

GENESIS 21:8-21 (p. 15)

JUNE 21, 2020

MATTHEW 10:24-39 (p. 791)

BLAINE

FATHER'S DAY

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

We know your heart is open to us Lord. Please open up our hearts to you as well. Help us to understand your will and your design for our lives. Illuminate your Word for us Lord, and enlighten our minds, so that we will know your Truth. Cause us to clearly see the paths that you have laid out before us. And then, quicken our spirits with your Holy Spirit, so that we will reach out and serve your world together, in Jesus' Name. Amen!

"FAMILY TROUBLE"

God looked down from Heaven and found that the world was in really bad shape! Things, in fact, are a mess! Maybe you've noticed? To quote Genesis 6:5, just prior to the Flood, "God saw that the wickedness of man was great, and that every inclination of his heart was corrupt"! So, the Lord sent an angel to check it out. And sure enough, the angel reported, "It's bad! Selfishness abounds! Fear is rampant! There are growing divisions that seem to permeate every corner of the world! Ninety-five percent of all the people on earth are currently misbehaving! Only a remnant really, less than five percent, are acting as you created them to be!"

The Lord was disappointed. But He sent a second angel to confirm the report. Only that angel too brought back distressing news! "It's true. Ninety-five percent of the world is selfish and corrupt! Only five percent are acting as they should."

Again, God was broken-hearted! And quite frankly, pretty mad! But He was hopeful to! After all, this is His Creation! So, recalling the Rainbow Promise, God chose not to destroy the world a second time with a devastating flood. But instead, send an encouraging message to the five percent living as they should, encouraging them to encourage others.

This is the “Age of Technology”, though! Zoom, and Facebook, and Twitter would be so much faster than a Burning Bush! Only not everyone has Social Media, or wants to have Social Media, maybe especially that five percent! So, God decided to send a group email instead. You know, reaching out to the remnant living as they should. Do you know what that email said? Anyone? I was just curious, because I didn’t get it either! The whole earth was full of corruption and sin! Violence, and divisions, and fear!

Do you remember how, after that incident in the Garden, people lived for hundreds and hundreds of years? And then how God, in Genesis 6:3 said, “My Spirit cannot contend with humans forever, for they are corrupt. Their days will be a hundred and twenty years.” Do you remember hearing in Genesis 6:11 that, “The whole earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and full of violence! Every desire in the human heart is full of evil all the time!” That was followed by forty days and forty nights of vicious storms! Apparently, God is not real thrilled with evil and sin! And yet that is our story, isn’t it, the story of man! It’s one repetitive theme, swinging back and forth like a pendulum between good and bad, between obedience and rebellion, between following God’s will, and selfishly going our own way! Followed of course, by God responding to that!

There are Blessings when we walk with the Lord, and Curses when we don't! There is a clear cycle of destruction, and then restoration, throughout the history of God's People! From Captivity in Egypt, to the Holy Mountain of God and the Law! From the Loss of Faith and Wandering around in the Wilderness, to restoration in the Promised Land. God initially told us how to act in the Garden, remember, which we rejected. God then gave us the Law to make things clear, which we also rejected! God then sent us Judges, when we tried to make things vague, which we rejected! And Prophets, when we blatantly went our own way, which we also rejected! And then, when all that didn't work, when every inclination of our hearts was still corrupt, God sent His Son! "Surely, they will listen to the Son!", it says in the Parable of the Tenants in Matt. 21:37, Mark 12:6, and Luke 20:13. But then, many rejected Him as well!

And now today, we find the Son sending out Disciples to continue His mission, to expand on His mission, because people are wandering around "like sheep without a shepherd"! "The harvest is plentiful," He says, "but the workers are few!" It is last week's sermon Part II! But He also warns us, as well, that we might find rejection too!

Jesus said, earlier to His Disciples, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves, so be on your guard. On my account you will be brought before kings and governors. Brother will betray brother. Children will rebel against their parents. You will be hated by everyone because of me!" Corruption is rampant folks! And people don't want to give that up! So, persecution will be rampant too, even among believers!

Jealousy and hatred will abound! It will be as if people have lost their moral compass! And what's worse, people will try to justify their actions! Paul even warns Timothy that in the Last Days people will "gather around themselves a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Tim. 4:3)! So, look around! What do you see? Let me quickly summarize! God doesn't like sin, and has told us so! We continue to reject His authority though, and try to justify our bad behavior, and even attempt to cover it up!

There was a family who decided to give their dad an album of Family History for Father's Day. They thought he would cherish it always. They wanted to make it something really special though, something that could be handed down from generation to generation, so they commissioned a Professional Biographer to assemble the details. They gave him all of the family facts and memories. But then, rather quickly added that there was one "black sheep" in the tribe. Uncle George, dad's brother, years ago, had been convicted of murder, and executed by the State in the electric chair.

The Biographer assured them that he could handle the situation in a most delicate way. There would be no embarrassing branch on this Family Tree! "I'll simply write that Uncle George occupied a Chair of Applied Electronics at a prominent Government Institution. That he was attached to his position by the strongest of ties. And that his death came as a real shock"!

That's us in a nutshell, isn't it! It's all in how you package it, right! It's not how bad you are, not really, but rather, how good you make yourself look!

So, when I stop and think about that, in light of Scripture, I can't help but smile! I mean, have you ever noticed how honest the Bible is about the flaws in people? We see the Disciples, for instance, arguing over power, or not getting the message, being competitive with one another, and hiding away in fear! The Gospel writers actually admit that their motives aren't always pure, and their actions aren't always perfect! We know it anyway, of course, they are human, and we've been around humans all of our lives! But when Scripture talks about Peter, the denier—and Judas, the betrayer—being among those that were sent out to witness to the Good News, I think it lends more credibility to the text!

What I'm trying to say is, if you were going to make something up, you would clearly put your best foot forward, right! You would make all of the Heroes shine, in the best light possible! Oh, you might share a minor imperfection here or there, slight mars maybe, that are easily overlooked! But in Scripture, we see real-life human reactions, to real-life human situations! People like you and me, flawed, sinful, less than optimal people—people with problems, people with issues—we are the ones who further the Kingdom of God!

Look at Sarah. She couldn't have children! But God had promised to make Abraham's offspring into a great nation! Now the smart thing to do would be to just wait and have faith. But rather than do that, rather than being patient, rather than trusting in the Promise of the Lord, Sarah takes matters into her own hands! And that, as you may have discovered, never works out well!

Sarah's idea is to give her maid servant, Hagar, to Abraham, in order to produce a family line! That seems a bit strange to us. But it was a common practice back then. A little less-than-perfect behavior though, wouldn't you say? It's now about thirteen years later, and young Ishmael is growing into a man. As an adolescent, he has been working alongside of his father, Abraham, daily, doing all the things expected of an heir! There is a relationship between the two. Father and son have shared a love, and a certain joyful bond! Only now Sarah has a child of her own!

Now think about that. Abraham and Sarah are monumental Heroes of the Faith! All four of the world's Monotheistic Religions—religions that believe in only One God—trace their roots directly to Abraham—Judaism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity! Short of Jesus, or your personal favorite Disciple maybe, I'll bet Abraham and Sarah are probably in the top five on your Biblical Superhero list! And yet, when problems arise, family issues, when jealousy and competition start to raise their ugly head, instead of going to the Lord for wisdom and advice, or waiting for God's guidance, Sarah has Abraham send her stepson, along with his mother, out into the desert to die!

That's not exactly great behavior, is it? Not to mention ethical! This is a real-life drama! There is no white-washing going on here! Isaac is definitely given preferential treatment over his half-brother Ishmael! And since the faithful of Islam trace their lineage back through Ishmael, the consequences of that decision are still being played out on the world stage today! But tell me, what did Ishmael do wrong? What did his mother, Hagar, do wrong?

How is it that this obviously “Blessed Family of God” suddenly finds itself breaking Commandments, persecuting those who they see as “different” or “other”, instead of embracing them with open arms, as God’s People are called to do?

Let’s be honest. We don’t live in a perfect world. And we are certainly not perfect people. We don’t always find ourselves in perfect situations. And we are not part of a perfect family! There is no such thing! And there is no such thing as a perfect church either! Only that’s not an excuse, God says! And it certainly doesn’t change the rules!

I am not surprised that God gets frustrated with sin and corruption! Or even that He destroyed the world after we frustrated Creation! I am not surprised that He gave us the Law as a guide, or the corrective voices of the Prophets when we didn’t follow it! And I am certainly not surprised that He sent His own Son into the world to straighten it out! I am not even surprised that Jesus sent the Disciples to do the very same thing! What does surprise me though, is that we are the only plan God has to spread the Good News to the ends of the earth! Maybe it frightens me, more than it surprises me?

“I did not come to bring peace to the earth, but rather a sword! I’ve come to turn a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother! A man’s enemies will be the members of his own household!” I’ve come to upset the Apple Cart! There is not a lot of whitewashing in this text, is there? Jesus is talking to the Disciples, to those who wish to follow Him, to those who take Him, and their Faith in Him seriously!

They are away from the curious crowds now, the onlookers, the bystanders. They are away from potential converts even. They are alone with Jesus. And He gives them their Marching Orders. “The harvest is plentiful, and we need more workers in the field! There is an abundance of people who are hungering and thirsting for a relationship with Almighty God. But only a handful who are willing to help them find it. People are feeling helpless and harassed, only no one around them seems to care. So, I want you, those of you who claim to follow Me, I want you to go and share the Good News! And remember, “anyone who welcomes you, welcomes me”.

It won't be easy though. In fact, it will most likely be hard. There will be all kinds of stumbling blocks along the way. And some people will simply not listen to what you have to say! Shake the dust off of your feet when you leave! That's harsh, isn't it? Or at least harsh to our “itching ears”! Obviously, Jesus is looking for a real commitment here!

That is not a popular theme in our world today! Commitment! And not, I'm afraid, even in the Church! But “whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in Heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in Heaven!” And then there is that whole, “Anyone who does not take up their Cross and follow me, is not worthy of me!” This Following Jesus thing is definitely a commitment, isn't it! And definitely, serious! A matter of life and death really! A matter of Eternal Life and Death!

Can you imagine, in this “politically correct”, “pluralistic world”, standing up and declaring that there is a “right” and a “wrong”? Can you imagine saying out loud what you believe, and why you believe it? Can you imagine telling someone who claims that they are “spiritual” that there is more, that it takes a relationship with Jesus, an on-going relationship, one you have to work at? Can you imagine telling someone who believes that “private worship” or “private devotions” is enough, telling them that Scripture clearly says the “Church” is Body of Christ, and you are a part of it!

Imagine sharing with your own family the truth that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and that no one comes to the Father except through Him”! Imagine the ridicule in that! Forget persecution, we don’t even know what that means here in the Unites States, at least not yet! No, we’re at a place, and a time, where we don’t even want to be uncomfortable, let alone embarrassed! But again, “whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in Heaven.”

There is a story from Africa that I absolutely love! I first heard it from Wayne Margetson, years ago. But I’ve shared it at Bible Studies and Workshops, in Sermons and on Retreats, so you may be familiar with it. It is a powerful lesson though, so I want to share it again. There was a missionary, who local rebels demanded must renounce his faith in Jesus Christ before dawn! He refused! So, they surrounded his house, and at sunrise took his life! Sometime during the night though, the man sat down and wrote the following on a scrap of paper.

I am part of the “Fellowship of the Unashamed”. I have Holy Spirit power. The die has been cast. I have stepped over the line. The decision has been made. I am a Disciple of His. I won’t look back, let up, slow down, back away, or be still. My past is redeemed, my present makes sense, and my future is secure.

I am finished and done with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tame visions, mundane talking, chintzy giving, and dwarfed goals! I no longer need preeminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits, or popularity. I don’t have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded, or rewarded. I now live by presence, lean by faith, love by patience, lift by prayer, and labor by power.

My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal is heaven, my road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions few, my Guide reliable, my mission clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, diluted, or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of adversity, negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity, or meander at the maze of mediocrity.

I won’t give up, shut up, let up, or burn up, till I’ve preached up, prayed up, paid up, stored up, and stayed up for the cause of Christ. I am a Disciple of Jesus. I must go till He comes, give till I drop, preach till all know, and work till He stops. And when He comes to get His own, He’ll have no problems recognizing me. My colors will be clear!”

...And then, at the bottom, he added, “How about you?” That’s our take-home today.

How about you? And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

O' Holy and Loving God, we are so privileged and so honored to come together in your Name—to praise you and worship you on this glorious day on which we celebrate your Resurrection! We are proud to be Christians, Lord, labeled with Jesus' name, proud to be united as a Church, as your people! Thank you for giving us this gift of family!

Father, as the Psalmist says, you have searched our hearts. You know our needs and our wants, our wishes and our necessities. You hold in your hand all that we require for life. In our silent prayers, you hear our heartfelt desires too. So, Lord, in your providence, please grant us what it is that we need most.

This morning Father, we lift up before you, We ask you to come to these loved ones, filling them with peace and patience, with healing and health. We ask you to come bearing gifts of love and life, and pouring out your blessings upon them. But even more than that Lord, we ask that you will grant to each of these, and to each of us as well, the gift of your Holy Presence, your Spirit, filling us with all power and wisdom, with heaven-sent compassion and pure hearts, and with an overwhelming sense of your peace—a peace that surpasses all human understanding! Comfort us, Lord, and care for us, as only you can do. And help us to do the same for others.

Lord, we ask for these gifts to be poured out on your Church as well, in all of its many manifestations throughout the world. Use us mightily in your mission. Empower us, and equip us, to reach out to the nations and to our neighborhoods. Cause us to be faithful servants, Lord—those who follow you nearly, experience you deeply, and reflect your Spirit brightly, in all that we say and do! Grant this Father, in Jesus' Name, and hear us now, as we pray together the prayer that He taught us saying, Our Father...