

Suffer to Give Life
Gal 4:12-20
January 13th, 2019

Last week I spoke on Epiphany. It was fitting because it was Epiphany Sunday.

Where the Magi were confronted with the Light of Christ, their eyes were opened and they saw Jesus face to face, and fell down to worship him as king.

Epiphany means what? Appearance. God moment. Manifestation. The penny drops – we hear God’s voice, we hear Him speak to us, the eyes of our heart opens up...

The first Epiphany was when God’s Holy Spirit, began to work in the hearts of these non-Jew Magi – astrologers, kings from the eastern lands; reveals Jesus to them – gives these men a hunger to follow Jesus, and as a result they journey from these far eastern lands to Bethlehem, where they find Jesus.

Isn’t it cool that these men, growing up in the east, discovered Jesus?

Think of those people groups who seem far away from ever discovering Jesus, and we wonder, how will they ever come to know Christ?

Jesus already has that covered. He is at work, drawing those to Himself.

Perhaps encourage each of us to pray for those far away from Jesus, and pray they be given an epiphany of him –

see Jesus face to face, fall down and worship Jesus as King.

Now think of those in our own sphere of influence, family, friends, who seem far from God. And remind yourself, God revealed himself to the Magi – these wise men from the east – He can reveal Himself to your friends; your family.

Give them to Jesus now.

Entrust them to Him.

I had this sense this week as I pondered Epiphany, and I have a sense – now you can test this over this coming year – but I have a sense that this is the year of Epiphany.

Break – through’s this year in our lives; the life of our church, people in our community.

I believe it. And am already seeing it.

The year of Epiphany.

Pray for Epiphany – eyes opened; open the eyes of our heart Lord, that we may see you, know you, hear your voice, sense your presence, your love, receive you ...

Worship

Now let’s prepare ourselves for Communion.

On the night Jesus was betrayed, scripture says he broke bread.

Think about who was around that table.

We have x-zealots / men who advocated violence in the name of religion, X-tax collectors, doubters, betrayers, deniers...

Quite the motley crew.

An imperfect bunch to say the least.

Read from Redeeming Sex – book by Debra Hirsch

Chapter 11

God might have formed a perfect church; he chose, instead, to establish one that was human.

Henry Newman

Having spent time around sinners, and also around purported saints, I have a hunch why Jesus spent so much time with the former group: I think he preferred their company. Because the sinners were honest about themselves and had no pretense, Jesus could deal with them. In contrast, the saints put up airs, judged him, and sought to catch him in a moral trap. In the end it was the saints, not the sinners who crucified Jesus.”

Philip Yancey

I want to begin with a story.

The setting is Israel at around 2200-1550 BCE or BC

Now they didn't have the same customs that we do when it comes to dating or courtship.

What they did was this.

When a young man would get to the stage in his life where he felt he was ready to be married, he would come to his Abba Father and make the request. Dad do you think it is time?

Well, this was a pretty serious decision, not to be made alone, so the whole community was invited into the decision-making process.

The community would then gather together in what was called an Insulae – community meeting place - to discuss whether they think this young man's boy is ready to be married. After hours of deliberation, they might agree that this would be a wise decision.

If the decision was yes, he is ready; someone would then bring up, perhaps the boy's mother, who might be a suitable wife.

They may even ask the young man's opinion, but this is not guaranteed.

Once they decide, the boy's father and the boy would go pay a visit to the girl's family. They would respectfully ask for their daughter's hand in marriage.

They would then be invited to stay as their community gathers together in their Insulae to deliberate and discuss – is it the right time – is she ready to be married.

If they decide it is the right time, they would then discuss whether or not this would be a good family for the young woman to be married into.

If both families agreed a covenant would be made between the two families.

A covenant is a promise or agreement – something that was taken very seriously. Not to be breeched or broken.

This is how they would strike up such a covenant.

They would gather together, the boy's family/clan on the one side and the girl's family/clan on the other.

The boy's father would then take a calf or a goat or a lamb, kill it, and cut it in half – laying the halves across from each other leaving a path of blood between the two halves.

He would then walk into the blood path and slowly stomp his feet in the blood saying,

“Both God and myself give you the permission to do this to me if my son does not fulfill the demands of this covenant.”

Pretty harsh. Right?

Following this, the girl's father would stand to his feet, walk into the blood path and slowly stomp his feet, saying the same thing.

“Both God and myself give you the permission to do this to me if my daughter does not fulfill the demands of this covenant.”

Keeping this in mind lets listen to this text ...

Now I want to make the shift to Genesis 15: 5-18a

God calls Abram to leave his country, his relatives, his father's family and go into the land God showed him. He promised Abram that God would make him a great nation. Essentially the blessing was this.

“Abram, I will make you a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. All the families of earth will be blessed through you.”

God makes Abram a promise that out of his line God will raise up a people who will bless the nations. It is from his line that Jesus is given – through Jesus God begins His rescue operation of the world and all creation. To redeem – to renew – make all things new.

He later calls Abram to walk before him and be blameless.

But Abram has a problem. He and his wife Sarai have no children – so how was this to be fulfilled?

So, he asks God, “What good are your blessings if I do not have a son? I have no descendants! Kind of need kids – lots of kids - to see this promise fulfilled.”

This is where we step into the story.

God tells him to look into the sky and count the stars – if he can – and then tells him that this is how many descendants he will have. As numerous as the sand on the seashore – as numerous as the stars in the heavens.

You and I are part of the fulfillment of this divine promise. In Jesus we are part of God's family – heirs of this heavenly promise.

Then God cuts a covenant with Abram.

The Lord tells him to bring him a heifer, female goat, ram, turtledove and pigeon.

He kills them all, cuts each animal down the middle and lays them side by side with a blood trail down the middle.

Abram has seen this before – this is how covenants have been made with his people for hundreds of years.

And Abram knows the drill. He knows what is about to take place here. He knows what the covenant will require – that he will have a part to play.

I wonder what he is thinking?

“Will I be required to walk through the blood trail? But what if I can’t meet the requirements? What if my people won’t be able to live up to the covenant? Walk before God and be blameless? Quite a high bar?”

No wonder the story tells us that Abram fell into a deep sleep and a terrifying darkness swept over him. God then reveals to him what must be.

God, being the greater part of the covenant, walks through the carcasses first. The smoking firepot and flaming torch all signify the presence of God’s eternal fire – His very presence.

God is stomping His feet in the blood saying, “May I die, I will shed my blood if I do not fulfill the demands of this covenant.”

This is where Abram would expect to take his turn, and walk through the blood path, but God does not require him to do so.

Remember the text...Abraham is fast asleep. God knows he can’t fulfill his part of the bargain. So, God takes him out of the picture.

Reminds me of the Prodigal Son story, when he comes to his senses and returns to his father, he confesses his sin, he admits he’s not worthy to be called his son; but when it comes to his rehearsed part of his speech where he would tell God he would work off his sin, pay his debt, his Father interrupts him, and throws a party.

God wasn’t about to have him work his way back into relationship; this was a gift of grace, paid for by the Father.

The same thing goes here.

God does not require Abram to walk through, in essence he is saying, “This is too big for you. Let me take care of it.”

Here God makes this promise. “May I die; I will shed my blood if you do not fulfill the demands of this covenant.”

Incredible! God invokes a curse on Himself, if Abram fails to fulfill his part of this covenant!

At this very moment God sentenced His one and only Son, His very self to death!

I want to remind you of Paul’s words in Galatians.

Galatians 3:13 says, *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”*

God knew before the creation of the world that Jesus would give up his divine privileges and take the humble position of a slave and be born as a human being.

All so that the world would know the love of the father – that the true nature of God is to be a servant – knowing full well that humanity would try to kill love.

But Jesus, obedient to His Father’s will, willingly laid down his very life.

So, for 1000’s of years God’s people – the Jews - would meet together in the temple to worship. At both 9 am and 3 pm they would gather together to remind God of His covenant promise He made to His people through Abraham.

That He will make them a blessing to the nations. That through them all people would be blessed. They continued to remind God of the covenant He made and that God Himself would keep His part of the covenant even if they failed.

So, they would gather together at 9 am and 3 pm to worship and cry out to God – at this time the ‘Shofar’ would be blown at precisely the same time the sacrifice was made and the blood spilt!

For thousands of years God’s people would gather together for this purpose. Crying out to God to keep His covenant.

1800 years later Jesus is paraded through the streets of Jerusalem, bloodied and beaten beyond recognition. Jerusalem would have been filled to the brim that day – probably 35,000 people - for it was a Holy Day, where God’s people would gather to sacrifice and worship God – remind Him of His covenant promise He made to Abraham.

A few hours later Luke records these words.

“By this time, it was noon, and darkness fell across the whole land until three o’clock. The light from the sun was gone. And suddenly, the curtain in the sanctuary in the temple was torn down the middle. Then Jesus shouted, “Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!” And with those words he breathed His last” (Luke 23:44-46).

Standing at the corner of the South East corner of the temple wall, at precisely 3 pm, **the Shofar would be blown**, just when the sacrifice would be made to remind God to keep His covenant promise.

Jesus hears the Shofar and cries out *“Father I entrust my spirit into your hands.”* And breaths His last!

It is finished! Jesus cries out!

In essence Jesus is whispering to God the Father, “Abba, I kept your promise!”

I don’t know what this evokes in you, but it causes me to worship God.

So maybe right out of the gate, you need to be encouraged that you’re in good company.

If you come to the table aware of your brokenness. Aware of your need. You found yourself stumbling towards the cross this week. Far from stellar performance, but you want to know Jesus, want to be like him, want to follow him – you want to follow but you're scared...you're in good company.

Scripture says that Jesus took the bread, looked each of them in the eye, and broke the bread saying...

"This is my body, broken for you, take and eat."

Essentially saying, I am enough for you. I am all you need. I am the bread of life. I truly satisfy. I paid your debt. I knew you wouldn't do it perfectly. That's why I came...I'm the perfect One. I am the faithful One.

Yes, you've been going to other things, thinking they will satisfy, but you have discovered they only make you more dis-satisfied.

Our response to his grace, is simply that we receive. Take and eat.

Take it for yourself. Own it. Invite me inside of you. Allow me to be in you. Allow my energy to course through your veins.

Broken for you, for me, so we would never have to be broken for our own sin.

He who was righteous, became sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God.

Then Jesus took the cup and said, "this is my blood. The blood of the new covenant.

You know that covenant I made with Abram 100's of years ago?

The promise God made so many years ago, that He will take it upon Himself to fulfill the covenant promise; "May I die; I will shed my blood if you do not fulfill the demands of this covenant."

He fulfilled that promise in Jesus. He shed his blood for you. To pay for our sin. Cancel out your sin and mine.

In Christ's work on the cross, his covenant demands were met.

And our response? Is simply to offer ourselves to Him.

Take and eat. Appropriate what He did on our behalf. Own it. Make it your own.

You know this Covenant; the best thing we have to compare in this life is marriage. The marriage covenant – this was meant to remind us of God's marriage covenant with us.

His vow that He will never leave us or forsake us.

As you come to the table this morning, I want you to hear these words.

I promise to love you, comfort you, honor and keep you for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, I am yours, now and always.

And for those of us who have put our trust in Him, we can come to the table and renew our commitment to Him.

I promise to love you, comfort you, honor and keep you for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, I am yours, now and always.

Let's come to the table.

Worship Response

Closing Words

My prayer for us as a church... It flows out of this story.

Debra and Alan Hirsch's church, either in LA or Melbourne.

"I've always believed in an open table. Our big, square, purple Communion Table was set up right in the middle of our gathering, symbolizing Jesus – not the band or the pulpit – as our center.

On the table were several loaves of bread, bottled wine, and grape juice. The table was set low to the ground with cushions scattered around so people could kneel or sit for as long as they needed, and they did.

Alone or with someone else, people came to meet with God, and many remained seated there until way after our gathering finished.

The things you can do with your own building.

One of my most precious memories was captured one Sunday morning as I looked around the purple table. Sitting, breaking bread was a lady who had known Jesus her whole

life. She was in her eighties, our oldest member, and dressed in her white lawn bowling outfit.

Right next to her sat a gay Jewish man in leather chaps. He was HIV positive and curious about Jesus. Among others was a woman who had four kids going through a messy divorce, a speech pathologist who worked at a local hospital, and a former exotic dancer who had found Jesus in a strip club. As I watched them all, I wept. What a symbol of the broken, diverse body of Christ.

What a beautiful picture of the body of Christ.

Diverse. Broken. Each one at different points along the journey.

But with Jesus.

This is my prayer...that we the River would become more diverse. More people, in all walks of life, experiencing their own epiphany of Jesus. Encountering Him, face to face for themselves.

That our table would one day include...

Indo Canadian. Squamish Nation. Straight, Queer...young, old...

Because Jesus did not come for the righteous, but for the sinner...like you and me.

Prayer

Send Out.