

Sunday 3rd October 2021
Numbers 9:1-5, 14 & Revelation 7:9-14
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Just let you know if you're watching from home, we are having a few technical glitches so hopefully you're still tuned in and joining with us.

Let's come to God in prayer. Let us pray:

Holy Spirit, come among us and soften our hearts to the word of God.

Holy Spirit, draw near and lead us in the way of Jesus.

Holy Spirit, come with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name.
Amen.

So, over the last four or five weeks we've been in a teaching series that has sought to bring us back to our Purpose and Values and we've seen that our purpose is:

to invite encourage and enable people of all ages to follow Jesus

and to help us as a congregation figure out what does that mean, what does that look like, how is this fleshed out, we have four values and we've explored three of those values:

the family

the value of meeting, meeting with God in a personal and life-changing way, of being a family a community who journey together towards wholeness and of growing in our faith growing both in faith and in character so that we mature as followers of Jesus

but along the way this isn't about us, really, having a nice organizational purpose and set of values, ultimately, I think what God's been wanting to do is bring us back to His heart and to reveal His heart to us, rather than just have a nice purpose and some values that we go 'Yep, that's us, that's what we're about'. He's wanting to know us, to know what stirs in His heart, what stirs in His heart for you and for this world, so that we might have a greater vision of what it means to be His people and of what He's called us into and so we've seen that God's heart is to have a people of His own and He will relate to them as Father, and He will take that people on a journey towards His peace, His shalom, His wholeness. Yet, we begin to taste it even now because our God is not just a figment of our imagination and He's not just a guy from history and He's not distant or far off. Our God is near' He is near you right now, He's near you every day of your life and He wants to meet with you every day, He wants to work through you that others might meet with Him as well and He made that possible, He made that direct dynamic possible with us because He gave His life, He gave the life of Jesus to reconcile us to Himself and so He's begun to work on us a work that is received by faith and He will bring it to completion on that final day, and, in that in between time, He will mature us, He will mature us in faith and character, He will nurture us if we allow Him.

So as we were thinking about last week, a few weeks ago, to nurture that holy fearful love, that love that is tender and responsive just like His love is towards us, this has been the revelation of God's heart to us, family, this has been His heart to us. So, to start and as a heart response of our own, I hope it's not just in one ear and out the other, I hope you've allowed it to stir something in your heart because it's all been building towards today and our final value which is that of Share, sharing our lives and

The good news of God's love in both word and deed. We've been building towards this and our passage today has much to share on this value.

But first, let me ask you a question. Who do you think are the two biggest political rivals in the UK today? I'll give you 30 seconds if you feel able and you're close enough to turn to your neighbor and share your idea with them. So, over to you who are the two biggest political rivals?

Five more seconds.

Okay. Well, I'm not going to get you to shout out your answers you'll be glad to hear, maybe, but keep that in mind as we turn to Numbers and dig into our passage.

In our passage today we find the people of God at Mount Sinai still and they are about to move on from there, and it's a year from the point where they left Egypt, and we find them a year after that point where God has rescued them. He has taken them out of captivity, out of slavery, He has liberated them and He made that possible by exerting His power. Exerting His power on behalf of an entire nation, a few million people who were held in slavery, held against their will, held for no other reason than it suited their captors, and so, God exerted His power, and time and time again He sought to persuade Pharaoh to let his people go but Pharaoh would not listen, Pharaoh would not heed the Lord and so, the Lord judged the nation but to save his people from experiencing that judgment themselves He instructed them to sacrifice a spotless lamb and use its blood to mark the lintel and the door frame and that would safeguard them from experiencing the same judgment, and ultimately it was that sacrifice that led them from that terrible oppression and into the good things that God wanted for His people. So, there was that first Passover sacrifice.

And so now, in our passage today. we find them a year on and about to remember what led to their deliverance, what led to them being free from that tyranny at the hand of their oppressors. So can you imagine how powerful this would have been for the people, how meaningful, how important it would have been as they shared in the sacrifice but then also the meal and the feast that came with it. Can you imagine what that would have been like to recall that first taste of freedom, that first taste of freedom in 400 years as a people, as a family that their very children had experienced? Can you imagine that any event that's going to mark that kind of occasion? It's going to be meaningful; it's going to be weighty with significance. This isn't a moment you want spoiled, this isn't a moment you want intruded upon, this isn't a moment you want to share with people who don't know your pain, very real pain. And yet, what does God say? 'A foreigner residing among you is also to celebrate the Lord's Passover.'

So, let's come back to that question about political rivals. Can you imagine Boris Johnson, Nicola Sturgeon - was that, was that who you went for? maybe you went for two different people - can you imagine Boris Johnson being welcomed into the SNP party? I can't. Can you imagine Boris Johnson being invited to speak at the SNP

political party conference? Can you imagine him being given the keynote closing speech of the conference rather than Nicola Sturgeon? Not a chance!

And yet, that's about the closest I could get to picturing something that might be getting the heart of this. Here are people who are celebrating something so special to them that maybe the height of their year and God says they've not to turn inward, they are to keep space for the outsider to be among them and even share in this special moment, they've not to allow fear, they've not to allow heart to turn them inwards, and again we're meant to see something here of the heart of God, the heart of God that is full of radical generosity and welcome for the outsider, such that, through His people, He wants to reach through His people to all people, and see them come to know Him as their God and Heavenly Father as well. He wants to see others come in faith to Him and you see the heart of God here friends. Can you see it? But it makes me wonder - how would an outsider get to that point of faith? how would such a person, who maybe doesn't know anything of the Lord, reach that point where they are willing to identify with the Lord's people, because remember, for the males, that included circumcision, so that's a rather big step of faith. What leads to that point?

And the only explanation that I can come up with is that not only is there meant to be space within the heart of God for the outsider, not only is there space for the outsider within the heart of God, there is meant to be space within the life of God's people as well. Think about it, the only way for the outsider to come to that point of faith of reaching out for the Lord is that they learn about the Lord through His people and the picture here is of one of where outsiders, people who don't know the Lord, are looking in and they're hearing of the Lord and they're asking questions and they're saying like 'What's your story? How did you Jews end up in the desert here or in this land or x, y and z? and they would maybe ask questions about their life choices, and they would maybe observe their celebrations, and, over time, they would be introduced to the Lord.

In this one verse God anticipates that others will be introduced to Him, to the God who loves with a holy love, and He anticipates them reaching that place where they put their faith in Him as well, but it first requires God's people to make space for the outsider and in doing that they're simply reflecting the heart of God, within which is space for others to come into His family.

So, I wonder, family, do we have space ourselves for the outsider? And what we do as church, is their space? Is your pew, your pew? Is your job in the church, your job? No one else's? Is the group you go to just for you and your friends, or is there space for the outsider? What about in your diary? Do you have space for those outside or just for the people inside? Are you creating space to get to know people in local community, that you get to know their story, they get to know your story, and in that shared space maybe something happens, that you get to share a little of your faith a little of this God you follow?

Are you making space for others? and hopefully in the midst of that journey and making that space, hopefully, there will be a conversation about God.

So, as a second point, what would you share about why you bother with church and why you follow Jesus? What would you share?

And I asked this because, back in Israel's day, in ancient Israel, if people were asking about the Lord they would be hearing about Yahweh, and in the Hebrew Yahweh and they would hear of a God who had rescued His people from slavery and brought them out and into a good place, He had good plans for them. A God who saves. A God who rescues. A God who made a difference.

And so, when you think about sharing your faith, what would you share? Are you sharing anything about or thinking about sharing anything of the difference Jesus has made to your life? Or is He simply some guy in an old book? Is he someone that you know and have found life through? Because, let's remember, these words of the New Testament - we read 'John saw Jesus coming towards him and said 'Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' or in the words of Paul 'for Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed.' The story of the Passover is meant to point us forward to this perfect lamb, the one who would come to bring forgiveness for any and all who put their faith in him. Jesus. He is that Passover lamb and so in Him, we find true life, in Him we find hope, in Him our lives are changed.

But, when someone asks you about your faith, what are you going to share? Is Jesus just a nice guy, is he a guy who teaches some nice morals? Or is he something more to you? Is he something more? Have you found life through Him? Have you found a cause of hope and celebration through Jesus? Because, friends, if you haven't, if Jesus does not astound you, and make and fill you with wonder, do you really know Jesus? Do you really know Him as your Savior, as a Passover lamb? Do you really know him?

Because, when we get to know Him and when we get to know what He's done for us, then that should make a difference in our life, and out of that should come a response. And the same was true of God's people in Moses time. They knew what He had done, how He'd save them from that slavery, and so at this point in the story at least, they are appreciative of that and live in response to it, and so we read next that 'Moses told the Israelites to celebrate the Passover. The Israelites did everything just as the Lord commanded Moses' and so in response to what God has done, we see two responses, the response of obedience and of joy. They, as they say, they did everything just as the Lord commanded Moses, everything, they obeyed it to the letter, they didn't add to it, they didn't try and water it down, they just obeyed, but obeyed properly and fully.

And I wonder, friends, in our response to what Jesus has done for us, are we obeying? Are we responding? So, for example, our purpose part of it at least and today's value is based upon these words of Jesus 'Go and make disciples of all nations' Go and make disciples, go share your faith, and it's a command to every one of us, not just me, not just our elders, not just the Community Outreach Team or those that get involved with CAP in some shape or form. Every one of us is to make space to share our faith, to

share something of Jesus, not maybe in the first conversation, but over time. So, are we obeying this command?

And at this point, I'd like to have a bit of confession. On Friday I disobeyed. On Friday I was down in East Ayrshire where Gill and I are buying house, kind of a bolt-hole, holiday home, and something for retirement, who knows what it will be, something for us to benefiting from, and our builder is Craig, great guy, really lovely guy, but the build is six months behind schedule and we're semi okay with that, and we were saying to them we'd really like to be in for the end of September, the end of September's come and gone and we're still not in but hopefully a couple of weeks' time, but I was down on Friday to let in the carpet fitters and Craig was there and I got talking to Craig and he was just saying how stressed he is, not because we're necessarily putting a lot of pressure on him, he's just stressed about the situation and it is affecting his health, and sure I listened, and hopefully I was a bit empathetic and gracious and all those nice things, but the thought came to mind 'You know I could pray for Craig' I could offer to pray for him and I must have had three or four opportunities over the course of that day and at the end of the day says 'I've got to go and pick up my daughter, I'll see you later' and I missed the opportunity. I missed the opportunity to create space, to introduce Craig to a God who might have given him some strength or peace or greater. Who knows what or just to know that someone cared enough to take that step of faith, or there's a God out there who is not confined to the walls of a church building, but is there in the everyday of life. I feel like I've really let Jesus down. I feel like I haven't obeyed. I feel like I've let Craig down. I've not loved my neighbor as I love myself, because I love myself more and allowing my comfort and my fear to control my actions, and I feel a wee bit grieved because I used to be that guy. I used to be that guy who would more proactively say to people 'Can I pray with you just now' And I've lost that to some degree. Somehow, along the way, and I don't like being that guy now that I am. I want to be that guy who had the confidence to say 'Can I pray with you' and I'm gonna get it back. If you know anything of me, I quite often say to some of the guys 'Where there's a will, there's a way' and I've got the will, so there's a way, and so here's me exerting my will, because we have a choice in this, friends, we have a choice to mature in faith or not.

So, here's me making my choice. If I'm standing at that front door and you've got something you want prayer for, I'll pray for you on the doorstep, if you're willing. If you're not willing, hang about here at the end of church and when I come back in, you might need to wait 10 minutes, I'll pray for you. I am not going to settle. I am, I want to be a follower of Jesus who obeys the words of Jesus and gets over his embarrassment and awkwardness so that, the next time I see a Craig I don't bottle it, because I can't call you into this if I'm not doing it. So, I need your help church, I need your help to grow in faith again. So, there's the invitation, not a challenge for you, a challenge for me. Today if I'm at the door or if you see me around church, I will offer to pray for you and if I don't you've got permission to pull me up in it. Okay, okay? Because sometimes, in the life of faith, we just have to do things and get over the hump and the first couple of times are really awkward but you know eventually we just get used to it and that's how we do it and that's the way that culture changes because I've got used, I get used to it again.

The Church of Scotland culture of faith is private and unless I'm doing a pastoral visit, I maybe don't offer as much to pray and I want that to change for me. So, will you help me? But you know with obedience can come joy, and when we obey, joy can come and the people they were told to celebrate the Passover, it wasn't a choice, it was a command, but I don't think God was imagining someone doing just a religious textbook 'Oh, there's the Passover done and dusted and it was a dreary affair' this was a feast, this was a celebration. God could have said mark the Passover do the Passover, have the Passover but He chose the word celebrate, celebrate. It's meant to be joyful. From obedience comes joy and there's a joy to be known as we share our faith and seeing people come to share in that great multitude and imagine if I had said to Craig 'Could I pray with you' and he had said 'Sure, that's fine' I would have been bouncing in here today and telling you a completely different story, but maybe he would have known joy as well because the joy is not just for us, the joy is for others in our community, and so if we want to see people in our community come to that place of joy for themselves, of knowing the Lord for themselves, of following Jesus and being part of that great multitude of people, friends, we can't just keep zipped, we really do need to find a way of sharing our lives making space, and then when the opportunities arise taking them to share our faith.

And, if we will obey, joy will come, joy will come. A joy for you, and a joy for me, and a joy for the people of this community, as they come to know the lamb who was slain for them, who loved them that much, he died for them. I pray it may be so. Amen.