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Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”



SERMON August 30: “Me & We: So Goes the Nation” 2 Chronicles 34:14-33

This week we finish our Me and We series by looking to the Old Testament for a very real relationship between the two that goes beyond what we’ve considered to this point. What we’re about to dive into is a regular theme in the Old Testament, though rarely do we put it in the context of individuality in relation to the collective. We have looked at the prophets in different ways recently. In this series we had Jeremiah as an example of individuality as a necessity to keep our faith strong amidst the waves of culture and the crowds going along with that flow that would persuade us away from Jesus. Also significant is that this trait is in common to most of the prophets that made a difference in Israel’s history.

In doing some reading this week I ran across an interesting additional way to categorize of prophets. A scholar named William Frick writes that prophets can be lumped into either central or peripheral prophets, noting that peripheral is an adjective not a value statement that they are less significant. In fact in reading the history of Israel, the peripheral prophets were often the ones the kings and people should have paid attention to. The central prophets were the ones supported by the leadership and public sentiment. The peripheral prophets were the ones who were not supported by the leadership and public sentiment.

As many of you likely know, throughout Israel’s history in scripture, the leadership and cultural sentiment most frequently led the nation away from God. It compromised with the cultures around them and led them into idolatry. The people, falling away from God, oppressed and took advantage of one another. Hearts that became cold towards God became cold towards their neighbor. Which makes sense. Scripture tells us that we can’t love God and hate our neighbor.

This statement was made to Christians who by their nature had gotten over the whole “worshipping multiple gods” thing. So if people can still claim to worship one true God can deny that worship by hating their neighbor, how much easier is it for those who have genuinely forsaken the one true God by falling into idolatry act hatefully towards their neighbor?

The central prophets were the ones tickling the ears of the kings and the people, telling them that everything was alright and not to worry. They implied that they were still pleasing to God despite all of the bad things going on and the clear abandonment of genuine worship. Notice, that these were prophets labelled as mouthpieces for God by God. Just because people label themselves faithful doesn’t mean they are. The blindness to this, and the convenience of their message to kings, leaders, and the people, made it easy to swallow these faulty, dishonest messages.

On the other hand, the peripheral prophets spoke the truth of God. They called out wrongdoing and called the leaders and the nation to get back to genuine worship and faithful living. They both warned of impending judgment if Israel continued on their path, and at the same time posed a brighter future and alternative if Israel changed its ways and returned to faithfulness. Their message was NOT convenient. It was NOT flattering. It called for humility for the sake of repentance and courage and strength for the task of changing. If we look at the prophetic record in Israel’s history, these prophets met with persecution, prison, and sometimes death.

This is the weave of individualism and collectivism. Individual Kings looking to have it their own way and reap the benefits of compromising faith and fidelity to God while still have their ears tickled. Central prophets looking out for their own individual interests by tickling the ears of the king to cultivate favor. The collective of the nation following suit by following the lead of the king and listening to these false prophets. The nation then falling away as a whole, and ultimately reaping consequence and judgment.

Then on the other hand, peripheral prophets taking the hard road of faithfulness, and paying the price for it. The remnant of faithful in Israel who continued to be faithful as they too were swept along in the consequence of the nation despite not falling into idolatry and compromise. Individuals and a smaller collective with the sturdiness and steadiness of faith, yet at the same time coping with the pain of what the larger whole has brought about.

Our Bible studies recently, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah all speak powerfully to this. Specifically in the Kingdom of Judah, the kings Manasseh, Amon, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah all allowed themselves to turn away from God, embrace idolatry and wicked practices, and had no shortage of people whispering in their ears that everything was just fine. The prophecies we read are filled with images of destruction and terrifying invasions coming their way as a consequence. Ultimately, this is what actually happens as Judah is invaded by Babylon, part of their population, in large part the elites who led the nation astray, was carted off into exile, and the Temple was destroyed.

Something interesting about what we note as judgment is that it is also the natural consequence of what happens when a nation tears itself apart. Often God uses foreign invaders to discipline Israel. That said, there is other factors here that we need to consider. These nations that invaded Israel weren't ONLY invading Israel. Israel's demise was simply one of many in a campaign of conquest where another nation was building their own empire. In other words, Israel wasn't unique in the grand scheme of things. But there is something that is unavoidable when the people behave the way we understand them to have behaved as a result of falling into idolatry. Over and over again in the prophets we see that they were less unified

and more divided. They treated one another unfairly, harshly, violently, dishonestly, and this is attributed to abandoning faith in God and embracing the practices that went along with these new idols they were worshipping.

How can a nation successfully defend itself when it has already weakened from within? How can they stand against an outside force when they can't even stand united together? Their inability to ward off invaders is directly tied to their falling away from God and their mistreatment of one another. What we call judgment, if we're honest, is simply the ultimate consequence of their own actions.

So often it takes a long time for the judgment to arrive. This makes perfect sense. We're not talking about an individual here. Many times individual consequences happen fairly quickly. For an entire nation, however, it takes time. Sometimes generations. Whatever the issue is at hand, it typically begins in one area, and then it takes time to spread. In Israel, often it seems to start with the King and then trickles down as whatever bad practices may have been occurring in other parts of the land are now given permission because of the highest example in the country.

Seeing judgment as also, in many ways, natural consequence can be very helpful not just in understanding ancient history. It can also be critical to see the warning signs today, as well as a wonderful encouragement that if we see circumstances becoming problematic, it doesn't have to be that way. Over the last 20 years I've heard a lot of common, ongoing frustrations and laments about the way our own nation is headed, and about the trajectory of Christianity itself. All of us today are experiencing in our own way the difficulties that are challenging our country. So this morning, I thought it might be interesting if we took a page from the Old Testament prophets, and perhaps recognize that where we are today rests on the shoulders of where we've been in the past, and where we end up tomorrow has everything to do with how we handle today.

Last week I had a conversation around this, and there was a very real sense that whenever this COVID situation settles down, there will be a lot else that has transpired regarding how we've dealt with one another through this time. Even if the virus goes away, the fallout from how we treat one another will linger on for some time.

In order to see that perhaps what seems like a then and gone way of looking at the circumstances through the prophets may be useful and applicable today, we're going to take a survey. We'll let majority rule as to if we'll include it in what we're about to concoct. I also want to remind us that the questions aren't pertaining to individuals or you or I as an individual. The questions are pertaining to what we have observed overall as our nation has developed over time.

Has it been saddening or frustrating to see how many other activities have crept in on Sunday morning and drawn people away from worship? You have abandoned worship of the One true God for sport, drink, slumber, and distraction

Do you share in the sentiment that much of our political leadership seems more interested in themselves and re-election than in serving the needs of the people? Your leaders have sought their own gain at the expense of the people

Across the country, do you see attitudes and values shaped more by people's politics than the gospel? You have left the ways of the Lord for worship of elephant and donkey

Do you share in frustration that the ones who have great wealth already keep growing wealthier while the average person continues to struggle to earn a reliable living? The rich grow their treasure while robbing their workers of the means to provide for their families

Do you feel over these years there has been a growing lack of civility and increasing willingness to express disagreement through violence? Compassionate speech has given way to violence, and division among you

Have you felt that over time people have become less concerned with honest facts and become more given to treating opinions and spin as truth?

Truth is far from you as every man seems to be right in his own eyes.

Okay, now for questions about our current situation:

Have you noticed that there are conflicting ideas about what COVID is, how to deal with it, and how serious it is? Therefore pestilence and rumors of pestilence will run through your land causing confusion and stoking the fires of division

Have you noticed that we are incredibly divided as a nation and the division seems to be getting increasingly heated? You will tear at one another and gnash your teeth at those who stand against you

Have you noted the large numbers of unemployment and long lines at food banks? For many, your labor will dry up, and food will be scarce to come by

Have you noted the confused messages from different areas of leadership in the country? Those in power will be thrown into confusion and chaos, truth will be hard to discern

Have you frustrated over stay at home orders and worried about the mental health consequences of people being isolated? Loneliness and longing for one another will overcome you

*Yet return to me, cling to My ways, let My Son be your light and guide, and healing will come.

The things we see play out in times that are difficult are most always the result of time and factors that have been at play for a while. Fortunately, the prophets and scripture don't only project disobedience and punishment. Were we to end on this note it would be a loose end with little in the way of direction and hope. So let's look at the one king we didn't mention in the line of kings starting with Manasseh.

Between Amon and Jehoahaz, we have King Josiah. Some of the prophecies over Judah that predicted their destruction at the hands of Babylon were in the early part of Josiah's reign. Of course, Josiah was only 8 when he became king, so there wasn't a whole lot he was going to do to change Israel's direction right out of the gate.

Around the age of 27 Josiah is brought a "Book of the Law". This book informs him of how his nation is supposed to worship. He learns of the commands they have fallen away from. He responds by immediately instituting reform across Judah. He calls the nation to return to authentically worshipping God, and conducting themselves in a fashion that pleases God. He turns the nation around.

Josiah is a grand example of the power one individual has in the right position to affect good and Godly change. We also must also acknowledge that the leader is only as strong and effective as the nation is willing to follow. Josiah and Judah hold off judgment for the time of his reign. In scripture, we see this clearly addressed when the prophetess Hulda speaks over Josiah. She tells him that because of his faithfulness there will be peace in the land, and that he will go to the grave having experienced that peace. When Judah returns to their idolatry, judgment looms heavy again. But during Josiah's reign, they are given a reprieve due to their change of heart.

This is such an incredibly hopeful story in Judah's history. It reminds us that the problems that have compounded from our past don't have to define us in the present. The story of Josiah's reign is a great example of an individual standing out, and the collective awakening to the wisdom of his guidance and making the changes that need to be made to be in right standing with God. The result is that the nation as a whole is spared consequence for a time so long as they are united in living rightly before God. Going the road of natural consequence, this is the natural consequence of the greater whole bowing before God and loving one another as God requires. The only possible response is that the nation becomes stronger and greater both as individuals and as a whole.

Josiah clearly exemplified the spirit of words spoken when Solomon dedicated the Temple:

"if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

Too often folks erase part of this verse. It isn't just humbling ourselves to pray, it's also turning from our wicked ways. The repentance that makes the difference and made the difference in Josiah's day was that they put muscle behind their prayers. It wasn't passive, praying and waiting for God to do the work. It was prayer that fueled honest transformation and returned the nation to genuine worship and living before God. This is critical for us as individuals, and as we look to those around us for guidance and leadership.

Note something important about the line of kings. Kings who are not Godly individuals can not be trusted to lead a nation in a Godly direction. It took Godly kings like David, Hezekiah, and Josiah to lead God's people in a way that was pleasing to God. Their own lives were turned over to God. They sought God's word, they desired to please God, and they knew that the best for their people could only be found when they were in right relationship with God.

I was having a conversation a few weeks ago about how and why we choose to raise our children in the faith that we do. Why it's important that we are able to make that decision and not have it forced upon us. Our faith is what provides direction and a compass for our entire lives. Nothing is separated from the influence of Christ. If it is, we need to get back to the drawing board in that area. The faith we cultivate follows us and leads us in all that we do. Without an ardent faith, our choices are up in the air. If we are saddened by the way things are headed, we have a grand call and opportunity for renewal and restoring our nation, our unity, and our ability to love one another. In a monarchy, it is incredibly top down. Literally the way the

leader goes, the nation follows. If the king is a tyrant, there isn't really the option of refusing to go along with the new direction of the country.

We don't have this problem. Yes, we have leaders, and yes our leadership has the ability to influence the direction of the nation by their Godly or ungodly attitudes and actions. We, however, have the freedom to choose our own values and path. We have the freedom to worship as we choose, and so if our worship and living are in keeping with Christ or not is solely on our own shoulders. I can't blame someone else for my lack of faithfulness nor can anyone else take credit for my genuine faithfulness.

The question is who among us will be the Josiah of our age? Which of us will refuse to participate in the attitudes and actions in our nation that don't reflect the will, wishes, and wisdom of Jesus Christ? The hope of Josiah's story is that a nation CAN change. Even when things seem rough and hard, the people can be moved to Godliness. What they need are the examples to inspire them and lead them. That's you and I. That's the Christian

who refuses to compromise and digs in to live the best possible example of a life of faith. The self-sacrificing desire to do what needs done so that those around us are called to a better way of doing and being.

The power of Christ is the privilege to not be satisfied with what is when what is proves destructive and damaging to both the individual and the greater whole. The power of Christ is the calling to bond together and make the changes in ourselves that puts us in step with Jesus, and then make the changes we want to see in the world around us through our example.

I want to end with both an encouragement and a caution.

The caution is that whether we are looking in the mirror or discerning whom to follow, the litmus test is whether our character truly reflects Christ. No excuses, no rationalization. The problem with the kings of Judah and Israel was that they rationalized and excused all kinds of things that were ungodly and made them right in their own eyes.

The encouragement is that when we hold ourselves and those around us to the standard of Jesus, all that we do has integrity before God. It is then that the promise in Chronicles will ring that God will heal our land. The land will be healed because God will work through those who are living in line with God's desires and design. In other words, God will work through us to accomplish God's mighty work.

BIBLE STUDY August 2: Zephaniah 3

Chapter 3 of Zephaniah is a tremendous culmination to both our study of these three prophets we've considered now for about 9 weeks, and the message from this past Sunday about the nature of the prophets, the people, and how both punishment and deliverance shake out. We see here wonderfully articulated a kind of cycle from unrepentant to judgment to repentance to deliverance and reward.

The chapter opens with harsh words for the city of Jerusalem, the holy city, the seat of power in Judah. Sunday we talked about the central prophets, the ones who tickled the ears of kings and people, guiding them away from God and into idolatry. They proclaimed good things in store for a nation that had judgment coming to them. Here we see this laid out very clearly. In the seat of power, the site of God's Temple, the public officials, prophets, and priests had all sold out. God's character is made known. In some fashion we understand that God is sending consequence on them, striving to change their hearts. The problem is that they refuse to allow their hearts to be moved.

This is one of the great perils of allowing ourselves to be persuaded that ungodly is Godly, and that the ones in authority clearly have the right direction, even if it's away from the God's path. Scripture tells us that our hearts will harden, that our conscience will be seared as with a hot iron. So often this is perceived to be pigeon holed in the category of morality. People will make life and immoral free for all. Sadly, this blinds us to another very real danger that is connected to this condition.

A seared conscience can deafen us to God's voice. Here in Jerusalem, God was speaking to them outside the officials and clergy, but they couldn't hear it. They were convinced that they were fine, and so anything coming down around them clearly couldn't be the result of their behavior and idolatrous worship. So down the path they continued to blunder. We see this today when people play the blame game. Whatever bad is happening, "it's not my fault, it's so and so over there, clearly I'm not the one whose done wrong."

Not receiving God's message because of a hardness of heart leads to a lack of taking responsibility. Refusing to take responsibility makes repentance impossible because we don't feel there's anything to repent of to begin with. Which brings us to the next piece of the chapter.

God is very clear that judgment is coming. Not like a whisper, but like a tidal wave. Jerusalem, Judah, and lots of other nations along with them are about to feel a punishing blow that will cripple them. There is a great sentiment in the midst of this. God says that God's hope was that Judah would be an outlier among the nations. The hope was that Judah would be faithful and turn from their sin.

As we saw under Josiah, they did for a time and were spared. This desire is clear in the statement that were Judah faithful, their refuge would remain. Yet they didn't get the message, and now would reap the consequence along with the other nations around them. I love that God's character comes through time and again in prophecy. God's wish is always that the people would be faithful. God's wish is always that the people would love one another and be united. In this continual lament, I believe this reveals that judgment isn't God's preferred plan of action. Not only is it not

preferred, it grieves God. This tells us that when consequence rains down, it is at least doubly grieving to God. Both our actions and the consequence that follow break God's heart. When we refer to God as "the Father", we see a God with the true heart of a parent, always want what's best for the children, and sadness that the children can scarcely understand when they go astray as well as when discipline is required.

When we talk about cultivating the heart of God, this is a piece of it. We are called to cultivate the greatest desire for one another to do what is faithful, just, and Godly. This cultivation must run so deep that we are broken when we see the brokenness of one another, and when we see consequences come about are moved not to joy but rather compassion.

So in this chapter we've gone from unrepentance to judgment, finally we finish with repentance and reward in the last third of the third chapter.

God ends this prophecy with a wonderful ray of hope. It is made known that the proud, the powerful will be laid low. The ones who largely authored and led the straying of God's people will be removed from authority to make way for those who are humble and whose worship is authentic. The lesson will be learned, and the result will be a return to Godliness.

When this happens, worship will return to authenticity. God's people will return to their homeland, and the ones that don't will be elevated where they choose to remain. They will be restored, they are forgiven, they are renewed in their relationship with God as they once again rise to what it means to be God's people. There is a grand sense of justice where those that are guilty will be dealt with including those that persecuted the people, and those that have repented are cleansed and given a fresh opportunity to thrive, excel, and succeed.

As with all of these moments in the history of God's people, the hope then is the hope today. Just as God's desire for Judah was simply to return to God, and forgiveness was freely available, that same offer remains today. The New Testament has a parable that is a twist on this Old Testament cycle of repenting and returning, the prodigal son. The only desire of the father was for his son to return so he could embrace him and welcome him back. Yet to see the wonder of this love, the prodigal son had to endure hardship and humiliation that were the product of his own actions. Humbled, he returns to the father expecting the worst. What he finds is open and loving arms not just willing to accept, but wanting to restore to the fullness of life and beyond.

You and I have that same welcome. We do our best to be faithful. When we come across a face in the mirror that has gotten off track somewhere, if we don't wait, don't dig in and refuse to see what's amiss, we spare ourselves much of the consequence that may be looming. If we have been stuck in the wrong place for a while, and are suffering for it, this isn't a reason to stay distant from God. It is the call of the Father to the child saying "come home to me, let me put you upright, help you heal, and free you from the weight of your guilt."