

HEARTBEATS- Staying Connected 9/20/2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, September 21 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for the aging in our communities and world. Pray for those 50 and over that they receive whatever medical and community help needed, as well as educational opportunities to help them age with confidence. Ask God to show us how we can better connect with those who often move into a time of increasing isolation.*

Many find the God of the Old Testament to be different from the God of the New Testament. They see the God of the Old Testament as violent, capricious, and vengeful, while the God of the New Testament is gracious and loving. The God of the Old Testament is unlovable and hard to worship, except out of fear, while the God of the New Testament is caring and much easier to trust. When, how, why did God change? Or did God?

It helps to realize that the writers of the Old Testament lived in a world where the many gods were what the God of the Old Testament at first appears to be. They believed that when a god showed up, it was bad news, and the arrival of a god meant someone has to die now or that someone has to be punished. So, they expected the God of Abraham to be just such a god. Where was the grace when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and got kicked out of the Garden? How could God cause languages to become confused instead of allowing us to better communicate with each other? How could God give Abraham and Sarah a son and then tell Abraham to take that son and kill him?

Remember, first of all, that God promised Abraham and Sarah a son when Sarah was well-beyond child-bearing years. That's grace. Even when they had failed to trust God's promise and Abraham instead had a son with Sarah's handmaid, Hagar, God fulfilled that promise of their own son, Isaac. More grace. And, when God said to take Isaac up on the mountain and sacrifice him, this is the kind of thing gods were expected to do. They seemed to enjoy blessing people just to then watch them suffer. But this God was different and when the time of sacrifice came, God intervened and provided the substitute, a ram, for the sacrifice. Grace upon grace. It seems a hard lesson, but it taught that this God is unlike all the others. This was a God who keeps promises—you will be the father of a great nation and acts in grace.

That doesn't mean that God doesn't punish, but when God does, it is for the purpose of teaching, correcting, and restoring the relationship back to God. When Adam and Eve failed to be satisfied with what God had given them, they needed to live and be in a place where they were dependent upon God for survival and protection. When humankind built the Tower of Babel, their unified language allowed them to accomplish great things with no thought of God, and threatened to push God out of their minds. The Israelites failed to trust God, even after being rescued from slavery in Egypt, witnessing ten plagues, seeing a great body of water parted, and had food provided in manna and quail. So, God caused them to wander for forty

years until a new generation came that had grown up relying upon God to provide for their needs every day and had a strong relationship with God.

Sometimes it's hard to see some of the actions of God as being rooted in grace and mercy. And for the people of the Bible, such a God was completely unexpected. That's why whenever God shows up, whether in person or in an angelic messenger, the first words are, "Do not be afraid." Everyone just assumed that gods should be feared, and had to be reminded by this God that this was not the case. Yet, even today, there are denominations that still use fear as a way of controlling people. They teach that God's love has to be earned, and if you don't behave, God will punish. When one party—God—has all the power, your only response is fear. This, then, is why God sought to change the power equation in Jesus. In Jesus, God sacrificed the power in order to remove fear and bring us back into relationship. Though there are churches that seem to forget this in how they present God, the God of both the Old and New Testament is the same—One of grace and love and mercy and relationship. We just have to stop being afraid and trust.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey