

BOOK OF FAITH SERIES: "TOP 10 OLD TESTAMENT STORIES & THEMES"

Week 8 (Beginning November 8, 2009): "When God Seems Absent"

READINGS...

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalms 137:1-6

Romans 8:18-30

John 11:17-27

Psalm 22

THOUGHTS ON THE READINGS...

+ Ezekiel: God's Partner People were in captivity under a foreign power and the temple where God lived had been destroyed, along with the holy city of Jerusalem. Israel's God, Yahweh, must have been dead, powerless or uncaring and absent. But Ezekiel helps Israel consider another possibility. Ezekiel seems to portray a God who doesn't choose to over-ride human choice and free will. Israel chose to neglect the covenant with God, contributing to their own demise. And, the Babylonian King chose to exercise his nation's military might by conquering a neighboring nation and enslaving its people. God didn't choose disobedience or captivity for Israel. But because of life circumstances and choices, captivity and defeat is what happened. In the midst of life's suffering, Ezekiel claims that God is still with Israel to endure the suffering with them, and to offer them the promise and hope of a brighter future. Ezekiel's vision of dry bones coming to life reminds the Partner People that hope endures and love wins in the end, even in the face of dire circumstances. Israel can choose to pursue life with the company of their resurrection God.

+ Psalm 22: Mark's gospel story portrays Jesus speaking the first line of this psalm from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It's a prayer of honesty and heartache. But Jesus would have had this whole psalm memorized, not just the first line. Once the psalmist expresses honest despair, the tone of the psalm gradually turns toward remembering God's faithfulness and help in the past, and trusting God's faithfulness and help in the future. Just as in the past, God will see us through this current suffering. Whatever we face, God is waiting for us on the other side, while sharing the journey in every single moment of the present.

+ Romans 8:18-30: Paul makes it clear that God doesn't desire or cause the suffering we encounter in life. Living life brings both joy and suffering. That's just how life is. But what Paul stresses is that God, with our help, can use our suffering and struggles to teach us life lessons as our faith matures. We learn from suffering, and enduring it makes us better able to live faithfully as God's people. Through our suffering, we are shaped into the image of Christ so that we can choose to continue the ministry of Christ, caring for our suffering neighbors.

INTERESTING PHRASE... DO YOU USE IT? ...

There's a popular phrase among people of faith that goes like this: "Everything happens for a reason." Some people of deep faith earnestly believe it to be true. Other people of deep faith regard it as simplistic, trite and unrealistic. But what do people mean by this phrase? It is most often used when bad things happen to "good" people. Some people seem to mean that God causes bad things to happen to people, intentionally, as part of God's plan. But evidence suggests that Jesus, the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther all disagreed with that sentiment. A God of grace -- goes the argument -- who loves us like a good and loving parent, would never choose to intentionally and willfully inflict harm and suffering on one's own beloved children. That certainly makes sense.

But there's another way to intend that phrase. Another meaning is akin to "When life hands you lemons, make lemonade." Another way to say this is, "When suffering comes, we have a choice. We can choose to use that suffering to make us bitter, or better." Rob Bell recently said, "When suffering comes, it's natural to ask the WHY question. But don't get stuck there. Rarely is any answer adequate as to the "why" of our suffering. Instead, after you ask WHY, then say to God, "So, what next?" All of these ways of dealing with suffering use the phrase "Everything happens for a reason" in a different way. Instead of believing in a trickster or mean-spirited God who willfully and intentionally causes harm to God's own beloved children for whatever reasons, we catch a glimpse of a God who walks with us in the midst of suffering to teach us, form us and increase in us the ability to help others and love others like Christ Jesus helped and loved the suffering and troubled of his day. Just like we are blessed to be a blessing, so too, when we endure suffering and recognize God walking with us in that suffering, we are better able to walk with others who suffer in similar ways. Rob Bell has also said, "If you really want to follow Jesus and help others, go find some suffering." When we have endured suffering, we are better equipped to relate to and impact others who are suffering, by sharing their burdens and making their life more bearable. So, everything, even the bad stuff, can be used for God's purposes. Some might summarize this truth with the words, "everything happens for a reason." We can learn something from it. But often, we only see or understand this truth in hindsight.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR JOURNEY...

- + What suffering have you endured in life? Did it ever feel like God was distant, absent or uncaring?
- + What has suffering taught you? How has it shaped you?
- + How have you seen and experienced God's love, presence and companionship in the midst of suffering?
- + How have you been a vessel of God's love, presence and companionship for others in the midst of their suffering and hardship?

TWO PRAYER EXPERIENCES...

1) "I believe, help my unbelief."

Read Mark 9:14-29. Focus on verse 24 as the father cries out to Jesus on behalf of his sick child. Open a journal to two blank pages. At the top of the left hand page, write the heading, "I believe." At the top of the right hand page, write the heading, "Help my unbelief." On the left page, prayerfully list things you can affirm or do believe. On the right page, prayerfully list your doubts, barriers to belief, or former beliefs that you have outgrown. An example might be, "I believe that God feels the pain of my friend who is suffering from cancer," on the first page, with "I don't believe that God causes cancer." on the second page.

2) "The Gift of the Struggle"

Visualize some area of your life where you are currently struggling. Then, picture yourself as if you simply give up on the struggle. Picture yourself giving up and quitting. Let this be a way of renewing your understanding of the gift of the struggle itself. Suggested readings to incorporate are: Mark 1:35-38 and Colossians 1:29.

Blessings as we continue the journey together,

Pastors Jay & Charlie