

October 25, 2020

“Altar-ed Lives: Jesus Altar-ed Kingdom”

[Isaiah 61](#) and [Luke 4:16-30](#)

I want to tell you a story that includes a few other stories too.

Once upon a time, everything was as it should be. People were in close communion with God AND each other. Our scriptures tell us there were only two people at the beginning of this story, which sounds so much easier than a bunch of people trying to be close; but we all know that two people is all it takes for things to NOT be as they should. Right? Furthermore, the story makes it clear who these two people were. It was a man and a woman. Do I need to say more about how easy it would be for things to NOT be as they should? In the midst, of this story, when everything was as it should be, God gave the man and the woman work to do. Work was not a punishment; it was a privilege. It was full of purpose and meaning; it involved the hands and the heart; it included dignity and freedom. Imagine, even **WORK** was as it should be.

But all that changed when an insidious serpent slithered into the picture and tried to sow seeds of doubt into the minds and hearts of the man and the woman; into their understanding of who God is and what God was or was not withholding from them. And they took the bait, and took a fall, and everything changed . . . and was no longer as it should be. And this included the work they did; how they viewed work, how they experienced work, and even the motivation for their work. Everything was altered – and not in a good way.

At some point, in the midst of all that was NOT as it should be, work became more about wealth, and status and power. Work even became something to avoid – especially hard work that made their bodies sweat and their backs sore. And then it dawned on someone: What better way to avoid hard work – and still make money and gain power – than to hire people to do the work for you? And, even better, what if the people who did the work for you weren’t really ‘people?’ What if you could treat them as ‘less than people’ – even own them and extract from them every ounce of strength and dignity and freedom? Think of all the money you could make and all the hard work you could avoid and all the power you could feel!

Sin takes a lot of forms. Slavery is certainly one of those forms. And God’s people knew what it meant to be enslaved. As the story goes on, God’s beloved and called people find themselves as slaves in Egypt. Now they were the ‘less-than-people’ people, getting their dignity and freedom extracted from them. So, God raised up a leader named Moses (plug Debby Berry’s story time last Sunday) to help set His people free. It turns out that – ever since then – God’s people have been helping people get free from all kinds of enslavement. Unfortunately, God’s people have also been part of the problem – enslaving people and/or doing nothing about the insidious sin of slavery. [We have a very mixed history when it comes to work and wealth, slavery and servitude.] Everything was and still **IS NOT** as it should be.

So God needed to send more leaders, sort of like Moses. These leaders were called prophets and they had a tough job because God's people didn't really like to listen to prophets. And most of the prophets knew this when they signed up for duty. Isaiah was one of them. [see Isaiah 6 sermon from last week.] And this is some of what God spoke to His people through Isaiah; it was actually after they had returned from exile/slavery themselves. [[Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11](#)]

This was a powerful word for God's people, but they were still a little confused about how to apply it to their lives. Who was this Good News for? Who were the oppressed and brokenhearted; the captives and prisoners? Was it just a word to and for God's "officially declared" people? What about the foreign slaves and immigrants among them? What about slaves in other parts of the world they didn't know about? Was this a possible NEW JOB DESCRIPTION for God's people – to tie in with the first job description they got when everything was as it should be?

Fast-forward roughly 7 centuries. God's people are sort of slaves again – under the boots of the Romans. They aren't free, nor are their leaders really doing the work God called them to do at the beginning of the story and through Isaiah. And Jesus arrives on the scene. He knew the entire story. He was present to it all and, out of the Father's deep love for humanity, came to be literally present with people; including the enslaved and the forgotten. After Jesus was baptized by His cousin John; after He fasted 40 days and 40 nights and was tempted to back out and back down by that same insidious serpent; this is what we read about Jesus: [[Luke 4:14-30](#)]

In the same way that the man and the woman didn't listen to God, and the Israelites didn't listen to Isaiah, it's pretty clear from the end of this story that the people in Nazareth didn't really want to listen to Jesus either. Especially when He started pointing out that God had a heart for the forgotten and the foreigner. That stuff about Elijah and Elisha really rubbed them the wrong way. And people still don't want to listen to God, Isaiah and Jesus. And might I add, WE don't want to listen to some of this stuff either?

I am grateful for my upbringing in the Church. I'm grateful my parents and local church sent a bunch of us off to camp where I was introduced to a relationship with Christ and the importance of God's Word. But to be honest, most of what I was encouraged to see in scripture and do in response to it had a lot more to do with me as an individual than me as a global citizen. As I grew up, I had plenty of exposure to "mission." But mission typically didn't extend into deeper issues of justice. In fact, I was skeptical of people who beat the justice drum; or defensive; or ignorant; or all of the above.

There are a lot of factors that have changed in the American Church over the last three decades, but a combination of factors has helped those of us who were taught to see things more individualistically to see things more corporately in the Church and systemically (pervasively, if that's a better word) in the world. Biblical justice has become a growing focus for many.

And that kind of a focus can be overwhelming emotionally and spiritually. Paying attention to issues related to Biblical justice often leads to anger and sadness. Add to that the sheer exposure to catastrophic events happening all over the world and sickening realities in our own country and community, and “Sometimes It Just Seems to Be Too Much.” There’s actually a poetic prayer by Ted Loder with that same title. It goes like this:

*Sometimes, Lord,  
it just seems to be too much;  
    too much violence, too much fear;  
    too much of demands and problems;  
    too much of broken dreams and broken lives;  
    too much of war and slums and dying;  
    too much of greed . . .  
        and the sounds of people  
            devouring each other  
            and the earth;  
    too much of stale routines and quarrels;  
        unpaid bills and dead ends;  
    too much of words lobbed in to explode  
        and leaving shredded hearts and lacerated souls . . .*

*Sometimes the very air seems scorched  
    by threats and rejection and decay  
        until there is nothing  
            but to inhale pain  
            and exhale confusion.*

*Too much of darkness, Lord,  
    too much cruelty and selfishness and indifference . . .*

*Too much, Lord,  
    too much,  
        too bloody, bruising, brain-washing much.*

*Or is it too little,  
    too little of compassion,  
too little courage,  
    of daring,  
        of persistence,  
        of sacrifice;  
too little of music and laughter and celebration?*

*O God,  
make of me some nourishment  
    for these starved times,  
some food for my brothers and sisters  
    who are hungry for gladness and hope,  
that, being bread for them,  
    I may also be fed and be full.*

Sometimes It Just Seems to Be Too Much. Amen?  
And YET . . .

There are people who know what “Too Much” feels like (because they’ve seen Too Much on a daily basis) . . . who also have courage . . . who also know the whole story that begins and ends with everything as it should be but has a lot of mess in the middle. They want to be “food for their brothers and sisters who are hungry for gladness and hope” AND who are enslaved. They know the words of Isaiah and Jesus AND ACTUALLY BELIEVE THIS IS PART OF GOD’S CURRENT JOB DESCRIPTION FOR HIS PEOPLE – THE CHURCH. And out of their deep immersion in this story, and close communion to the One who has authored this story, they have joined God in carrying out His instructions to: “Bring Good News to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners” (Isaiah 61:1) and to “ove justice” (Isaiah 61:8) . . . just like God does.

And because of what International Justice Mission has done and is doing, other stories are being written within this beautiful, LIFE-ALTARING STORY. I want to introduce you to two young women with two more stories. The first is a recent CMU grad, Christa Brown, who grew up in the Valley and has been touched by and joined the work of IJM. The second is about a young woman named Liana, from the Dominican Republic. They have vastly different stories but their lives have intersected through the work of IJM.

[Please watch the videos on our website in the online service.]

**\*\*\*Christa grew up in Palisade. Great family, great education, and great experience at CMU. She was especially grateful that she got connected to the IJM chapter on campus; that she grew in her faith, became passionate about the work of Biblical justice, and is now an IJM Advocacy Volunteer on the Western Slope. Liana was sex trafficked by her own mom to support her mom’s drug habit. She was finally rescued with the help of IJM, went through an aftercare program, and is now living safely with her grandparents.**

Now here we are, at a place where all these stories intersect . . . and this IS and this CAN BE our story too. We can choose to not listen to God’s Word and throw Jesus off the proverbial cliff. We can claim this is all TOO MUCH. Or we can join Jesus and IJM and others in loving the oppressed, brokenhearted, captive, and prisoner. We can be used by God to Alter/Altar the lives of others, and – in the process – be altar-ed ourselves.

**Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion**

1. How aware are you of the pandemic of global slavery? The work of IJM?
2. Had you ever realized the connection between Isaiah and Jesus? Have you pictured Him, as a boy and young man, studying the Book of Isaiah?
3. Have you tended to think of your faith in Christ and relationship with God in primarily individualistic ways or more corporately, culturally – even globally?
4. What do you have a hard time “listening to” from God’s Word? In what ways might you (figuratively) want to push Jesus off a cliff?
5. What do you hear God asking you to do about the injustice of slavery?
6. What does this passage have to say about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?