

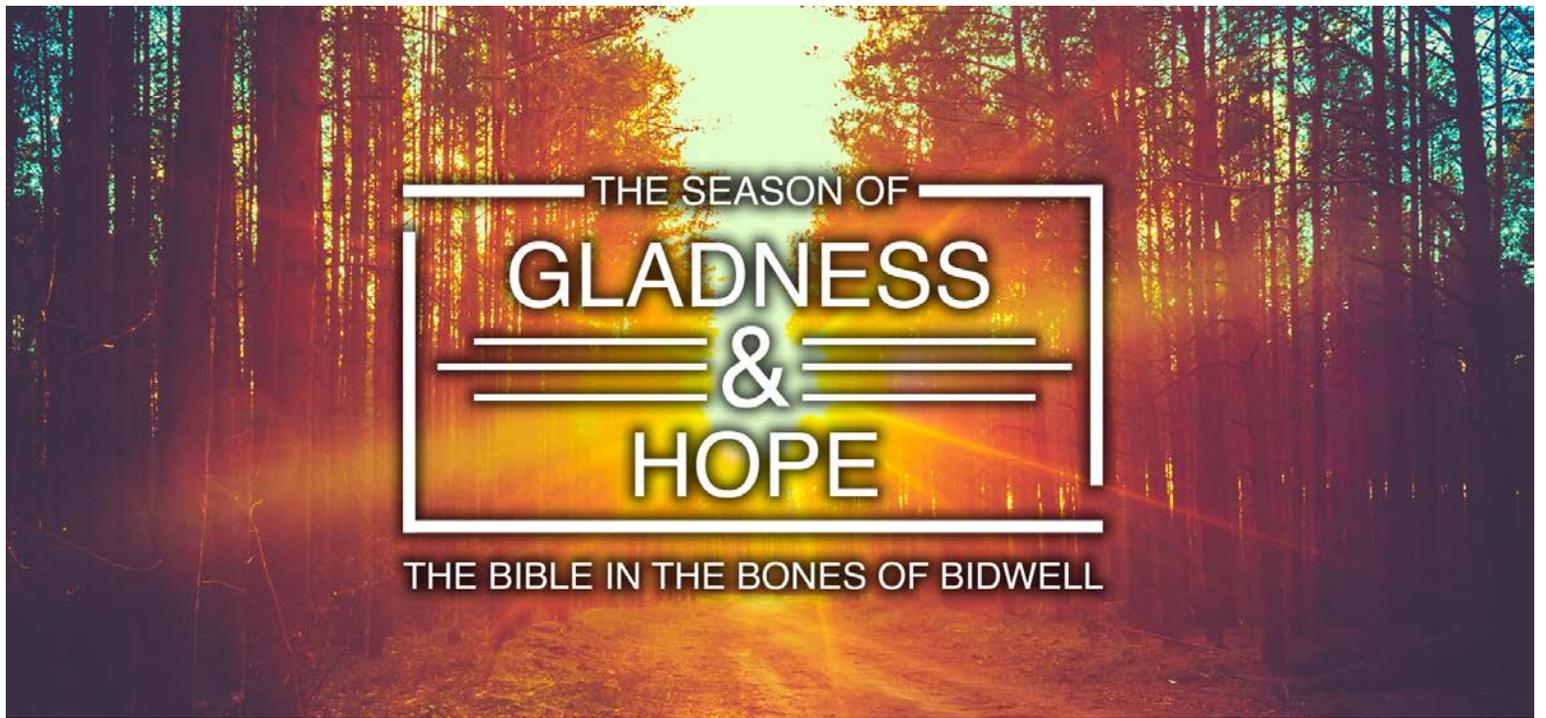
ENCOUNTERING ANCIENT RHYTHMS



CHANGING ME, CHANGING YOU

A Weekly Devotion and Spiritual Guide of
Bidwell Presbyterian Church

APRIL 11, 2021



CONTENTS

I. Introduction.....	pg 3
II. God's Story.....	pg 4
Psalm 133, 1 John 1:1-2:2, Acts 4:32-35, John 20:19-29	
III. Weekly Scriptures with Insight and Commentary.....	pgs 5 - 7
IV. Memory Verses.....	pg 8
V. Ancient Rhythm Formation Exercise.....	pg 9
VI. Life Group Questions.....	pg 10

I. INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this edition of Encountering Ancient Rhythms: A Weekly Devotion and Spiritual Guide. We have prepared this for you not only for your personal use but also for your Life Group study if you're currently in one. The purpose behind this packet is to promote your learning of Scripture, its integration into your life, and to unite Bidwell behind its vision to grow Deeper in Christ. We hope it will encourage you to have regular Scripture passages to focus on each week and empower you to live daily as Christ's disciple. We invite you to work through it at your own pace and apply it as it suits your convenience and where you are on the journey.

The following reflections are prepared by Pastors Henry Hansen, Shannon Coon, and Ray Medina. The Scriptures are derived from a resource¹ we're using for our purposes that interrelate if you read them closely. Also, they provide substantive amounts of verses to integrate into your habit of reading and devotion. May they and this guide enrich your spiritual life and promote your walk with Christ.

Faithfully Yours,

Henry Hansen
Senior Pastor

II. GOD'S STORY

Read this week: Psalm 133, 1 John 1:1-2:2, Acts 4:32-35, John 20:19-29

Easter is a season called “Eastertide” lasting seven Sundays. During this season, the church tells and retells the stories and implications of the risen Jesus. The focus of the earliest church’s preaching in Acts was more on the implications of the resurrection than they were on the implications of the cross. This is rather astonishing. Easter becomes and is, the hope and promise of something new, hopeful, and powerfully good. What is that something new? Surprisingly, that new something is the church, the people of God, living in forgiven relationships through the power of the Spirit. Psalm 133 says “How good and pleasant it is when people live together in unity”. Indeed, the church at its best is a unified people, “one heart and mind” as Acts 4 says it. The church has rich spiritual “fellowship” with God and one another, as 1 John puts it.

Today the church in America struggles to be unified. Online worship hasn’t helped our spiritual fellowship. However, Covid-19 revealed how missing out on community is really missing out on the Gospel. Online streaming is a wonderful tool, but a Spirit-empowered community living forgiven is the something new of Easter. Hearing good music and sermons has its place, but to be a Christian is to be committed to Christian community. All our Scriptures this week point to the church as community, none better than John 20. There, the Risen One offers us peace, commissions us, breathes on us the Spirit, and reminds us to make room even for doubters. Belonging and belief go hand in hand in God’s story and that is the new, hopeful, and powerfully good something of Easter.

III. WEEKLY SCRIPTURES WITH INSIGHT AND COMMENTARY

Psalm 133

Sometimes less is more. That is certainly the case with this powerhouse of a Psalm. It is among the shortest of Psalms at only three verses. Psalm 117 is shorted at only two verses, and 131 and 134 are the only other Psalms at three. But this is not to be mistaken with being a Psalm that says less. Rather, it's one that packs truth that all Christians need to hear, especially as it relates to Christian, and even national, unity.

Unity among his believers was something that Jesus himself addressed. In John 17 which is included in his Farewell Discourse, Jesus prayed:

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity,” (verses 20-23).

Of all the things Jesus could have prayed for, he chose unity among the disciples. This is also true in Paul's letter to the Ephesians (4:3). Thus unity is not mere idealism but rather a desire and even a mandate for the church.

The imagery used in Psalm 133 is potent. In Exodus 30: 22-33, God gave Moses a recipe for a holy anointing oil that was used to anoint the tabernacle, ark, and various pieces of tabernacle furniture – which made these physical objects “holy.”² Aaron who is referenced in this Scripture is the first high priest of Israel and is meant to represent the priestly family of God. Further, Mount Hermon which is also referenced in Psalm 133, was a large mountain (9230 feet) located near Israel's northern border. Precipitation on the mountain, which included snow, helped to feed the Jordan River and supplied water for the Israelites. The dew of this mountain provided a vigorous supplement to rain and so had much life-giving potential.³ Thus we can see the value of oneness being underscored

in this Psalm as it upholds the value of unity through employing these images that were vital in Israel's history . The Psalmist is communicating the power and necessity of unity for Israel.

Personal Reflection: Churches are not always known as places of unity. The reasons are manifold. You might think of them yourself and why that is the case. You might also think, now, about your own role in promoting unity. How are you an ambassador for Christian unity? And consider your own tolerance for diversity. Sometimes we can be intolerant of our own brothers and sisters in the Christian faith because of personality and stylistic differences. Consider for example the nature of those who demean fellow churchmen who enjoy one style of worship music over another. Does this please God to hear such quibbling in the church? Certainly, theological uniformity is important. The proclamation that Jesus is the way, truth, and the life (John 14:6) is of paramount importance. Yet that frequently isn't the issue that divides Christians between denominations or within a specific local church. Thus, think about your role in promoting unity whether it's letting go of petty grievances, standing for Truth that matters, supporting the church's leadership rather than finding reasons for complaint, being a positive force for the good, and promoting the purposes of God's kingdom. What's your personal role in promoting unity in the church of Jesus Christ? How will you invite others to join you in this mission?

For Extra: Think of the ritual of applying anointing oil. It can have many purposes. What might be a practical one you can apply today in a given circumstance you find yourself in? Perhaps it's to mark a certain occasion for someone or it's something administered by you or others for healing and care.

1 John 1:1-2:2

Many churches sprang up during the latter half of the first century (house churches) due to the teachings of the apostle John. After a few decades, the churches were experiencing the influence of false teachers who claimed to have special knowledge from God about God. They claimed that only those who followed these teachers truly belonged to God. This caused a problem among the churches because their

III. WEEKLY SCRIPTURES WITH INSIGHT AND COMMENTARY

teachings did not fit with the gospel that John had written. There was confusion and turmoil among the congregations of believers. In response, John wrote a beautiful, clear, and powerful letter which pointed out the basics of the Christian faith. He reminded them of the foundational teachings they needed to remember – teachings which we still need to remember to this very day.

First, John states his credibility as a direct witness to Jesus (along with the other Apostles). He reminds his readers of his authority and the foundational learnings of his experience with the “Word of life” – Jesus. Then John responds to some of the incorrect teachings the readers have been exposed to. When he says, “If we claim...” (v 6, 8, 10), he is pointing out some of the false teachings, which are apparently a false understanding of sin. John tells them that these teachings are contradictory to what they should know and believe about sin, and the implications of some of these false teachings. And finally, John reminds them of the correct teaching about sin and the reassurance we believers have in the atoning death of Jesus (2:1-2).

Personal Reflection: The contrast of “light” and “darkness” is one of the predominant contrasts in the New Testament. Jesus talked about light and darkness (John 8:12), Paul talked about it (Romans 2:9), and here John talks about it. What are some of the ways you experience or live into “light” in your life? What are some of the ways you experience or sometimes live in “darkness” in your life? When you are in a place of “darkness,” what do you do to turn and “walk in the light?”

For Extra: Look at Ephesians 5:8-20. What does the contrast of darkness and light look like here?

Acts 4:32-35

Acts could rightly be called “the gospel of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.” The fourth book of the New Testament was written by Luke, the same author as the Gospel of Luke. Four chapters deep in verses 32-35, Luke tells the story of a second wave of converts to Christianity and a summary of some of the characteristics of the early church. The early

church, after explosive growth, was “of one heart and soul” and experienced a sense of radical warmth and generosity together. In modern parlance, we would say that the early church at its apex was a synergistic community experiencing numerical growth as well as deep solidarity. Luke’s larger story tells not only of apex moments but of the failures of the early church, including their failure to enact justice during meal distribution (Acts 6:1), their fear of the former persecutor-turned-Jesus-follower Saul (Acts 9:26), the conflicts over ethnic origins, and table fellowship (Acts 11:1-18), and conflicts over doctrine (Acts 15). Despite these crises and conflicts, the Christian community learned to walk in step with the Holy Spirit, even through these downright disillusioning moments! At each point of failure or crisis, the Holy Spirit would guide the church to new expressions of faithfulness.

Today we face many crises and conflicts in the life of the church; different than those in Acts in some ways but similar in others. We can look to Acts for clues about how we can be a church with spiritual tenacity through disillusionment today. In Acts, the church was constantly “on mission”. Christians were ministering to the hurting, the marginalized, and the un-churched. This summary Luke gives us here (Acts 4) is the culmination of Peter and John healing a man who couldn’t walk (Acts 3:1-10). Likewise, even when the church was being persecuted severely, the scattering of Christians led to the spread of joy in other places (Acts 8:4-8) and the beginning of new churches (Acts 11:19-26). Churches today can easily get stuck in survival mode rather than mission mode, to the detriment of the church and the Gospel.

Finally, crisis and disillusionment caused the church to pray together with fervor. Again, the story leading up to Luke’s summary in (Acts 4) involves Peter and John’s arrest followed by the church praying for God’s empowerment and favor (v 23-31). Living this Gospel of the Holy Spirit is far easier said than done. It may require changes in “the way we do things around here”. It might mean the dismantling of the structures we’ve created that have been successful in the past. This is not easy work, but if you believe in the Gospel of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, then this is also inevitable. Thanks be to God for the continued work of the Holy Spirit!

III. WEEKLY SCRIPTURES WITH INSIGHT AND COMMENTARY

Personal Reflection: What are your dreams for the church and how have you been disillusioned with the church? How can you work through the struggle of trusting the Holy Spirit while working through a struggle in community? After reading this passage in Acts, what core practice do you think can help our church better live out the Gospel of the Holy Spirit?

For Extra: The first major financial gift occurs right after Luke's summary statement (v 32-25). Joseph Barnabas, a native of Cyprus, gives a substantial gift to the church by laying it at the Apostle's feet (v 36-37). This is significant not only because of the sum but also because Luke notes that Barnabas was "a native of Cyprus," indicating that he was part of the Jewish diaspora outside of Judea. The reach of the Gospel to "all tribes and nations" is part of Luke's story in Acts, and will eventually include not only Jews from the diaspora but Gentiles as well. This motif in Acts is so central to the conflicts and progress of the early church that it is rather amazing that more focus on racial reconciliation, inclusion, and justice isn't talked about more with reference to Acts today.

John 20:19-29

Many still think of "the church" today as the building, even after months of having to rethink church apart from the building due to Covid-19. Though the word "church" doesn't appear in John's Gospel (or any Gospel except Matthew), the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit come to a people. The exception is Easter morning when the risen Christ appears to Mary Magdalene alone in John 20. From that point forward, the risen Christ appears to his gathered followers. Everything the risen Christ says and does have implications for what it means to be his church today. Jesus appears to his followers even as they are locked up in a room for fear (v 19). Jesus says, "Peace be with you" indicating both his invitation to relationship and the "shalom" (peace) that God intends for the whole world (v 19). Jesus shows them his wounds (v 20) indicating that the risen Jesus is eternally wounded, marked, and broken for the sake of the world. Then Jesus commissions his followers for the mission, "As the Father sent me so I send you," (v 21) and breathes on them the Holy Spirit (v 22). After this, Jesus indicates that living in forgiving and forgiven relationships will be the crux of their

moving forward (v 23). A wounded healer, Jesus offers "the church" peace, spiritually empowers them and commissions them for the mission, and speaks directly to the quality of their relationships. This is the essence of a healthy church; but there is one more crucial element that has everything to do with Thomas. No disciple better represents the deep epistemological (relating to the theory of knowledge of something) questions people carry today about faith in God.

The disciples show us that the church makes space for the doubter. It is, in fact, central to the church's mission to be inclusive of those who cannot or will not believe. A week after Easter, Thomas is with the disciples. Hear that again, doubting Thomas is with them. Belonging comes prior to belief. Jesus again appears and invites Thomas himself to see and touch his wounds, after which Thomas makes a profound profession of faith. Jesus responds, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (v 24-29). Jesus speaks about us. None of us have ever "seen" Jesus, yet we believe, at least sometimes. We may also add with confidence "Blessed is the church who is peace-making, mission-focused, forgiving, and who makes room for the doubter."

Personal Reflection: Do you think of the church as a building or as a people? Do you identify with the word "church" as part of who you are? What does this text teach us about what it means to be Jesus' church? What core practice do you think can help our church be more like the church the risen Christ had in mind?

For Extra: This Easter story begins with the disciples gathered behind locked doors "for fear of the Jews." Throughout John's Gospel, "the Jews" is shorthand for some Jews, mainly the religious leaders, not all Jews. Also, their fear may be related to their own doubt of Mary Magdalene's witness to the resurrection. They, like Thomas, doubt what they have not experienced. Certainly not based on the testimony of a woman! The fact that Jesus appears first to a woman turns patriarchy on its head, a fact that we can easily miss. Lastly, they "rejoice" (v 20) when they see the wounds of Christ. It is his wounds that reveal his identity.

2. Katharine Sakenfeld, *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*.
3. Paraphrased fragment from commentary.

IV. MEMORY VERSE FOR THE WEEK

1 JOHN 1:3-4

“We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

“Fellowship” is a word whose meaning has been watered down. Anything related to church can be dubbed “fellowship,” from a potluck to an after church congregation about the big game. For John, “fellowship” is a gift given as a result of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The gospel creates a fellowship, and John encourages the church to have a gospel fellowship characterized by love and forgiveness. Put 1 John 1:3-4 to memory, remembering that fellowship is a gift from Christ and the quality of Christian relationships is a proclamation of the Gospel.

V. ANCIENT RHYTHM FORMATION EXERCISE

To say that worship is a spiritual practice is an understatement. Worship is a cluster of spiritual practices all of which shape us and form us to be less like the world and more like Christ. This week's spiritual practice is a call to figure out how to worship with the larger, broader church. Are you too tired or out of the habit to worship in person? It's time to get back to it. Worshiping in a community shapes us. It's not simply about our individual relationship to God, although it is; our becoming more like Christ has everything to do with encountering and relating to fellow brothers and sisters in Jesus, as quirky as they may be. Are you hesitant to worship in person? Understandable, but if you are eating on restaurant patios or going into the grocery store even for just 30 minutes, our outdoor patio worship service is going to be less hazardous to your health. Are you bored with online worship and simply cannot meet in person? Okay, find a way to fellowship. Call a sister or brother in Christ and exchange prayer requests on Sunday over the phone or on Zoom. Or tell a brother or sister what God has been saying to you through his Word over the phone. Don't just post it on Facebook, connect with someone because community really is a spiritual practice. Again, worship is a cluster of practices involving prayer, hearing Scripture reading, singing, and taking communion; all of which are formative. And worship involves community, being with and for others in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit!

VI. LIFE GROUP QUESTIONS (SERMON)

“Easter, Wedding Soup, & Real Community”

Message by Pastor Ray Medina

April 11, 2021

Acts 4:32-35; John 20:19-31

GETTING STARTED

This past Sunday, Pastor Ray Medina spoke about real community. Read through Acts 4:32-35 and John 20:19-31 for a memory refresher. Take some time to discuss the actions and attitudes of believers toward one another.

LEARNING & LIVING OUT SCRIPTURE

1. What does Easter have to do with being a genuine community?
2. How does the Spirit of the risen Christ help us to overcome our differences?

LIVING OUT “REAL LIFE”

3. What does your relationship with God have to do with your relationship with others (beyond being supportive to your own faith or obligatory)?
4. What does it look like for you to “be for other people,” characterized by love and service, rather than simply being with other people?
5. What might it look like for you to be more “real” or vulnerable rather than perfect? What might it look like for you to be more inclusive of doubters?

SHARING & PRAYER REQUESTS