

September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Scripture:

Psalm 30

Numbers 11: 1-35

John 1: 1-18

“The light is always there.”

A few years ago now Eugene Peterson wrote an absolute gem of a book called -----“The Invitation: A Simple Guide to the Bible.”

It came out in 2008 --- “The Invitation: A Simple Guide to the Bible” ----- and that’s precisely what it is ----- a simple invitation to the Bible ---- a simple guide and invitation into the beautiful world of the Bible ---- into the life changing world of the Word of God.

At the very front of the book --- before the table of contents --- before any introduction --- or forward ----- or dedication even --- are these simple words --- and they set the tone for the whole book ---

“When we submit our lives to what we read in scripture ---- we find that we’re being led not to see God in our stories --- but to see our stories in God’s.

God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves.”

That’s beautiful --- faithful --- reformed --- enlightened Biblical theology at its best.

“When we submit our lives to what we read in scripture ---- we find that we’re being led not to see God in our stories --- but to see our stories in God’s.

God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves.”

In other words it’s not about us ---- it’s about God.

God first --- huge majestic beautiful true wondrous splendid ---- God ----- and then us --- small --- sloppy ---- banged up --- and yes ---- because of God beautiful in a certain sense too.

But first there is God ---- and then there is us ----- and we always fit into that larger --- grander --- far more magnificent story that is God's story.

Every authentic and true journey in faith must at some point surrender to this basic and profound truth.

And so --- what a great introduction to a book all about God and His character ---- and action ---- and chosen people.

“When we submit our lives to what we read in scripture ---- we find that we're being led not to see God in our stories --- but to see our stories in God's.

God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves.”

And so how do we work this out --- this idea that our stories are nothing in and of themselves ----- but when placed into the context of His story they suddenly find meaning and purpose and beauty.

Continuing on in Peterson's book he has this to say about the book of Numbers --- our scripture focus for today.

Eugene Peterson on the book of Numbers ----

“Becoming a truly human community is a long ---- complex --- messy business.

Simply growing up as a man or woman demands all the wisdom and patience and courage that we can muster.

But growing up with others --- parents ----- and siblings and neighbours --- to say nothing of odd strangers and mean enemies --- immensely complicates the growing up.

The book of Numbers plunges us into the mess of growing up.

The pages in this section of the biblical story give us a realistic feel for what is involved in being included in the people of God --- which is to say ---- a human community that honours God --- lives out love and justice in daily affairs ----- learns how to deal with sin in oneself and others ---- and follows God's commands into a future of blessing.

And all this without illusions.”

And that last part is crucial --- “and all this without illusions” ---- living in community --- growing up in our faith --- maturing is difficult business ---- we can’t fake it or pretend it’s easy.

And Peterson goes on to say ----- in his usual straightforward and frank way -----

“Many of us fondle a romanticized spirituality in our imaginations. The “God’s in his heaven / all is right with the world” --- sort of thing. When things don’t go “right” we blame ourselves or others ---- muddle through the best we can ---- often with considerable crankiness.

He then says ---

“The Bible --- our primary text for showing us what it means to be human beings created by God nowhere suggests that life is simple or even “natural”. We need a lot of help.

We need organizational help.

When people live together in community --- jobs have to be assigned --- leaders appointed --- inventories kept.

And we need relational help.

The people who find themselves called and led and commanded by God find themselves in the company of men and women who sin a lot ---- quarrel --- bicker --- grumble --- rebel --- steal ----- --- you name it we do it.

We need help in getting along.

Wise discipline is required in becoming a people of God.”

And it’s worth pausing here because this last point here is something most of us really don’t like.

“Discipline.”

“Wise discipline is required in becoming a people of God.”

Most of us don’t like to be disciplined.

And yet discipline is a hallmark of Reformed theology ---- John Calvin perhaps more than any other theologian speaks of discipline ---Biblical discipline.

And Numbers 11 and 12 are full of God disciplining His people --- and as can be expected the people don't like it.

As human beings we seem to have a profound distaste for discipline --- being disciplined.

Anyone enjoy being disciplined?

As Peterson says ----

“Many of us fondle a romanticized spirituality in our imaginations.”

We mostly want a romanticized spirituality free from harsh discipline --- we want the fun loving part without the hard work parts.

We want the beautiful meal without the dirt dishes to clean up afterwards.

Faith development isn't like preparing a meal we can't get someone else to do it for us ---- and if we can't get someone else to do it for us it also means there will be dirty dishes to clean up at the end.

Growing in faith is not always clean and celebratory ---- it can also be hard down close to the earth work.

Barbara Brown Taylor echoes this sentiment writing ---

“Resurrection is always announced with Easter lilies --- the sound of trumpets ---- bright streaming light.

But it did not happen that way.

If it happened in a cave --- it happened in complete silence ---- in absolute darkness ---- with the smell of damp stone ---- and dug earth in the air.”

Resurrection --- new life ----- fresh beginnings --- growth ----- our salvation often comes after a cave experience ---- in silence --- in darkness ---- with the smells of damp stone and earth.

Jesus emerged from a cave at the resurrection --- he came out of a dark wet hole in the earth.

In our passage from the book of Numbers today we see God angry ---- indeed 3 times we experience the anger of God ---- and each time it grows -- -- finally resulting in divine discipline.

Verse 1 --- the first time we see God angry in the passage ----

----“Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.”

“His anger was aroused...”

And then in verse 10 --- we see that God’s anger has progressed ---

“Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents. The Lord became exceedingly angry...”

In verse 1 it’s God’s anger was aroused ---- in verse 10 now God has become exceedingly angry ---- and then we have the final mention of the anger of God in verse 33.

It reads this way --- “But while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the Lord burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague.”

Notice now it’s ---- “the anger of the Lord burned against his people.”

“His anger is aroused” ---- in verse 1 ---- by verse 10 He “becomes exceedingly angry” --- and then in verse 33 ---- “His anger burned against the people ----- and so He struck them with a plague.”

God’s anger builds throughout this passage --- and it ends with an act of discipline --- a lesson --- some punishment --- a consequence --- an opportunity for the people to grow ---- a plague.

God disciplines the people over and over again in Numbers ---- in the Bible as a whole.

He doesn’t just dispense nuggets of wisdom --- He doesn’t just coddle them ---- He invites and sometimes even forces the people to grow by disciplining them.

But we mostly don’t like passages like these ---- we mostly want the happy stuff --- the rainbows ---- and the butterflies stuff.

But the rainbows and the butterflies --- Easter ---- mean nothing ---- indeed cannot even exist without first the cocoon ---- and the Good Friday event --- the cross.

God's light shines ever before us ----- and sometimes that light is a fire --- a consuming fire even ---- as it is in Numbers 11 today.

“The fire from the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.” ----- that was a wake up call no doubt.

The people are ----- as Peterson says in his introduction to Numbers --- the people are learning to grow up.

And just like them we too need divine direction --- guidance --- and yes even discipline if we are ever to grow up.

And as frightening as it can sound --- divine discipline is a blessing and a gift from God to us.

The light shines in the darkness --- and the darkness does not overcome it --- - we read in John's gospel today.

The very beginning of John's gospel reminds us in these words --- that nothing can ever snub out the light of God --- the light of Christ ---- the Holy Spirit of God in our midst.

And of course right at the beginning of John's gospel we have reference to what we are looking at in Numbers today --- the Exodus --- Moses leading the people into a new reality as God tempers them.

Verse 17 from John 1 ---

“For the law was given through Moses...”

The importance of the story of Moses and the people of God journeying from Egypt to Canaan ---- from Egypt to The Promised Land --- the journey we now call Exodus cannot be overstated.

This journey this Exodus --- this movement from slavery to freedom ----- is the pre-eminent journey ----- growing up ---- discipleship model in the entire

Bible --- it is still part of our movement from enslavement to sin --- to freedom in Christ --- it still reveals much to us about the nature of God and our human nature.

We see the complete will of God in Jesus Christ --- but we appreciate the fulfillment that occurs in Jesus Christ in a far richer more beautiful way if we also study and familiarize ourselves with the movement of the Exodus and God's chosen people and leader Moses.

We see the beauty of God at Easter --- but it is far richer and beautiful and true if we have also taken the time and enriched our faith by journeying through the darkness and glorious beauty of Good Friday as well.

We cannot simply skip over or gloss over Moses --- Numbers --- the Exodus ---- God disciplining His people and expect to appreciate the Christ event as deeply and as richly as if we do enter into the movement and development of the people of God as we have it in the book of Numbers today.

Simply put we rob ourselves of a profound opportunity for spiritual growth if we only ever take the easy road and avoid the challenging disciplining texts such as Numbers 11 and Numbers 12 and others.

Yes the light shines in the darkness --- and no the darkness cannot ever overcome it.

And also ---- sometimes the light is a consuming fire of anger born out of a profound love that manifests itself in acts of discipline.

As Eugene Peterson ---- and Tim Keller --- and John Calvin would also agree -----

“When we submit our lives to what we read in scripture ---- we find that we're being led not to see God in our stories --- but to see our stories in God's.

God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves.”

And as Peterson also says ----

“Many of us fondle a romanticized spirituality in our imaginations.”

The story of God in which we find ourselves ---- mustn't ever be romanticized or watered down to just little feel good slogans and nuggets of

wisdom without also the valleys --- and the caves and the challenges and the discipline ---- discipleship and discipline share more than just phonetic roots ---- they are born of the same sentiment --- discipleship includes --- is born out of a very real need for discipline --- divine discipline.

It's not a fluke that Christmas and Easter services are the most well attended ----- they are the fun ones --- the bright light ones ---- the beautiful ones where the valleys and the darkness and the caves and tombs recess into the background.

We love the trumpets of Easter and so we should --- it's a beautiful thing --- new life ----- resurrected life --- eternal life even thanks to God in Christ.

We love entering into the Promised Land --- and so we should it's a beautiful thing --- covenant --- promised fulfilled.

Hallelujah Amen for sure.

But ---- but ----- without Good Friday there is no Easter.

Without the Exodus --- there is no entry into the long awaited and Promised Land.

We need the growing up --- the maturing --- the discipline ----- the discipling ----- the consequence ---- the beautiful deep enriching growth moments of the Exodus and the Cross ----- to emerge changed into the Promised Land and the empty tomb --- Easter --- everlasting life.

The light forever shines and the darkness cannot put out the light.

And as one theologian put it ----

“There is a light that shines in the darkness, which is only visible there.”

“There is a light that shines in the darkness, which is only visible there.”

Sometimes the light is profoundly appreciated when it dark and the little visible light has greater depth and meaning.

And then there is this ----- Barbara Brown Taylor says ----

“I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.”

We need discipline as much as we need congratulations.

As our scriptures remind us --- the book of Lamentations ---- chapter 3 verse 23 ----

“Great is his faithfulness;  
his mercies begin afresh each morning.”

“His mercies begin afresh each morning” ---- in other words after the dark we see the mercies of God afresh anew ----- in other words after the Exodus journey --- after the Cross event --- we see the mercies anew --- The Promised Land ---- and then chiefly and most beautifully of all --- the Easter event --- resurrection new life ---- everlasting life in Jesus Christ --- through our salvation because of Him.

The light was shining all through the Exodus journey --- even if the people couldn't always see it or feel it.

The light was shining all through the cross event --- the crucifixion --- even if it wasn't always obvious.

Indeed as many have argued the light shone the brightest in the Exodus event ---- and the light shone the brightest in the Cross event.

Just because we don't always feel it --- doesn't mean the Holy Spirit --- the presence of God isn't in our midst and powerfully.

In the middle of a 3 mile long tunnel it can be very hard ---- almost impossible to see the light.

When I was in university living in a student house ----- I learned something profound from one of my room mates.

Patricia ---- She was PhD student ---- and described herself as “a caver”.

A caver.

I had never heard of this before --- “a caver.”

She researched the earth by going deep deep into its cavities --- by going deep into caves.

In fact as she said to me she had gone just about as far into a cave as anybody else on the planet ---- and there she was in various National Geographic articles going into and talking about her research into the caves.

And she said to me --- “we cavers are a different breed you know.”

“We cavers are a different breed you know.”

And I asked her what she meant by that.

And this is what she said --- “To go deep down into the earth without natural light for days on end --- weeks on end --- without there ever being the hope of natural light unless you turn around requires a special kind of person.”

She said virtually every trip ---- and she had been on many --- and her kind of specialized research required a large team --- virtually every trip she said - ---- we lose people who simply cannot live without constant light who say things like ----- “I need more light I’ve got to go back now.” --- and off they go.

“Cavers are a different breed” --- she said ---- “we can go without light ---- and without the hope of light for far far longer than the average person.”

I don’t know how much of a caver I could ever be.

I don’t know if I could ever be a really good caver.

But I can say that cavers can teach us something ---- my caver roommate taught me something ---- it takes a special person to dwell in the dark and not lose faith.

It takes a special person to dwell in the dark all the while knowing that the light is still there --- always there --- forever there ----- sometimes just a little way off ---- sometimes a far way off ---- not always visible --- audible --- or tangible ----- and yet at the same time always always always present ---- ever

around us and within us in all of its radiant gospel ----- good and saving beauty.

Psalm 30 our call to worship this morning goes this way --- picking it up at verse 4 -----

“Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people;  
praise his holy name.  
For his anger lasts only a moment,  
but his favor lasts a lifetime;  
weeping may stay for the night,  
but rejoicing comes in the morning.”

God’s anger is short lived ---- lasts only a moment verse 5 says.

And His favour --- a lifetime.

Unfortunately ---- often in our impatience and romanticized spirituality we feel as though the anger is far more than just a moment and we so quickly become uncomfortable.

We too soon forget --- and here we go again with light and darkness.

We too soon forget that ---  
“weeping may stay for the night,  
but rejoicing comes in the morning.”

Fear ----- and panic --- grumbling --- impatience --- often characterize our culture.

Ours is a culture largely confused by what is wrong and what is right.

What is true and what is false.

Which way is up --- Godly --- and which way is down ---- evil.

Listen to the Israelites today in Numbers verse 4 ---

“The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, “If only we had meat to eat!”

The rabble --- do you know what the rabble means ---- rabble means the confused among them.

And just before that in verse 1 it's ---  
 "Now the people complained about their hardships..."

God has freed them from slavery --- they are on their way to the land of milk and honey --- The Promised Land ----- and now because they have to work at it a bit to get there they don't like it and so they complain and become all confused and unhappy because it isn't coming as easy as victory over Pharaoh did.

"Take us back to the way it was" ---- the Israelites say --- at least in Egypt we had better food --- more variety --- and it was served up to us.

I need the light and I need it now ---- the novice caver says.

God knows what we need and when we need it.

Jesus didn't come too late --- He arrived right on time.

The light we feel we need at any given time comes just as we need it --- right on time --- as God so wills it --- never early ----- never late ---- never out of step.

The discipline of the Lord --- the correction of the Holy spirit --- comes right on time --- just when we need it --- maybe not when we want it --- but when we need it according to our good good Father.

As Psalm 30 reminds us ---  
 "For his ---- God's ----- anger lasts only a moment,  
 but his favor lasts a lifetime..."

This is great comfort --- as are the words

"weeping may stay for the night,  
 but rejoicing comes in the morning."

--- also from Psalm 30.

As John's gospel reminds us --- the light is always there.

The presence of God is always with us.

The Holy Spirit is ever around us --- guiding us --- walking with us ---- saving us from calamity.

We are so blessed --- and we are blessed even when God corrects and disciplines us ---- because it shows us again and again His profound love for us.

Hebrews 12 verse 5 and 6 ---

“My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,  
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,  
because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,  
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

Deuteronomy 8 --- verse 5 ---

“Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you.”

Revelation 3 verse 19 ---

“Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent.”

Job 5 verse 17 -----

“Blessed is the one whom God corrects;  
so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.”

And so on ---- and these aren't my words --- they are God's words ---- God disciplines us --- and we are blessed by it.

Many of us unfortunately don't really like this part of our journey ---- many of us don't like this part of the scriptures.

Scripture isn't like ice cream ---- where we choose the ones we like and pass by --- ignore the flavours we don't like.

As Eugene Peterson says --- instead --- “Many of us fondle a romanticized spirituality in our imaginations.”

We are so blessed to have a God that takes the time to correct us --- pick us up off the floor ---- wipe us off --- correct us --- and set us back on our feet again ----- and then again --- and then again --- and then again --- and so on.

And should we ever struggle with how this might apply to us ----- we are not left to wonder.

Read Numbers --- read Judges --- read 1 and 2 Samuel --- read any of the Gospels and we see time and time again just how God so boldly and courageously --- carefully ---- and compassionately corrects us --- and invites us to grow.

Jesus never once came to a person and said --- “There is nothing about you that needs to change --- you just keep going as you are going --- carry on.”

Read the Gospels Jesus always offered something new ---- in every --- not almost every --- but every interaction Jesus offered something new --- sometime it was bold discipline ---- others gentle corrective --- never ---- “Carry on as you were.”

God is forever teaching ----- rebuking ----- correcting --- and training us in righteousness.

As 2 Timothy 3: 16 reminds us ---

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...”

To see just how much God loves us --- to see just how much God cares for us by offering an alternate path to the one we slide back into almost effortlessly ---- all we need to do is read the Word ----- come to the cross where the living Word Jesus Christ was sacrificed ---- and finally all we need to do is give way to the Holy Spirit of God.

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4 verse 7 -----

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”

We do have this treasure --- that is the all surpassing power from God ---- and sometimes we are the clay jars --- the vessels that carry this beautiful goodness of God for others to see and taste.

And as Paul also said just past this verse in 2 Corinthians 4 ---

“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”

Life can be hard --- death --- death of a child ---- death of one of our children ---- sickness --- sickness in our spouse --- sickness in us --- as a congregation we have had our share of death and sickness of late --- life can be hard.

But life is also beautiful --- a new born baby ----- the leaves changing colour and bringing with them the beautiful colours that only God can create.

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.”

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”

“weeping may stay for the night,  
but rejoicing comes in the morning.”

God is so good.

God’s love for us is so deep --- and grand --- and pure --- and saving.

An endless fountain.

A cup that overflows.

A river of life.

And so much more.

And so we give thanks.

And so we give thank for divine discipline --- embracing the profound care that God shares with us by correcting us when we go astray and become misguided and confused --- disoriented.

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.”

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”

“weeping may stay for the night,  
but rejoicing comes in the morning.”

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.”

Praise be to God in all His infinite glory --- love ---- goodness ---and truth.  
What a blessing it is to be called children of the living God.

And so we claim this blessing ---- remembering just how great a privilege it is to be called by God by name --- saved by God in Christ --- sustained by God in the Holy Spirit of God.

God is good and powerful --- compassionate and beautiful and true.

His is the larger story --- the largest story --- in which our stories --- our lives find themselves.”

We are so blessed --- and so we give thanks.

Amen.