



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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“Holy Hearts, Wholly for God” Fifth Sunday in Lent Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

The Bible makes God so simple and yet so “not”. Here’s a brief history of God, as I get it from the Bible.

This God who created us (in God’s own image no less!) has wanted from “day one” to have an intimate relationship with us. God “walked in the cool of the evening” with Adam and Eve, says Genesis. That’s the kind of open freedom God enjoyed with us—at first. Then we started (and have not stopped) choosing not to trust God—not even to listen to God—and choosing some other guide for our lives. Like Bob Dylan wrote “during his Christian period”, “You’ve Got to Serve Somebody”—“Now, it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you’ve got to serve somebody.” Ever since that first separation, God has wanted to restore that kind of relationship. But the ongoing habits of our hearts are really tough. God keeps at it, even though He has to work around all the roadblocks and walls we throw up. He’s been willing to do that, forever.

The Bible continues, after putting his creatures in an big boat along with a man named Noah and his family, God wiped out the rest of creation—like wiping a chalkboard clean—and started over, looking for that intimate and powerful love to be returned. No luck. In our self-will-driven freedom, we turned away again. And again.

God took another tack, steering around this obstacle. He chose Abram and Sarai to start that “pilot plant” I talked about a few weeks back. God wrote up a Covenant: Abe and Sarah were to be a demonstration project, to display the kind of trust and freedom that intimacy requires. Abe and Sarah seemed to be an improvement on Adam and Eve, but not by much. In this world broken by sin, they make some bad choices along with the good—and this goes through the family line: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and then Joseph, which brings God’s people to Egypt. When one of the later Egyptian Pharaohs made life unbearable for the Israelites (and other Hebrew slaves), the Hebrews cried out. God heard their cries, and remembered his Covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and decided to rescue his “pilot plant”. That’s the Exodus, of course, and the sloughing off of those who would not trust God, and the entry into the Promised Land.

But if you know the whole Exodus story (and the parts written in Numbers and Deuteronomy), you know things still were not going well with the “pilot plant”. So God issued the first part of an “Operator’s Manual”—the Law of Moses, starting with the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. Here were specific things to do, since this was a group of “doers”—the specifics of how to honor God. God had taken another tack—writing the manual.

God leads His people into the land He had promised them, and fights with them for the space they need to live, and make this “pilot plant” flourish, using the manual. But there’s no end of problems with the neighbors. Soon, the concern for peace trumps almost all other issues, and the people cry out for a king—one who will have a standing army to drive off attacks from the surrounding petit kings and their incessant raiding parties. But all the kings of Israel fall short—some are downright evil. So God lets loose the Assyrians, and then the Babylonians, who (on their way to empire-building) thrash both the northern part of God’s people, and then the Southern part, including their beloved Jerusalem, the Holy City they had made not so holy.

Now the Israelites, living in Babylon, didn’t know what to do. They were overcome with questions. Had God abandoned His Covenant? Had their God been too weak to keep these pagans out of His land? Their Temple destroyed, their capital de-capitated, the Israelites in exile had no center of meaning for life. It was a sad time—and yet, a highly-productive time, too. In exile, without their Temple and its priests, laypeople (ordinary Israelites) started the synagogue system for keeping their faith alive and passing it on to new generations. It was during this time of Exile (sixth and fifth centuries BC), most scholars think, that the Hebrew scriptures moved from a largely oral tradition to a fixed written form we have today. All these were efforts to preserve God’s Word and God’s “pilot plant” lifestyle against the pressures of the dominant, sophisticated and wealthy culture of Babylon.

Then came the Return. Announced by God’s prophets, God brought down the Babylonian Empire by the hand of the Persians—Cyrus the Great was their military emperor. Cyrus was led to do something the world had not yet seen, giving freedom to its deported people and letting them go home from Babylonian domination. Cyrus even gave back the precious furnishings from the Jerusalem Temple, and on top of that, provided the Israelites with a gift to aid in rebuilding the country and culture. Amazing! Though Cyrus did not know God at all, God used him to restore His people, so that the “pilot plant” might once again have a chance to produce the living example God kept reaching for.

Though many Israelites did not return, a great number did come back to Judah, and faced the daunting task of rebuilding a devastated capital and its Temple. It took many years, as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah show. But not long after, the Greek states arose, and Greek war parties set off to conquer the world. Though they left God’s people in place, they beat them down and desecrated the Temple, and drained their wealth through taxes and tribute. God’s people’s connection and motivation to reach out to God was at a low ebb.

So once again, God changed tactics. “At the right time,” Scripture tells us, “God sent his son to die for the ungodly.” (Romans 5:6, NIV) God was now not just making a “pilot plant”; God was not just “providing an “Operator’s Manual”. God now was “drawing people a picture” in order to bring His people to an understanding of the relationship God has been seeking. And that picture’s name was Jesus.

Jesus lived the “with-God life”. He made his words about The Kingdom of God, real. And he did this with a self-chosen community of men and women who needed years to unlearn the world’s ways. All his first followers were Jews. But then, one day, . . .

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,”

they said, "we would like to see Jesus." ²² Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

²³ Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵ The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

²⁷ "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name!"

Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

³⁰ Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. ³¹ Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. ³² But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." ³³ He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. (John 12:20-33, NIV)

Jesus' radical (down to the roots) re-orientation had left his followers overwhelmed. When conflict arose with the religious authorities (good church people, you know, who have all their doctrines right), his followers had nothing to say. When Jesus told them that he would be arrested and killed as a criminal, they were totally dumfounded. And so when it happened just as Jesus had said, all the men of his inner circle fled, abandoning him to whatever would be, afraid for themselves as followers of one of "Judea's Most Wanted". Would they be tried as co-conspirators in some kangaroo court, too?

Even in his trials and tortures and total defeat, Jesus did not strike back or take revenge, and also stopped his followers from doing any of that. Hung out naked in public, beaten to a bloody pulp, gasping for air through the pain of spikes driven through his wrists, bleeding slowly (so slowly), Jesus gave up his spirit, and gave himself over to his Father. Buried before sundown (when the holy Sabbath day started each week), his remaining followers disappeared.

Until. Until the third day. On that third day (Friday, Saturday, and now it's Sunday), some of the female followers find the tomb is empty. This is confirmed by some of the men of Jesus' inner circle. Has someone stolen the body? But then, Jesus himself stands among them—time and time again—and demonstrates his new life, his new resurrection body, but his continuing love for his followers.

Once again, the disciples are dumbfounded. This has never happened. Ever. After Jesus leaves them for the last time, they just keep together in that upper room and scattered in the City. They are excited, yet afraid. They can't talk much about this, because who can put words to what they have seen, and what this means?

Some 40 days pass, and one day God explodes among them with a spirit, a wind, that fills their sails to bursting. They get it! They get what God has been doing all along! It all makes sense—all their Old Testament verses, the whole story we just reviewed, Jesus' teachings, his miracles that showed God's approval of his teachings. Oh! And they poured out, no longer afraid, and begin telling absolutely everyone this greatest of news: God wants everyone to have this intimate parent-child relationship with Him that Jesus lived out. God has always wanted that. And Jesus has opened up the way to God. Turn from your self-sufficiency and your religious rules, they say. Be baptized into this new life, and join us in living this great secret of God, now given freely because of what Jesus suffered for us!

That's basically all the Bible says. The text from Hebrews today calls Jesus the "high priest" who "lifts His people" to God, and brings God to His people. The prophecy from Jeremiah speaks of God taking a new tack of not just "enforcing the written covenant" he has made with his "pilot plant people", but instead, God is "writing his covenant upon their hearts." *"I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord.* (Jer. 31:33c-34, NIV)

God wants holy hearts, wholly devoted to Him. What makes our hearts holy is being near to God—spending time with God. As we do that, our interest in God grows and grows into a holy hunger, and an eagerness to share this "with-God life" with others. In the early years of the church, God built a community of the committed, just as Jesus had done—and with the same cast of characters, multiplied by hundreds! They got together in homes every night—once a week was not nearly enough, because they weren't doing a worship service, they were racing over to spend time with God's people in God's presence. And the fire kept growing. They shared their possessions as though their "things" no longer belonged to them—because in fact, they had given everything to God, for whatever purpose God wanted. They ate together, prayed together, took care of each other's needs. It was such an impressive display of God's intimate love made real among people, that every day God drew more people to The Way, as they were called at first.

What might this look like these days? Last Sunday, I went home after worship, and I arrived before Sharon. I'd been bugged from time to time through the previous week by the thought that I sometimes feel like a fraud, because even as I urge you to spend time with God, there are periods of days when I study about God (for sermons and classes), but I am not hanging out with God much. I am really before God and God's Word to grab what I need for that class, or the message. I am not there freely, without an agenda, ready to accept what God might rather have me do. And Sunday afternoon, I said that out loud in the empty house, directing this as a confession prayer to God.

Then the strangest thing happened. During the afternoon, I started to feel this intense longing for God. It got stronger and stronger, and after a while I just had to stop what I was doing, and go off to an empty room, just to be with God. God had taken my guilt and shame, after I'd confessed it, and turned it into a positive longing that was so strong, I just HAD to "do the right thing"—just go sit with God. And it was the sweetest time I've had with God in a long time. Same thing on Monday.

Thursday, I met with a friend in Roseville who has given his life to connect people with God. He teaches as a substitute in public school to put food on his family's table. But he lives to

meet new people in coffee shops or parks, build a relationship, and invite them to discover God through Scripture. If God draws them to trust Christ for salvation, my friend will baptize this person, and begin training them to do the same thing with others. This is what Jesus told us to do, in Matthew 28:19-20: "Go, make disciples, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit [in other words, baptizing them into a new relationship with "the God Who IS Relationship"], and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded. And look—I'm with you always, to the end of the age." These are his last words in ministry, and my English teachers always told me to pay special attention to the first and last things the lead person says.

Are you doing what Jesus told you to do? Do you have any hunger for God, any longing at all? This is not about doctrine; it's about relationship. Relationship comes first; doctrine is created out of the experience of relationship. While doctrine does give us clues of Who we're looking for, doctrine by itself rarely leads to relationship. It's not "what you know", but "Who you know". God has been longing for intimacy with you, from before you were born.

What's the next step toward making your heart holy, and wholly for God? I think you know. What are you going to do about it?

I'll conclude with this story. Joni Dunn was an intermediate skier in 1972 when she skidded off a Vermont mountain trail. She plunged 100 feet into a deep ravine, fracturing her spine in seven places, and her neck and skull. At first, doctors held little hope for Dunn's survival. "I heard them say, 'She won't make it through the night.'" Dunn remembers, "I knew if I stopped concentrating on living, I would die. I had always handled my problems along with everyone else's. Now I was as dependent as a baby. When they brought my 3-year-old son, Brian, to the hospital, he reached out his arms. I wanted to touch him, but I couldn't move." It was nearly a year and a half before Dunn was able to hug her son.

Meanwhile, an operation to save her from paralysis, and a body cast for recovery took two inches off her height and left her hunchbacked. "My body seemed entirely alien to me," she recalls. "I used to stare at my back in the mirror and just cry." Dangerously weak, Dunn began swimming therapy at the suggestion of her doctors. In 1975, she joined the local YMCA in Greenwich, Connecticut, with her son, and managed to dog-paddle the length of the pool two or three times a week. "Just moving caused me incredible pain. But I knew I had to do this. I come from a very disciplined Dutch Reformed family in Illinois. That discipline has always been with me, and it makes me strong." Soon, Dunn was able to swim half a mile without resting. She also began taking little jogs around her neighborhood. "The doctors told me not to overexert myself, but after a year of running I began to feel normal again and stopped listening to them," says Dunn. Other exercises such as bicycle riding began to flatten the hump on her back.

It was a different story, though, when 43-year-old Dunn -- who had never done a sit-up before her skiing accident -- got the idea to enter Hawaii's Ironman Triathlon, an endurance test consisting of 2.4 miles of swimming, 112 miles of bicycling, and a 26-mile marathon. "Everyone looked at me like I was a crazy lady," says Dunn. "When I began training for the triathlon, I used to wake up in the middle of the night so scared -- it was the same feeling as when I first started walking after the accident." But not only did Joni Dunn go on to beat all other women her age in the 1985 Ironman Triathlon, she also did it in record time. "At the start of the race I jumped in the water with all these world-class athletes -- and for a moment felt

paralyzed. I thought, 'What am I doing here?' Then I realized I've never quit at anything in my life. And I started to stroke." (from *Success* magazine, Aug, 1986, pp. 36, 37)

There was a woman with a heart fully devoted to discipline and self-development. What would it take for us to have such devotion to living in intimacy with God?

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on March 29, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]