

Sunday Sermon – Advent
12/17/23
Series: The Story
Passage: Jer. 29:10-14
Title: Return/Exile

Good morning, church! Today we will be continuing in week 3 of our Advent series. The purpose of this series is to tell the big story of scripture. We all have heard the little stories: The flood, the plagues of Egypt, the golden calf, but do we know the larger story? The story that the whole of the Bible tells? The one that reveals humanity's need for a messiah, our need for a savior? Do we understand what our problem is? And do we know who the story of scripture points to as the remedy?

That's why we've entitled our series through Advent "The Story." Knowing God's big story is important because, in understanding the big story, we lay hold of the true significance of Christmas.

As I mentioned, this is the third week of Advent. Advent is a season of anticipation that should prepare the hearts of God's people and remind us of the gift of love that God gave the world through the birth of Jesus Christ. The first candle we lit was the Prophet's Candle. It symbolizes the coming Hope of the world. Last week, we lit the second candle which symbolizes Peace. The peace which God will restore to the human heart when it is reconciled to Him. This week's candle is the Joy candle. Paul in Romans 15 says, **"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing..."** Jesus in John 15 says, **"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."** When the human heart is restored to God, one of the fruits of its attachment to him – is joy. In the Psalms, David says, **"You have put more joy in my heart than they have when grain and wine abound."** God gives greater joy. A joy found only in laying hold of his greatest gift, his Son.

{Pray}

So I've been reading through chapter books with my girls before bed most nights. Our most recent one is "The Book of the Dun Cow" by Walter Wangerin Jr. By the title you might think that it's a story about a cow, but it's not. It's actually a story about a rooster named Chauntecleer. It is a fantastic read with spiritual undertones. It's our second time through, and if you haven't read it, I do recommend it. But here's the thing about chapter books, they are generally too long to get through in one sitting, so as you read it, you find yourself digesting pieces of story. And sometimes, you come to the end of the chapter and you find yourself on a cliff hanger. Or sometimes the chapter resolves the issue in a nice little bow, it feels like the story should end. But you're only a third of the way through. Why is the story continuing? What is going to happen?

That is not unlike our experience with scripture. We've been talking about how the story of scripture is like a roller coaster of ups and downs. God does something amazing, but it doesn't last. We experience incredible victory or breakthrough. Nothing changes in the long term. And

as the chapters of the story go on, we find that they all begin to point to something ahead, a pinnacle, a climax, something coming that will truly bring answer or resolution to the problem at hand. And in God's story, that problem is not Satan, that problem is not nations or governments, it's not your neighbor or your spouse. In God's story, our reality, the real problem is the problem of sin.

And in our story so far, humanity has not found the answer to that problem. There's the promise of it. There are glimpses of something being done about it, but God's people are found still waiting. Two weeks ago, we began our story at Creation, where not only did God create all things good, he created all things in perfect relationship with him. But humanity chose to break that relationship, and through that action, sin, and its pervasive effects, entered into the world.

And when sin became a reality two things happened. First, it enslaved the human heart. Last week, Preston talked about one of the dominant narrative themes of scripture – that is, God's action/work to bring people out of slavery, out of their bondage, and to deliver them to a place of freedom. And we saw that in the story of the Exodus – a physical picture of a deeper spiritual reality. Humanity is in bondage. But God was not going to leave his people in their place of bondage, and yet they were completely helpless to deliver themselves. They needed a Savior. **And that is when God said, "I will do it."**

Like a child who can't get out of the crib until the parent comes and picks them up. The story of the Exodus is God is showing humanity that he is able to deliver his people from bondage. A physical picture of a spiritual reality. Because one day God would show up to deliver his people again. Only this time, his deliverance would be pointed, not at physical bondage. It would be pointed deeper, to humanity's spiritual bondage - our bondage to sin.

That's what's represented here in these two jars. God's work/humanity's problem. But what we see is that it doesn't matter how great the work of God is, how miraculous the power of God is, how faithful the presence of God is in responding to the problems that sin causes in the world, the problem remains – lodged in the human heart, killing the spirit, corrupting the soul.

Now pause for a second. Does this mean that nothing good or praiseworthy ever happens because sin is in the world? Of course not! Nor does it mean that people are unable to act good or loving or rightly. In fact, we see good things happen all around us, both inside and outside the church. What God's story points us to is not the absence of good, but the pervasiveness of sin, of brokenness, of depravity. Why is mental health such a big issue? Because we are broken. Why does injustice run rampant? Because we are broken. Why does "self" rule the day? Why do we hurt other people? Why do we choose against God? Why do we have addictive personalities? And coping mechanisms? Why do we purposefully choose things that bring harm instead of acting in wisdom? Answer: The problem of sin.

And we see this pattern continue in the story. The book of Joshua – God brings his people into the promised land. Do they remain faithful? No. **The book of Judges is just story after story of this pattern:** God's people sin against God and choose idolatry, that idolatry leads to bondage and oppression, until the people cry out to the Lord, and God provides a means of deliverance, only then to have the cycle repeat and repeat and repeat.

In fact, the very last verse in the book of Judges points to the problem, ***"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (21:25)***. That kind of sounds like today, doesn't it? - What's right? Whatever I want to be right. How do I know it's right? Because I decide what's right. There's no king. Therefore, I'm king. It's the problem of sin and it goes back to the garden of Eden and the lie of the serpent, ***"You can be like God" (3:5)***.

Sounds good right? **But here's the problem: We were never created to be King.** Humanity needs a king that is not "of us" but "above us." And God's people would soon find out the hard truth: That no earthly king, no earthly kingdom, can provide the remedy to the problem of sin. Yet that is what the people wanted. They thought their problem was a physical one. They believed that this cycle happened, not because of sin, but because they lacked leadership. So they reject God's kingship and establish kings to rule over them.

And after just three kings, the nation of Israel was split in two. And all throughout the kingship we see the same pattern of brokenness.

But even in the midst of rejection, God remained faithful to his people. Throughout the OT, God raised up prophets to challenge the authority of the king, and to call people back to him. And there's lots of good prophet stories we could talk about – **Nathan and King David, Jonah and the city of Nineveh, Hosea and his adulterous wife.** But there's one particular story and prophet I want us to focus in on this morning – the prophet Elijah. You see, Elijah is considered by many to be the greatest prophet of the OT. If anyone could do something about the problem of sin in Israel, it would be Elijah.

In Elijah's time, Ahab and his wife Jezebel, were king and queen of the northern kingdom of Israel. 1 Kings 21:25-26 tells us that ***"There was none who sold himself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited. He acted very abominably*** (like the snowman – terrible depravity) ***in going after idols..."***. Ahab is considered by many to be Israel's most evil king. And Jezebel made it her job to kill God's prophets. This pair was somethin' else. And as part of his reign, Ahab established a robust worship of false gods, especially the false gods Baal and Asherah.

So against the worst king, God sends his best prophet. And all this comes to a head at Mount Carmel, where Elijah challenges Ahab's false prophets to a showdown. And he does this in front of the people of Israel. Listen to his challenge to them: ***"How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (18:21)***. Yahweh, the One True God, is about to crush the powerless idolatry of Israel. But if you don't know the story – two altars, two piles of wood, no fire, call on your God, winner take all, loser is an idiot. Simple game.

So the prophets of Baal call on their god all day, ALL DAY, nothing happens. Elijah finally says, "Enough! You're making fools of yourselves." Dumps water on his altar not once, not twice, but three times. Prays and fire falls from heaven and consumes everything – the offering, the wood, the rocks, and the water. And it says, "**When the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The Lord he is God; the Lord he is God!'**" (1 Kings 18:39) The false prophets are put to death. Elijah and Yahweh win the day!

Question: So why do we find Elijah one chapter later depressed, hiding, and wanting to die?

Answer: Because it didn't even matter.

Ahab and Jezebel were still evil, they wanted him dead – all the awesome, spectacular work that God did, did nothing to change the hearts of the people, to address the problem of sin.

It's like a good baseball player on a bad team. You might consistently hit home run after home run, and yet over and over, you still lose the game. After a while you kinda get tired of it. What difference does it make?

I mentioned earlier in the sermon, two things happened when sin became a reality. **The first was bondage.** We talked about that. **The second was exile.** This is the second dominate narrative of the OT. **Sin exiles the human heart from the Lord.** It's a departure, a leaving for a foreign country, a severing of relationship. We don't want him. Many times we are even hostile toward him.

You see, because of the problem of sin God's people were on a trajectory toward exile. This trajectory did not surprise God, just like Egypt was not a surprise to him. Before they ever entered the promised land, God told them that that's where they were headed. Way back in Deuteronomy 28, just before the people entered the promised land, God told them, when you choose evil instead of good, faithlessness instead of faithfulness, I will kick you out of your land. "**The Lord will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you or your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone.**" (Deut. 28:36)

And ultimately that's what would happen. As a physical picture of a deeper spiritual reality, God would allow his people to be conquered and exiled to the land of Babylon – which was itself a place of sin and corruption. In that place God's people again found themselves hopeless and helpless to change their state. They again found themselves in need. This time in need of a Redeemer to come and buy them back, to restore again a right relationship with their Creator.

And just as we saw in the story of the Exodus, God, faithful to his covenant, was not going to leave his people in exile, but show them that he was a God of Redemption. While in Babylon, God's people were helpless to bring themselves back from exile, **but while we were far off God said, "I will bring you back."**

Jeremiah 29 reveals the heart of God in accomplishing this work, saying, "**For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my**

promise and bring you back to this place (that is: back to their own land, the land of promise). ***For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you*** (“shalom” – it means: plans to bring you into a state of peace, completeness – shalom is a word often used to describe our covenant relationship with God). Again, physical picture of a spiritual reality. God says, “Here’s my plan – I’m going to restore your shalom – your peace with me instead of the evil you’re currently living in. Yes he is talking about the exile but he is also talking about the problem of sin. He goes on, I’m going ***“to give you a future and a hope.*** He says, when I do that, ***“Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.*** (What is this? It is restored relationship. That’s God’s plan. God wants to restore this broken relationship so that we are no longer living in exile from him.) ***“I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes*** (it’s interesting: that’s a word which carries in it the connotation of being taken captive – God says, You will be taken captive by me instead of your sin) ***and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.”***

And God did it. In the first year of the reign of King Cyrus of Persia, it was the Lord who stirred the heart of the king to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem and thus began the return of God’s people to the land. He was Redeemer in Babylon just as he was Deliverer in Egypt.

A physical picture of a spiritual reality. God did it physically. But spiritually the problem of sin remained.

The people of God were not better upon returning from the exile. **In Ezra people started rebuilding the temple, but then stopped their service of God to serve themselves. Nehemiah rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem in 52 days, only to turn around and realize that the people were the ones that needed rebuilding. The problem remained.**

What could be done to rebuild the human heart? Maybe that’s the problem. Maybe the problem is that the human heart didn’t need to be rebuilt. It needed to be replaced. Maybe the human spirit didn’t need to be enhanced. It needed to be exchanged. **And in that God says, “You can’t do that. I’ll need to do that too.”**

This chapter of the story closes with that promise of hope. That one day, God would do something that would exchange the lifeless human spirit. That would replace the hard, sin-filled heart.

God says, “Just wait. It is coming. I will do this.”

For through all of this God had already set in motion a plan to set captives free and to bring spiritual exiles home again into a restored relationship with their God.

A plan that establish a King to be our king, and yet who could also rule his kingdom in perfect justice and righteousness.

God says, “It’s coming. ***The zeal of the Lord will do this.***”

THE STORY



***“May the God of hope fill you with all joy
and peace in believing...”***

- Romans 15:13



“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

- John 15:11



***“You [God] have put more joy in my heart
than they [humans] have when their grain
and wine abound.”***

- Ps. 4:7



THE STORY



Two Effects of Sin:

1) Sin enslaves the human heart





IDOLATRY



OPPRESSION



CRYING OUT



DELIVERANCE



***“In those days there was no king in Israel.
Everyone did what was right in his own
eyes.”***

- Judges 21:25



***“In those days there was no king in Israel.
Everyone did what was right in his own
eyes.”***

- Judges 21:25

“You can be like God.”

- Gen. 3:5



“There was none who sold himself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited. He acted very abominably in going after idols...”

-1 Kings 21:25-26



“How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”

- 1 Kings 18:21



“When the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, ‘The Lord he is God; the Lord he is God!’”

- 1 Kings 18:39



Two Effects of Sin:

- 1) Sin enslaves the human heart
- 2) Sin exiles the human heart



“The Lord will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you or your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone.”

- Deut. 28:36



“For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed in Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you (“shalom”) and not to harm, plans to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you...”



“You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes (root: “captivate”) and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.”

- Jer. 29:10-14



“Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne...with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.”

- Is. 9:7

