



Owl Creek Baptist Church

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OUR VISION: *To be a continuing light in the world's darkness inspiring people to love God and to love others.*

Volume 1 • Number 8 • May 10, 2020

News and Announcements...

❖ **Happy fourth Sunday of Eastertide!** Is it possible to find happiness during a society-wide quarantine? It is admittedly difficult amidst the wrangling and debate about “re-opening” our society for businesses and services. There is a genuine tension about health and safety on the one side and the struggle to make a living on the other. But if experience has anything to say to us, it would include the reminder that hasty decisions made under the primary influence of impatience are risky, even dangerous. Still in the grips of the virus pandemic, news and interpretations change rapidly from day to day. We can become all the more frustrated and anxious with voices coming from every direction. In a world of turmoil and seeming chaos, a culture of competing authorities and opinions, let us fix our hope and our courage on the center of our faith: “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*” ~ Hebrews 13:8

❖ **Have you taken communion online?** While we have not been able to enjoy genuine fellowship around the Lord’s Table, Pastor Chapman has prepared a brief communion service for you to experience online. Simply log on to the church web site (listed above) and view the communion video. All you need is your own bread and cup!

❖ **How to stay busy while staying home?** The “Turban Project,” based just down the road in Frazeytsburg, Ohio, is certainly keeping busy sewing protective face masks. Their work began with making headwear for cancer patients, but has evolved into making masks for local police and fire departments as well as hospitals. They have made tens of thousands of products in the few short years of work performed by their volunteers, and our very own **Oneta Debolt** is among them! Learn more about them at <https://turbanproject.com>.

❖ **Remember to consider** a donation to our ABC International Ministries, as they are seeking to avoid a \$700,000 shortfall before September. We want to keep all our missionaries on the field! (www.internationalministries.org)

❖ **Your Executive Board** will meet again on Monday, May 11th via ZOOM internet video conferencing software. If there are items you would have the Board discuss please contact our chairperson, **Bonnie Kohl**.

❖ **Tell us your news items!** Email Pastor Chapman or Bonnie Kohl with news or prayer requests that you would like to share. Any family happenings that you’d like to tell us about?

To lift up in prayer...



For our nation, as several states begin to experiment with re-opening their businesses and other services. We trust that people will act responsibly, and that we will avoid a rebound of the pandemic.

For our American Baptist missionaries and their medical, educational and agricultural projects, that they be fully funded during these challenging times. And, that they find safety in regions where poverty does not allow for proper medical protections.

For our school children, being forced to stay at home, that they find creative alternatives to public education. And that the poorer families be provided with computer access so that their children might stay with their better-supplied classmates.

For Martha Robey, who was sent back to the hospital because of complications regarding her medication.

For Pastor Chapman’s mother, doing well in hospice care in San Diego.



SERMON: “The Resurrection as the Power that Drives Our Faith” (4th Sunday of Easter)

TEXT: Ephesians 1:15-23

Have you figured out what really motivates you? What is it that truly drives you? That which, as they say, gets you out of bed in the morning? As I rhetorically ask this question at the beginning of our meditation, I am fully aware that there is no simple—and certainly no simplistic—answer to such a question when asked of any of us. Life is full of persuasions. Some of these inducements are quite strong, others are barely noticeable, while most of them lie somewhere in between. But what is certain is that we ought to be aware, *very* aware, of the things that drive us and compel us each time we make the many decisions that consume our minds.

It’s not easy to live in these days, when there is so much energy being put into the effort to get our attention, even distract us. We are literally bombarded by persuasive messages. We endure thousands of daily commercial enticements, ads designed to persuade us that we somehow cannot live with any satisfaction whatsoever unless we spend our money to purchase such and such a product. I am certain that it would frighten the average computer and cellphone user to realize how much the advertising coalition knows about us—our location, our age, our gender, what we like and dislike, and so forth. Powerful marketing strategists use the information they have gathered about us to target ads designed to persuade us to open our pocketbooks. Facebook users, beware! Mark Zuckerberg is taking advantage of your innocent communications to lure you into spending your money!

We know that mere advertising does not force us to make decisions, even if it wears down our resolve. At the end of the day, the things that really compel us to act in one way or another fall along a spectrum. I recall reading one study conducted many years ago whereby psychologists determined the kinds of messages that are most persuasive. I was surprised to learn that the use of *threat* is very low on that scale. Threat may stir our emotions, but it is not a good motivator. Somehow, people find courage to overcome many threats they receive and make wiser decisions. This finding helped me see why the “hell-fire-and-brimstone” method of preaching the gospel never really worked well. Not far above threat is the mechanism of *guilt*. This attempt at persuasion is little more than threat, except that it is directed at our emotional rather than our physical insecurities. Christian preaching that points bony fingers at people’s sins is squarely in this camp. Needless to say, most people are not convinced to believe the gospel because some evangelist has told them how terrible they are in God’s eyes. The next step up in the spectrum has something to do with our sense of *duty*. This can be a powerful motivator. It drives us to care for our children, as that is our parental expectation. It drives us to get and keep our jobs, since we all have bills to pay. It can even be the force that motivates decisions in, say, times of war, when many deeply feel a patriotic duty to defend their countries.

But at the top of the list—again, according to psychologists—is the persuasion that comes through the sense of *fulfillment*. Deep down, we are all looking for fulfillment at the most profound levels. We do sometimes decide to avoid threats or guilt, or seek to perform our duty. But what we really want is to be personally fulfilled. For when we are fulfilled, our highest dreams are seen to come true. When we are fulfilled, we believe that we have been born for such a time as this. When we are fulfilled, we feel that life has been made more complete and that we have arrived at sense of purpose, a purpose that is usually selfless. Thus, when all our decisions are calculated, the things that have persuaded us most have typically been the things that we believed would truly fulfill us. That’s not to say that bad information and false guidance haven’t clouded that search for fulfillment. Unfortunately, that happens far too often. The point, however, is that we are *seeking* fulfillment and as human beings we are hard-wired to hunger and thirst for fulfillment until we find it.

How does this understanding of human life square with the gospel? Quite nicely, actually. Jesus told Nicodemus that God sent him into the world not to condemn it but to love and save it (John 3:16-17). God, therefore, does not employ threat to persuade us to trust him. Paul wrote that God’s kindness was meant to lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4). There is nothing about shame or guilt in that theology. What Paul has further written in his letter to the church in Ephesus captures God’s motivational strategy quite beautifully. Paul wanted those believers to “be enlightened...and know the hope” to which God had called them. Hope is a benefit that comes from God which I define as a gift of trust in the future, one that only God can guarantee. Such hope moves us forward. It frees us from chains to the past as well as burdens of the present, because there is always a new day that awaits us. This hope, Paul writes, involves what he calls “the riches of [God’s] glorious inheritance.” No peppered with details, but certainly enticing!

The burden of Paul’s gospel that he received directly from the risen Christ lies in its demonstration. What evidence is there that God intends to make good on his promise of such life and hope? How can we be assured that he will deliver the things that will finally fulfill all our dreams and complete our yearning as human beings? Paul answers such questions immediately. “God has the power” to fulfill his offer to us, he writes. It would certainly take tremendous power to bring about the glorious life that he has promised. But that power has already been demonstrated. It was shown precisely on that day when God the Father raised his son Jesus from the dead. That was the moment when “God put this power to work.” In other words, the promise of the Kingdom is not some too-good-to-be-true offer. I am thinking of those promises peddled by the makers of modern pharmaceuticals, who make life look “heavenly” in their TV ads. But those ads always end with legally mandated lists of potentially horrible side-effects. Well, there are no side effects with the gospel. There are no disclaimers with the Kingdom. God’s intentions are pure and transparent.

Thus, it is to the resurrection that we once again turn. Paul argues that the resurrection was nothing less than a demonstration of God’s power, one designed to motivate us with his love and grace. God not only has the power, but also the desire, to bring us all from death to glorious life. What, I ask, could be more fulfilling than that?

BIBLE STUDY



TEXT: John chs. 7-9 (Jesus as the “light of the world”)

Last week, I introduced the wonderful Johannine inclusion of Jesus’ “I am” sayings, sayings which are unique to the fourth gospel. These seven sayings are presented not as scattered revelations throughout Jesus’ many dialogues. Rather, they are tightly bound to similar elements in their various contexts. John beautifully captured how Jesus uttered these sayings at times when they could be best illustrated. Thus, Jesus fed bread to a crowd of 5000 followers, prepared to attend the Passover feast in Jerusalem (the “feast of unleavened bread”) and then finally proclaimed himself to be the “bread of life.” The concept of Jesus as “bread”—in all its symbolic representations—was hardly lost on his audience...or on John’s first readers. If anything, this analysis demonstrates our need to read more than just the short, pithy verses of Scripture. The larger contexts have more to teach us about the meaning of those pithy phrases if we take the time to study them.

The next “I am” phrase spoken by Jesus in John’s chronology involves a context that stretches over three full chapters. Once again, the literary “package” includes each of the three elements: 1) the saying itself; 2) a particular Jewish festival; 3) a miraculous sign. This story begins as Jesus left Galilee to attend the Jewish Festival of Booths in Jerusalem (7:2). According to John, this was at least the third journey he made to the holy city. His first trip was for a Passover feast (2:13). His second trip involved attending an unnamed festival (5:1), but it may also have been for the Passover the following year (6:4), depending on whether these narratives refer to the same trip. The festival in chapter seven is indeed a different occasion, since this festival is named. One detail John includes is that Jesus did not go up with his disciples, but went up later “in secret,” because the Jewish authorities were already looking to arrest him (7:1, 10-11). A detail that John does *not* include is the fact that this “Festival of Booths” (or, “Tabernacles”), was also commonly called the “Festival of Lights.” The “booths/tabernacles” part of the festival name comes from the significance of the occasion as a remembrance of the Jews’ exodus from Egypt, subsequent wandering in the desert, and the necessity of living as nomads in tents. This was one of the four annual pilgrimage festivals, and served to remind the Jews of God’s miraculous act of redemption. Along with Passover, it was a celebration of the greatest event in Jewish history, one they were to never forget.

But the key to Jesus’ “I am” saying in this story requires some historical background. The Jews called it the “Festival of Lights” precisely because that is how it was structured. Four huge lights—in the shape of the famous seven-armed Jewish menorah—were constructed outside the temple court. These were not mere candlesticks, but giant torches some 15- to 20-feet in height. It took a ladder to reach the tops of the torches to fill bowls with oil that would be lit and burn all night. According to the “Mishnah” (a Jewish commentary on the Torah), “...there was not one courtyard in Jerusalem that did not reflect the light” of these torches.

Hundreds of priests, who also carried individual torches, would read Scriptures and lead in the singing of psalms, while flutists played music as tens of thousands danced around the temple. It was quite a sight, and quite a celebration. In all of this, there were no doubt thoughts among the celebrants that “Jerusalem is the light of the world...the Torah is the light of the world...Judaism is the light of the world.”



And then came Jesus to the festival, to the city bathed in the light of the giant menorahs. He went to the very temple court where the giant torches were displayed and began to teach, taking advantage crowd of pilgrims gathered there. And one of his first utterances was, “I am the light of the world” (8:12). He was offering his true light in direct contrast to the glorious but nonetheless artificial light emanating from the festival props. This bold contrast was bound to draw attention from the religious authorities. Jesus’ challenged them to emerge from their darkness. They heard him say that he had been sent by the Father to proclaim these things. Those who believed his message also heard him say that his “light” was shedding the truth and that his “truth would make them free” (8:31). But these words only served to anger the Pharisees. The teaching session ended with them attempting to stone Jesus for allegedly uttering blasphemy. He promptly left the festival and the city.

But Jesus was not done with this episode. Somewhere on the outskirts of the city, Jesus encountered a blind man (9:1). The disciples, still with much to learn, assumed the common theology that this man was not a victim of nature, but one suffering from the consequences of his own sins... or, at least, the sins of his parents. Jesus dismissed that explanation, and simply declared that this was an opportunity to do some ministry. The famous mud made from Jesus’ own saliva, followed by a washing in a nearby city pool, brought the man the full eyesight he had been denied since his birth.

As we think about the theme presented in these three chapters, we can see the progression—from the lights of the festival, to Jesus’ proclamation as the “light of the world,” to the powerful demonstration of light brought to a blind man’s eyes. It is a complete and beautifully illustrated theme. There may have indeed been light at the festival. But Jesus had come to supersede and outshine that light. For the former light had been bottled up tightly by Jewish tradition, custom and exclusivism. Gentiles were not full participants in the light that the Priests and Pharisees offered. Jesus was an alternative light...*for the whole world!!* He proclaimed it to everyone. He offered it to anyone who wanted to hear. And he demonstrated it with his power to give sight to the blind. This episode perfectly illustrated John’s testimony with which he began his gospel: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:4-5).