

Lenten Devotionals

Based on the Daily Gospels Reading from
the Revised Common Lectionary



Part 3: March 18-23, 2019

**Knox Presbyterian Church, Listowel
Rev. Don McCallum**

Monday, March 18

Who Moved?

Reading: Exodus 33:1-6

“You are a stiff-necked people. If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you.”

Exodus 33 takes place after the incident of the golden calf. Moses had been on Mount Sinai for weeks receiving the Ten Commandments and other instructions from God. In his absence the Israelites grew impatient and demanded that Aaron provide a god like that of the nations around them. He complied and both God and Moses were angry with the people forsaking God's commands so quickly after he had saved them at the Red Sea.

God's punishment was essentially to say, 'You're on your own!' They were told to continue on to the Promised Land and take it over, but God would not accompany them.

Tenille Towns song, 'Somebody's Daughter' is about a homeless woman begging for money at a stoplight. It includes the line, "I'll wonder if she got lost or they forgot her?." Sometimes people feel like that. They feel that God is far away and they've been abandoned. They feel like God has moved out of their lives and doesn't care.

At times we may feel alone like the person on the cover of this booklet, but God is walking with us. But at other times we are truly far from God. At those times we have to ask, 'Who moved?'. Did God really abandon us or did we initiate the situation by our own choices and actions? When we want our own way, God often lets us have it. If we want to learn the hard way, it's our call.

The good news is that later in chapter, Moses intercedes and God relents. There are still consequences for our actions, but God's grace is also on offer. Sincere repentance can bring us back to the place where we are walking with God.

Tuesday, March 19

Generational Sin

Reading: Numbers 14:10-24

“The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”

The idea of God punishing children for the sins of their parents became an excuse for the Israelites. When the Babylonians were conquering Judah it became the common outlook. It wasn't their idolatry, oppression of the poor, etc. that was the problem. They blamed the sins of earlier generations.

In Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 18, God counters these excuses. They are being punished for their own sins. Leave grandma out of it!

I think one way of understanding Numbers 14 is to look at the sad reality of generational sin. I am currently reading a book about the 'home children' who were taken from the slums of England and brought to Canada. Some went from the frying pan into the fire and suffered heartbreaking abuse. Their own families had seen generation after generation of alcohol abuse and failure.

And one has to wonder about the homes of some of those Canadians settlers. What trauma had those families seen in the old country that led some of them to treat the home children that way? Sometimes the consequences of sin seem like a snowball rushing downhill. The pain crushes one generation after another.

The healthier question is not whom to blame, but how to call a halt to the pattern of sin and pain. People like Caleb courageously went against the stream and modelled a new way of living in the Promised Land. God wants that sort of freedom for all of us. He wants to get us out of the rut of abuse or bitterness or self-pity and wherever we are stuck so that we can experience his abundant living.

Wednesday, March 20 **Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!**
Reading: 2 Chronicles 20:1-22

"Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's."

The expression ‘jumpin’ Jehoshaphat’ is a mild oath or expression of surprise that originated in the U.S in the mid-1800’s. It was acceptable because it based on a Biblical character and was not blasphemous. And the Israelite king by that name was no doubt himself surprised by the events described in this passage.

The southern kingdom of Judah was in serious trouble. It was militarily weak and the powerful nations of Moab and Ammon were massing for an invasion south of the Dead Sea. Humanly speaking the situation was hopeless. However instead of fleeing or surrendering, Jehoshaphat took the situation to God. In a time of fasting and prayer before the assembled nation, the king reminded God of a number of truths.

First, God as the ruler of all nations is in control. He had given the Promised Land to the descendants of his friend, Abraham. They remind God of his power and grace.

Secondly, during Moses’ time in the wilderness, the Moabites and Ammonites had denied them passage, but God had commanded Israel not to conquer them. If Israel is in a pickle now it is because they had obeyed God.

Thirdly, God had promised that in times of national emergency, if they went to the Temple and fasted and prayed for help, they would receive it. They are calling in the promise.

The result was stunning. Their enemies were defeated without military action on their part. Prayer that reminds God of his actions and promises works! Jumpin’ Jehoshaphat!

Thursday, March 21

Fourth Man In

Reading: Daniel 3:19-30

“Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.”

Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar had been manipulated into a decree that commanded all inhabitants to worship his image. When four Jewish officials refused they were cast into a fiery furnace. But, instead of an agonizing death they were seen strolling around in the fire in the company of a godlike being.

Some Bible scholars believe the fourth man in the furnace was Christ himself. It was a pre-incarnate visitation to save the faithful.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had declared that whether God saved them or not, they would not worship any other but the One True God. In this instance God miraculously intervened to deliver them. But in other situations God does not do so and the believer may suffer or even die for the faith.

On this side of heaven we do not know why God sometimes intervenes and at other times he does not. Regardless of the outcome, Christ walks with us in our trials.

You may be in a situation even now where you feel you are severely ‘burned’. Perhaps you have been betrayed or unjustly treated by another. Perhaps you’ve been falsely accused of doing things you haven’t done. God sees the injustice and is walking with you. Your conduct in the midst of this may reveal Christ to others.

Some situations are extremely difficult and confusing. May God gives us the ability to stand true, no matter what.

Friday, March 22

The End is Coming

Reading: Daniel 12:1-4

“There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then”

The second half of the book of Daniel moves from the ancient Middle East to look at the end times to come. Like parts of the Book of Revelation, it predicts terrible trials in the last days. There will be plagues, disasters, economic hardships and persecutions. While Hollywood loves this sort of Apocalyptic disaster, most of us read about these things with apprehension or even dread.

There are other aspects of the end times, however, that should occupy our attention.

First, the Righteous Judge is bringing the evils, injustices and sufferings of this world to an end. We grieve the condition of this fallen world. We want the perpetrators of evil to be punished and the good blessed. That's where this is headed.

Secondly, Jesus describes the turmoil of the end times as being like birth pangs. In this case the good result of painful labour is not a baby but a new heaven and earth. God is ushering in the paradise that we need.

Thirdly, even in the midst of those dangerous times, God promises to care for his own. Interpreters differ as to whether believers will go through the Tribulation period or not. We will have to wait and see but regardless, God will be with us.

Finally, teaching on the end times is meant to alert us to make hay while the sun shines. We are to be faithful in our days to share Christ's love by word and deeds. And to live fully until the day he comes. As someone has put it: “Jesus is coming! Plant a tree!”

Saturday, March 23

A Heart-Rending Ballad

Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7

*“What more could have been done for my vineyard
than I have done for it?”*

Songs have a way of getting things across in a way that is more powerful than the spoken word. They can make us happy, inspire confidence, shock us or cause us to grieve.

Here, the prophet takes on the role of someone singing about her lover's vineyard. It's probably set to country music because everything has gone wrong for this farmer.

He invested heavily establishing this new agricultural venture. He built walls and fences to protect the plants from wild animals. He planted good vines and made supports to hold them off the ground. He weeded and fertilized and watered. He built a winepress and places to store the fruit. And what did the vineyard produce? Bad fruit. The grapes were good for neither eating nor winemaking nor raising bread. He could even pass them off as 'organic produce'. It was a dead loss.

The scene shifts to a court of law. The farmer is suing the vineyard for breach of contract. He argues his case and the upshot is that he tears down the vines, destroys the infrastructure and drives away in his Sierra 1500.

Then the zinger: This has not been about farming. It's about God and his people. They have let him down. Instead of living right they have been living wrong. Instead of caring for others they have abused the vulnerable.

If God were to write a ballad about us how do you think would it go? Would it make people happy or sad? Would it inspire or be a cautionary tale? Do we need to make changes that would enable God to change the tune?