

Reminders of God's Blessings

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Scripture Reading (included later in the message): Genesis 35:6-7, 9-14

This Sunday begins week 10 of doing our part in staying at home during this pandemic. It was March 15th that we stopped having worship services at our church. Who knew it would be this long, and we do really do not know how long this will continue as our state and country, especially with places all over in our country and the world trying opening up more and more through phases.

Our Church Council has meet already as we make plans for the day we are allowed to resume having worship services at our church. We of course put the safety of each other and our community first as we make plans and consider what it will look like when they allow churches to have worship services with limitations most likely. There are too many questions still, uncertainties and of course the waiting of what happens with churches having worship services again.

Though our state extended stay-at-home order is until May 28th, we do not know what places will be allowed to reopen and the initial requirements will be. However, we will not be any rush to open the church until we are prepared as a church to do so, even if it ends up being a week or two after we are allowed to reopen the church.

As we all know, there are more questions than answers. We also know we come to this with different approaches, such as some would like to resume services right away and some want to stay home until there are no more cases of COVID-19 in our area. Let's pray together as our church continues to prepare.

As you pastor, and as one who does trust in our God, pray for me also as I seek to do what is best for all of us. The last thing we need is the worst case scenario happening in reopening either too early or without proper preparations. Though we cannot prevent everything, as long as we are able to take the time to prepare well we will.

I cannot say when we'll reopen, even when restrictions are lifted more and more. But when we do we will make sure everyone knows what the plans are, options for those who wish to remain home until they feel safe enough to venture out again, and those who will remain home until it is deemed on day as completely safe.

Now for the Scripture reading from Genesis 35:6-7, 9-14.

⁶Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, ⁷and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel,¹⁴ because it was there that God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother.

⁹ God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and he blessed him. ¹⁰ God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.” So he was called Israel. ¹¹ God said to him, “I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you. ¹² The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.” ¹³ Then God went up from him at the place where he had spoken with him. ¹⁴ Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured out a drink offering on it, and poured oil on it.

Let us pray. Ever-present God, we trust in you for you have and will always watch over us. Bless your Word and speak to us through your Holy Spirit. Transform the words that come from my mouth into the message you have for us and as we strive to live faithfully and lovingly as followers and disciples of Christ. Amen.

There are some objects, photos, tools, and other significant things that I have that mean various things to me. They all have stories that remind me of a time, a place, an event, and often times people. We have various magnets on our fridge that are from places we have traveled as a family on vacations. We have Christmas ornaments from when Jamie and I were first married, including of kayakers with our names below them that remind us of having traveled to Maine with friends and went whale watching, kayaking, hiking in Acadia National Park and so much more like eating a 3-lb lobster someone said he'd pay for if I ate it all in one sitting. And I was smiling as I enjoyed the entire lobster in one sitting with surprisingly a little room for dessert just a little while later. I have tools my dad gave me that I remember as a child seeing him use. He has newer tools he uses when he needs while living in Florida, but the tools he gave me were still in good shape since he took good care of them, as I do to this day. There are so many other things that I have that were gifts, such as when Rebekah was first born, as well as when our twin boys were born. On our fireplace mantel there are all sorts of objects, such as the first gift Jamie and I received when I began my first appointment as a minister at First Birmingham United Methodist Church, a wonderful gift from friends of a beautiful large multi-mirrored framed hanging. Also on the mantel is a small item that also touches my heart when I see it, which is the paw print of our last dog, Cody, who we rescued and loved for 13 years. I have a set of Petoskey stones, gifted to us, one for each of us 5 Kim family members. I could go on and on. But I will end with one more object that never leaves me. That is my wedding ring. As you know, it represents my love for, connection with, and commitment to my wife Jamie. It also represents my vows that are not only to her but to God. Let me be clear here that I am not trying to making commentary at this time on divorce or the various reason people do as well as need to do so. I intentionally mention my wedding ring last, as well as how it also symbolizing my vows to God, because if we really think about the gifts we have in life, every single one of them, they are from God.

The items we have in life, whether they were given to us, whether we bought them, or whether they we made them, they remind us of something and usually someone.

If you look around your house, you'll see items that were placed in certain places so you would not forget a time, event, and those you were with.

If you look around most buildings, it'll be the same. If you drive around a neighborhood, a town, or to just about any civilized or once habited place, you'll find signs, land markers, and all sorts of objects and even monuments to tell a story, to point to a person or place or historical event. When living in Washington, D.C. I was able to visit the National Mall often where there stood the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial, Korean War Veterans Memorial, Thomas Jefferson Memorial, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial, National World War II Memorial, as well as the 15 free national museums to visit, one of my favorites being the National Air & Space Museum.

Time, resources, and so much effort were put into making all such monuments, memorials, museums, and so much more because we did not want to forget the people, the lives, the sacrifices, and the difference each person made through their lives, their service, their inventions, and gifts they gave so that others would have a better life.

This is nothing new, and it certainly was not an idea of those who arrived in these lands we call America. There were those who lived here before we did. There were people who lived not only a few hundred years ago, but all the way back to the beginnings of the human existence.

People from Old Testament times did not only do this out of how God created them to want to make monuments for achievements, events, and for people, but God also directed and commanded them to do so.

And in today's Scripture reading, God tells Jacob to build an altar where God met him many years ago, some calculate some 20 years, when Jacob was running away from his brother. If you remember, Jacob had pretty much taken everything from his brother, that included his birthright and firstborn blessings. If you don't remember, it was their mother's idea that Jacob disguise himself as his brother Esau in order to trick their blind father to give Jacob the blessing instead of firstborn Esau. And Esau vowed to kill his brother, which their mother knew would happen unless Jacob literally ran for his life. So when God first spoke to Jacob was in that place where Jacob had a dream of the stairway from earth to heaven and the angels of God were ascending and descending. At that time, Jacob made a stone or pillar memorial to remember that glorious moment of God speaking to him with promises of making him a great nation. Jacob also promised then to give back to God a tenth of all God had and would bless him with.

What's interesting about Jacob's life was that it seemed like he was running away from one problem to another. We know it was fortunate that before he met his brother he was able to grow and mature spiritually, not only physically, emotionally and mentally. He wrestled with God the night before he met his brother Esau, who Jacob thought would still try to kill him. Thankfully Esau also grew spiritually and was able to forgive once he realized God had and would continue to bless him without his birthright and firstborn blessing from his father.

So at this last time of him running from trouble, God directs him to go back to those places, first being where he built an altar that he named the place El-Bethel. And then at the second place in Paddan-aram, God blessing him and restates how he will be blessed to be a great nation and how his name is no longer Jacob but Israel, as when God told him when Jacob wrestled with God before meeting his brother Esau. If you have a hard time remembering or following all of that, go back and read from Genesis 25:19 to Genesis 35.

Though there are many paths I could go with our Scripture reading today, I focus on Jacob not only being told by God to make an altar but also in remembering that Jacob on his own made monuments to remember the first time God talked with him, where God told him to return to in order to build an altar. And again, after God reminded him of his blessings and change of name, Jacob built a stone marker to remember that special time with.

Like our church with an altar, baptism font, steeple with bell, stain glassed windows, crosses, and so much more, there were traditions passed down, especially with the baptismal font and altar. Then there are things that we created to remember, to give thanks for, and to never forget how blessed we are so that we may be blessings of God to others.

This is how God created us. We were created to pass down what we could through stories, gifts of land or property or items large or small. We were created to remember with thanksgiving.

And today I ask you how you remember God's blessings in your life?

- How do you remember and give thanks for your birth? Sure we have birthday celebrations of some sort each year. Do you make sure to thank God for your birth, and not only on your birthday? What do you use to remember it is God who blessed you with this life? It may be as simple as a photo of your parents who are holding you. It could be a gift that you cherish that was given to you on one of your birthdays. It could be anything else.
- What item is prominent in your house to remind you of God's blessings of love, grace, forgiveness, hope, peace, joy, and salvation? If you look around your house, what are the most prominent things that you and other see? Are they things that remind you of God's blessing you with what you have, that God has granted you life, the gifts you have, and the abilities to earn, build, and keep what you have?
- And another way to look at what you have around you as reminders is to see that God has actually blessed you with it all!

What does this do for us, as God intends for it all to do? When we see what we have as reminders of God's blessings, then we cannot help but see with greater joy, thankfulness, and love the family God has given us, the food God has given us, the place in which God has given us to live in, and all the things we have at our fingertips and for our use and pleasure in living life to the fullest.

It also allows us to see how God wants us to use what we have for loving God and loving others. We see that what we have been given is temporary, whether temporary for us and our lifetime, as well as temporary as we can only pass on things for so long.

We have to see beyond the items and to the Giver of all the blessings and gifts God has given to us.

The biggest difference between us now and those from the Old Testament, as well as early New Testament times, is that they did not yet have the greatest gift of all who is Jesus Christ.

Of all the things I have, if you want to say, I have the Good News of and saving relationship with Jesus Christ to share, to pass on to, and to offer as a lasting gift to my children, to my family, to my friends, to all who cross my path within and outside of the church.

More than items to remind me, more than things given or created by me, more than things is the relationship with my Lord and Savior that I want as the lasting monument, if you want to call it, the spiritual monument, that is shown in all my relationships, that is shown by my speech and actions, that is evident in how I work, how I play, how I spend my time, how I spend my money, and in how I live my life.

May we all be living testimonies and living monuments of the saving grace and good news of Jesus Christ.

It is written in 2 Corinthians 3:2-3 “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”

We are living testimonies of God’s blessings So continue to see as well as create ways to remember God in your life. And never forget that you are also a living reminder to those around you of God’s blessings, the greatest blessing being that of Jesus Christ.

May others be reminded of God’s blessings in and through our lives. And may God use us to bring more and more people to know and be saved by Christ too. Amen.