**2 Chronicles 33:1-16** (selected verses) July 7, 2019

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 *2 Chronicles 33:1Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. 2He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. 3He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had demolished; he also erected altars to the Baals and made Asherah poles. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them. 4He built altars in the temple of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, “My Name will remain in Jerusalem forever.” 5In both courts of the temple of the Lord, he built altars to all the starry hosts. 6He sacrificed his sons in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced sorcery, divination and witchcraft, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking him to anger…*

 *10The Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention. 11So the Lord brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon. 12In his distress he sought the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. 13And when he prayed to him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God…*

 *15Afterward he got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the Lord, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city. 16Then he restored the altar of the Lord and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the Lord, the God of Israel.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

 It is so good to see you. John the Baptist once said something that lives and breathes in the heart of every pastor. I believe it actually lives in a lot of you too, but it lives in a special way in pastors. Now John the Baptist had a hard calling. Out in the desert, he preached to the rocks and sand and a shepherd or two until somehow people got wind of this off-his-rocker preacher out in the desert. They went out to see and sure enough, there he was: every bit as wild as they had heard: clothed in scratchy camel hair, eating whatever he could grub up in the desert (grasshoppers and the like). Popularity didn’t change John. He could have moved into the city with people feeding and clothing him. He didn’t. He could have preached in the courtyards of the Jerusalem temple, but that’s not where God wanted him. Out in the desert, without medical insurance, a 401k or three weeks of vacation a year, God’s lonely voice called, and people listened.

 Then came Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth. Clearly a humble and caring guy but he was no John the Baptist. No scratchy clothing. He set up shop in the same neighborhood and the flood of people was diverted to Jesus. John’s disciples thought this unfair. They had endured the desert heat. They had had to learn to love the crunch of locust between their teeth. Who is this latecomer? He’s nowhere near as “authentic” as John!

 Do you know what John said? He said—this is what I meant when I told you he said something that lives in the heart of every pastor—he said, *“The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine.”* John said he was like the best man at a wedding. The wedding ceremony isn’t about the best man; it’s about the groom and the bride. The best man is simply overjoyed for those two who have found each other.

 Every Sunday, whether there are many of you or few, I feel a little like John. I am so happy that for this hour Jesus will be brought closer to his people; that his people have come to see Jesus. My hope and prayer is that by God’s grace I just don’t get in the way. Another Christian (not in the Bible) pictured Jesus and his people this way, “A light upon the shining sea—the Bridegroom with his bride.” What beauty to see you and your Savior together today!

 Some people find great joy in flinging mud at beauty. Once in a while Christians get asked, “Could God forgive Adolf Hitler?” Every decade has its villain. In my college days it was, “Could Jeffrey Dahmer ever get to heaven?” Some other horrible person surely gets put in the blank these days. “Could God ever forgive *that* person?” We’re not talking about church-going folks here. In fact, we aren’t even talking about people with “a checkered past.” We are talking truly awful people who find some sort of demented pleasure in destroying other humans created in God’s image. People so horrible that we don’t say out loud what they have done.

**theme: “Even Him?” “Yes, Even Him!”**

 Now we can accept most “sinners”. We can look at that uninvited woman with a sin-filled past who came in and anointed Jesus’ feet. [In today’s Gospel reading.] We don’t have a real problem with her. She was probably forced into a life of sin, right? No food to put on the table. A baby crying for hunger. What’s a mother to do? Bad choices, but in a way we can understand. This woman full of regret washes Jesus’ feet with her tears. Meanwhile, over there, is that pompous symbol of the oppressive patriarchy grouching about *“what kind of woman she is.”* And with our 21st century false dichotomy of oppressor and victim, we stop thinking of her as a “sinful woman” and think of her as an “unfairly treated woman”—which misses the point of what Jesus said and cheapens what Jesus did for her. Yet, whatever she is, we don’t picture her as a monster.

 Jesus came for people like her. But a monster?

 The absolute ruler of the land walks into your church with government bodyguards around him and they bolt a pagan shrine to the floor right next to the baptismal font. He lets the congregation know that anyone who touches it will not live long enough to regret it. He is the man in the palace with all kinds of weird stories swirling around him, stories of pagan feasts and black magic to feed his quest for power. He orders murders in the street. Others have seen him in dark rituals outside the city gates taking his own child and handing it to a pagan priest who… who slays that tiny infant! Meet King Manasseh!

 Jesus died to forgive the sins of all people. Yes, we like that. It looks nice on paper; it sounds good. But can God forgive a monster?

 The monster I just described is the man in our reading. Then ***“the Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people.”*** While Manasseh still stood neck deep in sin, God was longing to be reunited with him. He sent messengers, prophets, preachers, who showed up on his doorstep, telling him to stop it, telling Manasseh’s people to stop it. God called for a return, but they were enjoying themselves too much. There was too much in it for them.

 ***“So the Lord brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon.”*** With those words we breathe a sigh of relief. Surely, the few godly left in Manasseh’s kingdom did too. Better foreign domination than that monster.

 But that wasn’t God’s plan. ***“In his distress [Manasseh] sought the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. And when he prayed to him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom.”*** Really? There is scarcely a more unfair sentence in the entire Bible! “Justice demanded that heaven should be closed against him, [but] the Almighty opened for him a hole in the [sky].”[[1]](#footnote-1) Forgive him?

 Here I have to pause a moment. We have to ask ourselves why bad things happened Manasseh? Why the hook in the nose? Why bronze shackles and an imprisonment in far-off Babylon?

 I have never heard this myself, but second-hand I have often heard of people who approach the sick and the suffering and say, “You must have done something really bad that God is punishing you like this.” Jesus condemned that thought process in his own disciples in John chapter 9. The Bible, and it doesn’t often do this, but when it reveals the will of God it gives a wide variety of reasons for bad things. Not having time to go into examples: sometimes the Bible tells us that troubles keep us from something worse; sometimes bad things happen so that God can be glorified; sometimes God lets bad things happen to us specifically because he does want us to repent. This was God’s will with Manasseh. So much so that when this baby killer and pagan idolater humbled himself before God, God forgave and restored him. These troubles came to Manasseh so that he would repent! Even him!

 I would highly advise against saying that to suffering people. You do not know God’s mind. But I would suggest that when bad things happen to you and to me, we should be asking ourselves: “Is there something that God wants me to repent of?” I am not saying that it is the answer, at least not always. Yet it is worth asking if the reason we have financial troubles isn’t because we have been unfaithful stewards of God’s gifts. It is worth asking if our family troubles aren’t because we have failed to treat our family as God wants us to do. Yet while asking that question, we should know that as surely as Jesus forgave that sinful woman and Manasseh, we are to be certain of God’s forgiveness through faith in Christ Jesus.

 But back to Manasseh’s repentance… It is important for us to understand what happens after forgiveness.

 The Bible says that Manasseh was king for 55 years starting in 697BC. It doesn’t say when Manasseh’s repentance happened, but from outside archeological data, it seems that it happened about five years from the end of his long rule. He returned from captivity as an aged man, humbled yet knowing that the Lord is true God. When he got back to Jerusalem, ***“He got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the Lord, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city.”*** He took all that he had held dear and threw it out of the city. Let me tell you this, when you threw something out of ancient Jerusalem, it was kind of fun. Walled city on a big hill. You march up to the top of the wall and give that idol a toss. You watch it hurdle through the air, smashing on the rocks, and the pieces just keeps on tumbling down the steep rocky hillside. Good bye, idols! Manasseh was forgiven, and like an alcoholic glad to be sober for the first time in decades, he cleans house. Manasseh lived in light of God’s forgiveness.

 This man, dare I call him a monster, is reconciled to God. But is that fair? How could a man like that get to heaven? Maybe he will have to issue a public apology. Maybe he will have to spend the rest of eternity with a guilty conscience. Maybe God will give him a seat in the back corner by the bathrooms. Oh, we would like that wouldn’t we. But we’re not God. While perfect and holy and zealous for justice, God has declared that with the death of Jesus Christ all sin is forgiven. We squabbling children have no right to argue about it. The monster is forgiven! Through faith we see a sinner brought back to God; “A light upon the shining sea—the Bridegroom and his bride.”

 Here is the difficulty. About 50 years after Manasseh’s death, when his great-grandson was king, the kingdom of Judah was annihilated by the foreign Babylonians. When that happened, 50 plus years later, do you know who was to blame? *“Surely these things happened to Judah according to the Lord’s command, in order to remove them from his presence because of the sins of Manasseh and all he had done.”* (2 Kings 24:3) So did God forgive Manasseh or not?

 This should give pause to all those people who think, “If I sin, all I have to do is ask forgiveness.” There are even Christians, who think like that. Two things: People who say “sorry” just so they can get away with more sin have not repented. God knows the heart, and he hates hypocrites more than just about anything. Second thing: what we do today cannot be undone. Manasseh led Israel into sin, but he was unsuccessful in leading them out of sin. He repented, but most of his people did not. Our sins can have devastating long-term consequences even though forgiven. Manasseh repented and reformed, but he could not change the fact that his 50-year idolatry and violence had convincingly taught idolatry and violence to generations of Israelites, so much so that their destruction was sealed. How do you live with that?

 About 350 years ago, a certain British man was raised by a most godly mother—for six years until she died. As he grew he rebelled against her ways. Even from his teenage years he lived in open sin and finally got involved in the most inhumane business ever seen on this earth, slave trading. He was ruthless and cruel and foul-mouthed like the worst. Yet God’s mercy claimed him from that life of sin. For the rest of his life, unable to undo what he had done, but knowing God’s tremendous forgiveness, he lived and preached and sang about God’s amazing grace. In fact, he, the slave trader monster, John Newton, wrote that song “Amazing Grace.”

 Can God save monstrous sinners? Today’s reading from Second Chronicles is a clear answer. But it isn’t just about monsters. How does that hymn go? “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like him” No that’s not quite it…Oh, here it is, “…that saved a wretch *like me*.” Amen.

1. Edersheim, *Bible History*, 948 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)