

Devotions - November 11-17, 2007
By Pastor Scott Williams
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Sunday, November 11

*“For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,
and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” I Corinthians 1:25*

I don't like to be thought of as a fool. Who does? I think that is why many Christians sidestep one of the central tenets of our faith- namely that we believe a man named Jesus was born from a woman impregnated by the Holy Spirit and is now our Lord and king. Tell that to someone who doesn't believe and you are likely to get a strange look! We sidestep this issue because we don't want to be thought of as foolish or irrelevant. Plus, we think, that making Jesus fully human without the divine element is something non-believers and “reasonable” people will be able to swallow. But when we do this we lose the essence of God's greatest gift to the world- we lose the gospel.

When Paul went to Corinth to plant a church and work among the people of that enlightened and happening city he had to pick a strategy: cater to the culture he found there, or stick to the revelation he received of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. He writes, “God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”

Without the proclamation of this message there is no forgiveness of sins and no peace with God. If you take that out of the equation all you have left is human striving. And I don't know about you, but my striving isn't achieving what I hoped it would. But thanks be to God for the message and the promise that, foolish as it may sound, brings us real peace and wholeness.

Monday, November 12

“But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of this age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.” Hebrews 9:26

“Pastor, why so much blood? Ewww-that’s so gross! I’m glad I didn’t live back then.” I love it when Confirmation class “degenerates” from a well-crafted lesson into question-and-answer time from the young theologians of L’Anse Middle School.

They are perceptive and they ask an important question. And why did the old covenant set up sacrificing animals to be forgiven of one’s sins? And why did Jesus have to die?

Romans 6:23 reminds us that, “the wages of sin is death.” I don’t usually consider my sins as something deserving of the death penalty- that sounds a little dramatic. And this is where my way of thinking is not like God’s- He finds my sin very offensive indeed! But this God of justice is also a God of mercy- he provides ways for sinful people to come back into the covenant relationship with him. Blood is the reminder that the consequence of sin is serious and the forgiveness or it precious.

There is something very helpful about considering the old covenant’s sacrificial system: it probably made those folks think twice about willful disobedience towards God. They might have gone through with it anyways, but at least they had a very sensual reminder of the wages of sin. How might you think about your sin differently if you knew you had to sacrifice a living animal for it?

There is also something very sobering when I think about living under the sacrificial system- my herd ain’t very big! It would cost me a lot of money either raising my sacrifices or buying them from someone else and my budget’s already tight!

Jesus has paid that price for my sin (and yours) “once and for all.” He didn’t do it to save us money or animals. He did it because God loves us so much that he sacrificed his perfect son so that you and I could live under a new covenant of grace and mercy, free to “thank, praise, serve and obey Him.” This is most certainly true!

Tuesday, November 13

*“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,
may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him,
so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened,
you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.” Ephesians 1:17-19*

“What is it like to live without hope?” someone asked me yesterday. I didn’t know quite how to answer that one. Some days hope seems to be something that is elusive- the grind of daily life, routine, and disappointments can easily take up the majority of our time and attentions. The image of darkness seems appropriate to describe our hopelessness.

It is in the midst of this darkness that Paul prays for the church in Ephesus that, “with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.” It seems that we need this divine gift of having our “light” turned on and that God is willing to give it. The world seems to be a different place when we remember the overarching story of God in history. He will one day bring all things under the head of Jesus Christ. And God is working on that even today. May the light of hope shine on you today!

Wednesday, November 14

“Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Hebrews 13:7-8

What does it mean to, “Imitate their faith” when we are considering people who have been influential to our Christian faith? I can remember growing up and revering the pastors of my church. I believed every word that came out of their mouth. They were the ideal for what a good man was. And I probably suspected they could walk on water even though they were too modest to admit it!

As I have grown older I see them in a bit of a different light. Now my parents tell me stories about them that I didn't know then- some of the hard times they went through that were oblivious to me as a kid. Turns out they weren't perfect, either. This was really clarified for me when I became one! I grew a new and deeper respect for them as I joined their ranks, and its not because I became “holy” like I thought they were. It is because they endured and persisted in proclaiming Jesus Christ as savior and lord day in and day out despite the obstacles they faced. I now find myself asking the question, “How did they do it?”

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” That's how. We realize that our struggles of faith are the same ones that have faced others throughout history. I gain great strength from seeing people overcome hardship and still keep the faith. And they do it because the same Jesus who poured himself out for his disciples and those he ministered to on earth is the same Jesus who sits at the right hand of God and continues to sustain the saints. And he's not about to stop! His past actions to others I have known remind me that he will be faithful to me today and into the future. Those who believe that are the models we are to imitate. They have shown Jesus to be faithful.

Thursday, November 15

*“When the days drew near for him to be taken up,
he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Luke 9:51*

I am not a big fan of the doctor or the dentist, although I very much like each of mine as persons! When I see an appointment coming up on the calendar I have to do some mental work on myself by reminding myself the benefits of regular check-ups can ward off some bigger problems down the road. I admit the anxiety gets to me a day or two before the appointment and I have to decide to keep my appointments. I meet with my lawyers and make sure my will is updated and my insurance in order. Then I go get my teeth cleaned.

As silly as my fears are they help me when I read this short passage in Luke. Not that I can at all identify with what Jesus was facing, but from the standpoint that there are always things that we think about avoiding. I try and picture Jesus standing somewhere that day, mulling over in his head the decision he has to make. He knows what heading into Jerusalem will bring him. And I'll bet there were other places that crossed his mind- easier and less-dangerous destinations to which he could go. And yet I find great comfort in this one verse- Jesus did not avoid his calling but decided to go where he know God would have him be, no matter the cost.

I don't know that the lesson to be learned here is to find something and set your face to it. But I am moved to gratitude and worship for one who would do this for me. Jesus has set his face on each of us- what an incredible truth!

Friday, November 16

By, Melissa Williams

*Read Acts 4:1-22 “Rulers of the people and elders,
if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone
who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed,
let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel,
that this man is standing before you in good health by the
name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified,
whom God raised from the dead.”*

In this passage, Peter and John are before the Sanhedrin to account for the healing of the paralytic man by the gates and for their teachings. I am struck by the response of the three groups of people in the story: the church leaders, Peter and John, and the people.

The Priests, Captain of the Temple Guard, and the Sadducees are like the world. They do not understand God in his true nature nor do they understand the role Jesus played as the true Messiah. They are still threatened by him and afraid of him—so much so that they commanded Peter and John not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

Peter’s and John’s responded with bold truth: “It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth...that this man stands before you.” They quoted scripture to give weight and truth to their response. “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

The response of the people is equally notable: the man who had been healed was standing there with them, as if to give them credit and a witness. The leaders themselves said that “everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle...” and they could not decide how to punish Peter and John because all the people were praising God for what had happened. How do we respond to the ones in the world who are threatened by or afraid of or just plain hates Jesus? Do we react boldly in truth or do we quietly back down to avoid an unpleasant confrontation?

Heavenly Father, help us please to react boldly for our Lord, as did the apostles. Empower us with your Spirit to do so. Help us to respond with praise, as did the people of this story, for all you have done and continue to do. Fill us with your power to speak the truth to a world that may not want to hear it. Amen.

Saturday, November 17

“In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.” Ephesians 1:13-14

From the sounds of it I am in pretty big trouble. I keep seeing these commercials on television that tell me I will more than likely end up living in a refrigerator box down by the river when I retire because I refuse to place that call to them so they can guard against a humiliating retirement for me and my loved ones. Apart from their advice the only other hope I have is an inheritance. But every time I show up to my parent’s cabin in Minnesota the conversation goes something like this: “Hey, nice new door!” “Yeah, we bought it with your inheritance.” So you can see that my future is pretty grim.

Advertising operates on scarcity, doesn’t it? Most commercials of the financial nature tend to motivate by fear- the fear of living in a refrigerator box down by the river or not being able to purchase that vineyard so you have somewhere else to work when you quit working! And many of our stewardship talks in church motivate in the same way- there’s not enough. Pretty soon our churches will all be built out of a collection of refrigerator boxes down by the river.

Paul sounds a different chord when telling the church in Ephesus about their future. He reminds them that the inheritance has not been spent on a new gate for St. Peter! Instead, the abundance of God has provided all that we need not only for today but for eternity! The Holy Spirit is a down-payment, a guarantee of that inheritance. Do we really believe that God feeds the sparrows and forgets about us? He is not a God of scarcity, but of abundance! Remember, when we pray the Lord’s Prayer today we ask God to provide our daily bread. Believe that He will give it abundantly.