**Reimagining the Church – a people who remember their God (May 12, 2024) Genesis 17:1-9**

1. It has become almost a meme: The God of the New Testament as revealed in Christ is a God of grace, peace, mercy, kindness and love. The God of the Old Testament? Not so much. Too much blood, war, and a complete disregard for human life.

2. The famous Oxford evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins, said this about the God of the Old Testament in his bestseller, "The God Delusion." *""The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."*

3. Most Christians would disagree with Dawkins but they wouldn't be able to answer him because, frankly, their knowledge of the Old Testament is incomplete and they don't understand the flow of God through the Book, even the parts of the book we avoid or at which we cringe.

4. The other problem is the way Christians have been taught to look at their Bibles. I plan to either do a series of sermons about this or a long form video – weigh in and let me know which you would prefer. Let me be very, very clear: there is not a problem with our Bibles; there is a HUGE problem with the way we use our Bibles and what we have been told about our Bibles.

5. Handled correctly, or rightly divided, as Paul said, the Bible brings us to God as revealed in Jesus, the Christ. Handled incorrectly, we get thousands of denominations, all claiming to have a unique truth, and a set of templates on how to read the Bible that lead us to do one of two things with the uncomfortable stories in the OT – just ignore them and hope they go away or find a way to make it all holy and good and right and loving even when it speaks of genocide against women and children.

6. We need to address that head on – either in sermon or long form video – but, for today, I want to call us back to the Old Testament. We need to be the people of God who remember their God from the beginning, through the prophets, through the poetry, through the histories, all the way to Jesus and then through the early church and all the way through the last 2000 years to us…and, most likely, well beyond us.

7. We used to have Bibles in our pews…but our Bibles were just the New Testament and, perhaps, Psalms. We were told to pay attention to the things written on THIS side of the cross. We were completely divorced from our Jewish roots. We were taught a replacement theology where God was said to have once loved the Jews but, since they didn't accept Jesus, He has since dropped them and now taken the Gentiles to be His people.

8. Of course, this goes against the entire flow of scripture and a host of passages in our New Testament that warn us against even entertaining such an idea. Not that that stops so many Christians from continuing to think this, even if they don't teach it. ("Of course God loves the Jews and we aren't racist BUT…")

9. So…let's consider these older books, the foundational books in our community of faith. If we don't, we divorce Jesus's teachings from the centuries that led up to his arrival. It makes Christians orphans, without heritage. It makes us completely unable to understand some NT books such as Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation as they are soaked in OT teachings, images, arguments and allusions. It makes us twist Galatians and Romans so that we can legitimize our ignoring of the fact that our faith – even today – is Jewish in character because it came from Jewish sources, chosen by God.

10. And Jesus was a Jew – and one who took the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob seriously and called Him "Father." Those sent out into the world to tell others about Jesus were Jews. As Paul put it, it's a Jewish tree! We Gentiles are grafted into the tree but we are in no wise greater than the tree and we certainly are NOT replacing the tree.

11. In the NT, we learn that Jesus loves us and cares for us. That is wonderful news – Good News. Yet, in the OT, we learn something we need to understand first: this earth does not and never will revolve around us. It is God's world, not ours.

12. In our Western world, we demand that things occur in a timely, organized, logical manner. But in the OT, we learn that God often moves slowly, unpredictably, and paradoxically. As the song says, "God is His own interpreter and He will make it plain." Trying to overlay Western logic on an all transcendent God is a futile task; frankly, it is a silly task.

13. In a world that celebrates celebrity, the OT reveals a God who doesn't care at all, not one iota, about celebrity and worldly wealth or power. He is not impressed by our tanks, social media influencers, presidents, kings, or war machines. Examples?

14. In the story of the birth of Moses, God identifies by name the two Hebrew midwives who save Moses' life…but not the name of the ruling Pharoah. Historians think that, of all of Israel's kings, King Omri was the most powerful and one of the most influential in his part of the world…and God gives him 8 verses.

15. In the OT, God reverses the direction of religion. The pagan God cries and that makes it rain on earth. He gets mad and lightning strikes the land. But our scripture shows us a God who listens to us and then acts FOR us. He acts through and for us and with us…but it is still HIS world.

16. There are patterns in the OT that, if we read it give us great comfort. One of them is that God's gift of salvation is found in the middle of judgment…in and after the Flood (8:15-19), after the dispersion of the nations at Babel (11:1-9)…and it is there we find the blessing of Abraham. And notice something about Abraham's blessing?

17. First, it is found in the middle of judgment and hardships. Second, he was blessed to be a blessing. Just as Noah was blessing in the face of the coming deluge, Abraham would be a blessing in the

middle of times of crisis and confusion. So were the prophets, kings, judges, disciples, apostles, and you.

18. Go into all the world…to whom much is given…I send you out like sheep among wolves…let your light shine in the darkness…be a city on a hill…a city of refuge…a sanctuary.

19. Take the long view of history. Learn how God leads us through history and has since our books were first written (and before). What you see is not the end of the matter. In Genesis 12:6-9, Abram is sent out into the desert. Canaan is a big place but only three places are named – Shechem, Berthel, and Negev. He never saw the end of the story. When he died, they were still isolated places that seemed to play no part in the story of God or His people.

20. But they are the same three places named in the story of Jacob who entered the land about 215yrs later. And they are also the sites named as occupied by Joshua in Joshua chapters 8, 10, and 11… occupied 500 years after Jacob, 715 years after Abraham. What you see is NOT the end of the story and NOT all that there is. God moves when He moves in the way He moves. If we learn our OT, we learn that.

21. God has been here before. He walked with them even in dreams and He will walk with us. When God sends us out into this new world, it is new to us, not to Him. If He is not afraid and if He is not panicked, we should not be, either.

22. God Himself is our shield and reward (15:1). Whatever reward you want out of life, consider that receiving God as your reward is a significant upgrade.

23. I love reading how Abraham and those after him argued with God and questioned God – His timing, His goodness, His actions and His inactions. We do the same. And the answer God gave more than any other? “I am the Lord.” (using the same name given to Moses)

24. He calls us, just like He called Abraham, to “Walk before me and be blameless” (17:1,2) Abraham’s wife struggled through all of this and God changed her name to Sarah, meaning “princess.” And

those of us who remain faithful, who remember our God, will receive a crown just like her.

25. Once, Abraham fell on his face and laughed. When he got to the point of his life where he fell on his face and just listened, God blessed him and he, in return, blessed all of us.

26. We are blessed to be a blessing, to walk with God and leave tracks so that our children and grandchildren and neighbors and strangers who see us will find their place in this very long, beautiful, story of God.

27. Start each day with: remember God. See where that takes you.