



Rev. Dr. Craig Lindsey

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Sermon – I Will

A small group during COVID19 began reading the Bible together on ZOOM for half-an-hour, Monday thru Thursday. Together we have read Matthew, Acts, Romans, 1st and now we are into 2nd Samuel. For several, this daily Meditation has provided a touchstone of normalcy, in a time when nothing is normal. For others a way to get to know others. For me, I care far more about what Nancy, Pat or Roger think about the Bible than what Dr. Spurgeon, or Calvin, or St. Augustine thought 1800 years ago! However what has been said several times in these discussion is “How human the circumstance of Jesus and people in the Bible!” These are not esoteric theology, mythic superheroes, not a Harry Potter with magic abilities, not even characters we watch on television who encounter major disasters effecting their cities every week!

After Calling the first Disciples, Jesus and the fishermen went to Synagogue where Jesus began to teach. We have said before that the Temple of Solomon was destroyed by the Babylonians, and one reason for the writing Mark’s Gospel was that the Roman’s destroyed the 2nd Temple; following which Judaism changed from Atoning for Sin with Animal Sacrifice; to gathering at Synagogues which were Schools and Community Centers, where Rabbis/Teachers explain the Scriptures & ideas. SO, where better Jesus go? People were amazed by Jesus’ teaching, because he taught as one with authority, who actually believed what he was saying, unlike other Teachers of the Law.

One man, afflicted with demons, began to make a scene. How often we dismiss the Scriptures as being archaic, from a different place and culture because of miracles or demons! Truthfully, we have all known people among our families and neighbors afflicted with demons. We may call these Depression, Alcoholism, Dementia, Headaches, Paralysis, Fears, Lusts, Cancers, but these are our demons. Rather than Jesus displaying the latest surgical technique, penicillin or anti-virials needing refrigeration, Jesus listened and he cared about raising people up. Many preachers today have been concerned that finding Simon Peter’s Mother-in-law in bed, Jesus heled her so she could serve them dinner! But what I love about this paragraph is that where the Bible is translated as “Jesus took her by the hand and helped her up;” that phrase in Aramaic is the exact same description as what God did to Jesus at the Resurrection! “Jesus took her by the hand and raised her up from death to life.”

I believe I have shared the story previously that 30 years ago, I was pastor of a church in Wisconsin that was afflicted by an epidemic, not COVID19 or Influenza, but an epidemic of suicides among the teen agers. Within a month, our community had buried 10 of our High School students. I went to the School Principal and simply offered to listen and care. The principal announced over the PA if students had contemplated suicide, they should come to the Gymnasium, where we would listen and care. Over 300 came to the Gym. The Guidance Counselors and I set up small groups for the students to not compete or put one another down, but instead to listen and care and lift one another up. Instantly these demons were vanquished.

Verse 35 describes “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” More than any other phrase in all the Bible, I think GOING TO A

SOLITARY PLACE describes where we all have been throughout this last year. Since moving to Arizona, we have not bothered with an Alarm clock, as our Spaniel nudges me every morning between 4:30 and 5am. I manage to crawl out of bed, turn on the coffee on the way to scooping out her food, let the dog out and in, and by 6am watch as the sun rises over these mountains. Only after moving here, did we come to realize that all the places we have lived, not only had snow and cold, but averaged 360 days of gray skies per year. Every morning here there is a different display as the heavens transform from black to a glowing brightness, hot pink reflecting off purple cloud formations, which clear to a turquoise clearer than any native stone. While our home is in the midst of an HOA, at that hour of the morning, it is a place of solitude without another person on the horizon. As our valley is transformed from shadows of blackness into so many differing hues, each morning I give THANKS TO GOD. At 5am, I am not always certain if I am giving thanks to God for Life, or Health, this Church, for Family, or just for strong Coffee, but at 5am I figure God knows. I prefer the translation that says "A solitary place" rather than "a deserted place" because **deserted** means empty, lonely, abandoned, forsaken, besides which, while there are not other persons yet awake or aware the valley and mountainside are teeming with life. On several occasions, I spent two weeks at mission sites in remote places; yet each place was filled with sounds and smells of life. Life is noisy and smelly!

We have each been in solitary places, which before this pandemic is over will have lasted over a year. The ides of last March, when the world went into lock-down, it felt a little like a retreat, a night of solitude to recoup and recharge before having to listen to the world. Our youngest son is an Engineer developing a technology that tracks movement of earthquakes and volcanos; who describes that the technology developed to record Levels on the Richter Scale, are recording how very little movement and sound we have been making in isolation.

Throughout this year I have been searching Church History, Theology and Confessions for wisdom about times like these. I have a good friend who is a Professor of Church History at a Catholic Seminary whom I contacted asking "Surely, with the Bubonic Plague having scourged Europe for 300 years there must have been a Confession of Faith about times like this?" But he responded that the only real reference to that pandemic was The Second Helvetic Confession concerning Baptism of Infants, but there is nothing really about Christian faith in times like these. However, what we are dealing with is not only this evil virus, but the effects on human beings of being alone. When socially distant from life, we begin to imagine we are the only persons that exist, the only ones that matter, and we make others inanimate objects unworthy of our care. Apartheid in South Africa was a Government and Church sponsored system that gave Caucasian Afrikaaners rights at the expense of Indigenous Africans. This separation had become so culturally accepted, that these two could not see the same truth in any circumstance, in the end the only means of change came through what were called Truth & Reconciliation Commissions. The Confession of Belhar is the Confession of Faith, adopted by the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 2016, which says in part ***We Believe in the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as such we believe this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and between groups is sin, which Christ already conquered, and accordingly anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted.***

But there is another kernel of gold in this passage. That is, when the man with leprosy begs of Jesus, You can make a difference "IF YOU WILL," Jesus responded I Will! How often we witness a circumstance, we hear of a problem, and are overloaded. If someone else helps that is a great human interest story. But Jesus listens, Jesus cares, and responds "I WILL" then resurrects the person by restoring them from being an inanimate thing to being a Person of God.

SO, let's make this passage to personal to us. During COVID19, everyone has gotten accustomed to being socially isolated. Twice in the last week, persons have come to me describing that our congregation is not friendly! I would assure you, that to Judy and I, you have gone out of your way to care for us. Like every Church, even without Coffee Hour persons have sought out their friends! However, I fear that I have made a grave sin! Being isolated, we have been so concerned to wear masks, to prevent singing, to exit at least 6 feet apart, to be safe. I have not encouraged you to seek out the stranger, to welcome one another, to listen and care. Which leaves us as inanimate things to one another, rather than the resurrection of claiming those who were as good as dead and making them a friend and sister or brother.