11 on steroids. Because Assyria was a fiendish empire and they besieged Israel for three long years.

For those of you who endured Hurricane Hugo, imagine living in those conditions for thirty-six months. We read in Lamentations, 'The hands of compassionate mothers boiled their own children.' These are normal moms, eating their own kids.

And so if you were living back then and experienced this, or you're living today and are looking back in horror, you probably ask the question, 'What does this mean God? What do we make of these nightmarish things? How do we interpret them?'

God gives us the answer in verse 7: 'This occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God.'

So pretty straightforward. This is God's judgment upon a sinful people. But this answer raises all sorts of other questions. A big one for contemporary readers - what are we supposed to take from this story?

Because, you know, this happened in the OT, when God was angry and vengeful. We live in the age of the New Testament when God is happy and full of grace. He doesn't do this kind of stuff anymore. So how do we apply a text like *that* to our lives? How do we hear the Old Testament today?

Fortunately, there's a passage in 1 Corinthians 10 where Paul give us the key for reading these old stories of judgement. Paul cites a number of examples where God poured out his wrath upon the Israelites and killed thousands of people, and Paul then writes, 'these things took place as *examples* for us...They were written down for *our* instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.'

And so again, this is relevant. These stories are not historic curiosities. They're examples and instructions for us. So how is God speaking today through 2 Kings 17?

Well in today's passage we find three timeless truths about God that are the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Three things about God we need to recognize to make sense of this tragic passage...and so that we can avoid the same tragedy in our own lives.

Number one, God redeems. Number two God speaks. Number three God judges. God redeems, speaks, and judges.

So first, God redeems. In verse 7 the writer explains that the judgment has happened because the people sinned against God, but then He goes on to highlight God's character. And he says, '*The God who had brought them out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh.*'

So it's not just any god the people sinned against, but the very one who had rescued them from slavery!

It's like if you went to the pound and rescued a dog about to be euthanized. And you bring them home and feed them and clean them up...and they turn around and bite a chunk out of your face.

Or it's like a prince rescuing a princess from a dragon. And the prince sheds his blood in the battle, saves her, brings her home, they get married and live happily ever after...until she runs off with the stable boy. Not really a Disney ending. But this happens—and this is Israel's story.

So the first thing the writer wants us to see is that Israel has rejected the very one who had rescued her, as crazy as it sounds. Somehow they'd forgotten the one who had redeemed them.

And it raises the question: how do we respond to God's redemption? In your life? In my life? Do we remember what God has done, or do we slowly forget? Do we get comfortable and complacent with our newfound ease and start fooling around with idols?

I find that it's easy to forget. This summer on my sabbatical I read some old journals from 12 years ago. And what I discovered is that I'd forgotten how bad those years were, and how much God had done to rescue me. The late 2000s were the darkest

years of my life. My parent's marriage was falling apart, my grandfather had Alzheimer's, I had a painful relational break-up, and I had Lyme disease and felt like I was dying.

And yet, I'd forgotten how bad things were and how much the Lord had brought me through. But reading those journals helped me to *remember* and led me to a place of thanksgiving for God's faithfulness.

You know, sometimes we don't want to think about what God has done because it reminds us of how weak and helpless we were...and are. And we don't want to go there.

I'm reminded of a poem Rudyard Kipling wrote in 1897 during Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee. Near the height of the British empire, Kipling warned his people not to forget. He wrote:

Far-called our navies melt away;
On dune and headland sinks the fire:
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget!

How do we avoid forgetting? Simply by telling the story over and over again. Stories of all the Saints, stories from the Bible, but also from our own lives as well. Parents and grandparents, tell your children your story constantly. When they're small, when they're going to bed. How did God become real to you? What did He rescue you from? What were the dangers, toils, and snares? Children love stories of grace.

And of course the theme of remembering runs throughout the Bible and culminates in Jesus. On the last night of his life, what was his last charge to his friends? 'This is my body which is given for you...do this in *remembrance* of me.' The entire service of communion is built for one purpose, to remember what God has done in Christ and through remembering, to experience Him again.

OK, so God redeems and we remember. The **second** thing we see about God in this passage is that God speaks. So in verses 8-10 we see what happens when the people forget. They build altars and idols on every high hill and under every green tree. Little sins leading to complete capitulation.

Fortunately though, God doesn't leave them in their sin, but He speaks. Verse 13: 'The Lord warned Israel by every prophet...saying, 'turn from your evil ways.' Basically God calls to them through the prophets, 'Please come home to me. This is not going to end well.' And how do they respond? Verse 14: 'But they would not listen. They despised the warnings He gave them.'

So the second principle here is that God speaks. And our response is to listen or we will be enslaved to idols.

So how are we doing hearing God's voice? Are we listening to his prophets? Are we reading his Word? Are we listening to the Holy Spirit in prayer? And if we're *not* hearing God's voice, might there be little idols cropping up on *our* hills and under *our* trees?

Of course today our idols aren't golden statues and wooden poles. For one thing our idols are often much smaller than they used to be. They're microscopic bits of data on the stock exchange. They're titillating pixels on our phones. But they're still with us.

How do we know when something is an idol? Basically, anything that sits on the throne of our heart other than Jesus Christ, is an idol.

Three diagnostic questions:

What do we fear losing?

How do we prioritize our time?

What are we most excited about?

When we start asking these diagnostic questions, it can be quite revealing. What do we fear losing? Our job, status, reputation, health, appearance, friends, family?

How do we prioritize our time? I have to confess, sometimes I've said, 'I'm too busy to pray. I have to exercise in the morning before work.' So what I'm saying is that *functionally*, exercise is more important to me than God. Or I might say, 'I don't have time to go to church, my kid has a tee-ball tournament on Sunday. Again I'm saying that *functionally*, my kid's athletic exploits are more important than honoring God.

No, we always make time for what we truly value, no matter how busy we are. Throughout his life George Washington woke up every morning at 4:00am and spent an hour in prayer. Even as he was facing down the

greatest empire in the history of the world, somehow he made time to pray.

Finally, what do we get most excited about? What do we long for? In the Harry Potter books there's a magical mirror called The Mirror of Erised. And when you look into this mirror it reveals your heart's deepest longing. And so when Harry looks into this mirror he sees his parents who died when he was young. He longs to see them.

On the other hand Harry's friend Ron looks into the mirror and sees himself as a star athlete, adulated by all.

What would you see in that mirror? What is your heart's desire? It could be good things like family or success. But if it's anything other than Jesus Christ, then Houston we have a problem. Something has taken God's throne.

One of the most common idols of our day is pornography. It's an epidemic. Last year a single website had over 33 billion visits. People spent 5 billion hours viewing content on *one* website. And what many of us don't realize is that this consumption directly fuels the engine of human trafficking. They're intimately connected. It's a horrifying cycle growing every day. And so every time we click on one of these sites, we are participating in one of the most depraved forms of human slavery the world has ever known. And the blood is on our hands.

And this leads us to our third truth about God. God judges. We've seen that God redeems and we're called to remember. God speaks and we're called to listen. The third thing we see in this passage is that God judges and we're called to repent.

Verse 18: 'Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight...God afflicted them and gave them into the hand of plunderers.'

And so we come to the wrath of God. Israel did not remember, they did not listen, and so the judgment falls. And here we also come to the interpretive crux. How does this apply today? Because it seems very far removed from our contemporary Christian lives. You know, we live in the age of grace, not law. The age of forgiveness, not judgment. God's wrath was an OT phenomena, right? Not something we have to worry about today?

But what do we say every Sunday in the apostle's creed? He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead? That sounds a bit like judgment, doesn't it? Or what did Jesus himself say about God's wrath? Luke 21: 'There shall be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people.' Or John the Baptist, the greatest of the prophets. John 3: 'Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.' Or how about Paul? Romans 2: 'For those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, there will be wrath and fury.' Or the apostle John, in Revelation 19: He has a vision of Christ's return and writes, 'The Son will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God.'

We began today by looking at the Twin Towers. Did you know there was a famous tower that fell in Jesus' day and also raised a lot of questions? In Luke 13 Jesus mentions the tower of Siloam, a tower that fell and killed 18 people. And Jesus says this: 'Do you think those 18 people were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No I tell you; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.'

Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. What Jesus is saying is that every example of destruction we see around us, is an image of the judgment we will experience if we don't repent.

The truth is, God's fierce anger toward sin has not changed one iota. As God judged the world with water in the days of Noah, God will judge the world with fire at Christ's return. His wrath is as real as it ever was.

So what has changed? You know, between the testaments? Simply this, Romans 5:9: '*Since, therefore, we have now been justified by [Christ's] blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.*' Yes, by dying on the cross, Jesus saves those who put their trust in him, from the wrath that is coming.

Peter Moore once shared a powerful image of this. Some years ago out West there was a terrible prairie fire. And afterwards a farmer was walking over his burned land when he stumbled over something. He looked down and saw the charred carcass of a pheasant with its wings outstretched. He kicked it over with his boot and was surprised to see three little chicks scurry out from under the body of their mother. The mother hen had saved her chicks by taking the fire upon herself.

My friends, that is an image of Christ. The one thing that has changed, is that for all who have repented and are in Christ, there is no more wrath, because it has fallen on the savior. And it destroyed Him on the cross. 'Yes, the judgment is coming, Jesus says, but if you let me, I will take your place.'

My friends today know you are *precious* to God. In spite of all the sin, when God looks at you, He sees something worth saving. Someone worth the life of his only son. Indeed, He went to hell and back to make you His own.

And so to honor that sacrifice, **Remember** His redemption, **Listen** to His voice, **Repent** of your sins, and take shelter under the blood of the lamb, the one who laid down his life for you and for me.

Let us pray.

Gracious Lord, by your Spirit help us to remember what you have done for us. Help us to hear your voice. And convict us of our sin, that we can repent and walk in the light. May we glory in nothing but the cross of Christ.