December 14th

Joshua 1-2 | Matt. 1:1-6

This week of Advent continues our Christmas Story of Redemption by picking up in a season of Israel's history that is ***not*** marked by rebellion and disobedience. After 40 years of aimless wandering, the fearful and rebellious generation of Israelites passed on, replaced by a new generation - one whose every response to God had been completely reshaped.

A new generation. Another chapter in God's unrelenting faithfulness to humanity. A fresh invitation to trust in Him. To watch Him deliver, redeem, and provide in miraculous ways.

Israel is again at the door of the Promised Land - but this time they will follow God and their new leader, Joshua, into the land He had promised them. Joshua had spent the better part of 40 years learning from Moses ; how to follow God, lead the people, and engage in the redemptive story God was unfolding. As Joshua 1 opens, we once again see the heart and invitation of God. Joshua is called and commissioned to lead Israel, as they are repeatedly encouraged to be "*strong and courageous*." God also confirms in Joshua 1:3 that He will give them *"every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses."*

But simply because it was promised did not guarantee that it would be easy. They would soon learn that this journey would take every bit of them. Ultimately, entering the land would depend on God winning the battles, often making a way when there was no way.

We don't get very far into Joshua, (or geographically, into the Promised Land), before we see God redeeming an "*outsider*." Joshua 2 tells us of Rahab. She was an unlikely woman with a past, who risked her life to protect the 2 Israelite spies that came into her city. Her faith in the God of Israel would change her future. Before the first battle is waged, a scarlet cord of redemption marks their first steps into this land. Matthew 1 reveals that this very Rahab was part of redemption's promise. God wove her redeemed life into the lineage of the Messiah!

This "Promised Land" was never merely about a new homeland for Israel. It was always about God's plan for the redemption of the world. Joshua had no idea what the overarching plan of God was; he only knew his call was to radical courage and strength in the God who sees the beginning from the end. This is the same call upon our lives – to live in this same courage and strength. It is anchored in the God who holds every moment of history. The One who is writing a story beyond our awe and comprehension.

"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face." **-** *1 Corinthians 13:12*

We may only see a small part of what God is doing today. But Joshua's story and Rahab's rescue remind us that His promises reach farther than we can imagine. God will redeem us. And in Jesus, this plan of redemption is made clear.

December 15th

Judges | 1 Cor. 13:16-22 | 2 Peter 3:9

"In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." - Judges 21:25

Sound familiar? How about, "*live **your** truth*" ? This verse feels eerily similar to the society in which we live today. Humanity's brokenness and depravity is never more on display than when we, as a people, do "*what is right in our own eyes.*" And yet, such a season is where our story picks up today, as we look at the book of Judges.

The book of Joshua ends on a note of triumph, victory, and deliverance for the people of Israel. God had brought them to the land He had promised. He was the Savior of His people. But, shortly after Joshua's life comes to an end, Israel enters a new season of leadership characterized by *judges*. Though it is a different model of leadership than what was common in those days and in ours, a pattern known as "Israel's Cycle of Sin" begins to emerge. The pattern, observed in most of the Old Testament, goes something like this: Israel sins and disobeys; Israel is given over to foreign oppression; they cry out to God; God raises up a deliverer; God delivers Israel. Rinse. Repeat.

On one hand, Judges is not an easy book to read. It is full of some of the worst moments of Israel's history. But on the other hand, there is still beauty to be found in God's intervention. **It's not beautiful because Israel continues to sin; it is beautiful because God continues to save.** He hears the cries of His people, has compassion on them, and raises up deliverers. In both the Old and New Testaments, we see God's patient and saving heart on full display. The book of Judges is no different. The judges were not perfect (some worse than others), but the constant is the faithfulness of God!

"He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." - 2 Peter 3:9

The unfortunate reality is that the "cycle of sin" is not unique to Israel. Israel was made up of people who needed saving, and I believe that is something we can all relate to. All too often, we find ourselves stuck in these same patterns. But thankfully, God's patience extends towards us, just as it did towards Israel. Ephesians 2:4–5 reminds us that God, rich in mercy and love, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in sin. By grace we have been saved.

The judges were never meant to be the ultimate answer to brokenness. Yes, they brought temporary deliverance for Israel, but like us, they needed a Savior. And one day that Savior would come to deal the final blow to sin and death. When Israel cried out in repentance and desperation, God was faithful to hear their cries and rescue them. And that same faithful God would make a way to rescue us through Jesus Christ, even when we were dead in our sin.

December 16th

1 Samuel

Have you ever heard the phrase, “*Be careful what you wish for*” ? Sometimes, we may think we know exactly what we want, but actually have no idea what it is we are signing up for. It’s kind of like those familiar boxes of assorted chocolates. Comedian Jim Gaffigan refers to them as “gamble chocolates.” They all look incredible on the outside, but you could be in for a disgusting surprise once you get to the center! So often, the “shiny” things of this world seem to shape our desires, but we don’t even realize that the very thing(s) we are desperately begging God for may not be the path He has for us.

This perhaps summarizes the theme we find in 1 Samuel. After years of leadership under the judges, the people of Israel were not pleased with the state of their nation. Instead of inquiring what God would have them do, they came up with their own solution (golden calf at Mt. Sinai, anyone?). They began to look around at the leadership of the surrounding nations, leading them to demand a king**.**

The problem wasn't simply that they *wanted* a king. The problem was the motivation and desire of their hearts. They wanted ***to be like*** the nations around them, and in this desire, they were rejecting God's kingship *(1 Samuel 8:7)*. The people wanted a king they could see, a king who would fight their battles, and God allowed them to experience what they were asking for.

We are introduced to Saul, as the first king of Israel. Scripture describes him as handsome and taller than anyone else. According to human standards, he appeared to be the best candidate for kingship. But ultimately, his outside appearance did not match what was inside. You might say that Saul was a “gamble chocolate.” Integrity, humility, and submission to God were characteristics he lacked, and his disobedience would eventually cost him and his lineage the throne.

The book of 1 Samuel tells of Saul's rise and fall. Multiple times he *partially* obeyed God's instruction in battle, disregarded his responsibilities as king, over-stepped his role and made unlawful sacrifices to the Lord, and even made a monument to himself. The prophet Samuel rebukes him in 1 Samuel 15:22–23, reminding him that obedience matters more than sacrifice. In the end, all of the outward beauty and characteristics couldn’t make up for a heart that refused to be obedient, living by his own wisdom, in continual rejection of the instruction of the Lord. Saul tried to save the nation, and himself, by his own strength rather than leaning on God. The attempt to self-save may appear to have some early success, but it will ultimately fail. In the end, God would take the kingdom from Saul's family.

Even through Israel's rejection of God as their true King, and Saul's failure as king, God would not abandon His redemptive plan. He prepared another king. A king whose heart would matter more than his appearance. And yet even that king (David) would point beyond himself to the King we truly needed.

December 17th

1 & 2 Samuel | Micah 5:2 | Acts 13:22

Who would have thought that a little town like Bethlehem and a seemingly insignificant shepherd boy would play such significant roles in God's redemptive story? The prophet Isaiah informs us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are His ways our ways. The selection of David as king, from the very town that finds its way into our homes every Christmas, was a plan no one would have seen coming.

Following the failures of Saul, the Lord guides His prophet Samuel to find the next king. In 1 Samuel 16, Samuel arrives in Bethlehem, at the home of Jesse. Samuel assumes David's brother Eliab must be the one God has chosen, but God makes it clear in 1 Samuel 16:7: "*Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.*"

With Jesse's sons standing before him, not one was chosen by God. Confused, Samuel asks if Jesse has any other sons. Surely, he couldn't have misunderstood God's instruction!

There was one more son.

We aren't sure why his father didn't call him in, but at minimum, it implies that David wasn't considered as likely a candidate as his brothers. For everything Saul appeared to be at first glance, David seemed the opposite. Saul was impressive in stature and looked the part of a king. David wasn't even brought before Samuel. Instead, he was out tending sheep. **But this boy who was overlooked by his family was handpicked by God.**

David spent years being developed in obscurity. Being trained for the battlefield by fighting lions and bears as he faithfully tended the sheep in his care and developing a heart of worship in those same hills. God was preparing him for a role far greater than he imagined. Through this shepherd boy, God was continuing to unfold His redemptive plan leading to the Redeemer Himself.

Although Samuel anointed David that day, he would wait many years for his kingship to come. But David's heart overflowed with worship. Throughout the Psalms (of which many he is the author), he cries out to God as his salvation, fortress, portion, and refuge. Even with threats against his life, David continually turned to God rather than relying on himself. He writes in Psalm 23:4, "*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.*" Familiar with these valleys, David learned to wait on the Lord rather than lean on his own understanding.

David was far from perfect, but when confronted with his sin, he responded with brokenness and repentance. Even through David's greatest failures, we see the mercy and faithfulness of a God who redeems and forgives. And God's faithfulness to David would extend far beyond his lifetime. In 2 Samuel 7:12–16, God made a promise to David that would carry His redemptive story forward for all generations to come.

December 18th

Isaiah | Luke 4:14-20

Have you ever seen the movie *Groundhog Day*? If you haven't, it's about a weatherman who travels to a small town to cover the annual Groundhog Day celebration. But when he wakes up the next morning, he discovers he's living the exact same day all over again. No matter what he does or how hard he tries to change his circumstances, he wakes up to the same day, repeating the same experiences over and over.

A few days ago we discussed Israel's "Cycle of Sin." It feels worth mentioning here again, because as we move through the Old Testament, we just cannot seem to escape this cycle. Israel seems stuck in the same "day" - continually falling into the pattern of self-reliance, rebellion, and pride as the centuries went by. And yet, isn't that our pattern sometimes as well? The patience and kindness of our God to remain faithful to His promises, generation after generation of brokenness is truly unbelievable.

After David's death, his son Solomon became king over Israel. Solomon was one of the wisest men to ever live, but despite that, he too turned away from the Lord. Following his death, the nation was divided into two kingdoms - Israel and Judah.

The "cycle of sin" would become so pervasive that God would eventually discipline His people by allowing them to be conquered by the powerful nations of Assyria and Babylon. The northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria, and generations later, the southern kingdom of Judah was taken into captivity by Babylon. **Yet still – even in the midst of their rebellion, God did not abandon them.** Throughout these generations, He would raise up prophets to call His people back to Himself, warn them of coming judgment, and remind them of His promises. The prophetic books of the Bible are filled with these warnings, calls to repentance, invitations from God to turn away from their sin and return to Him. More importantly, they were also filled with prophetic words pointing to the coming Messiah.

One of these prophetic voices was Isaiah, who spoke during the years leading up to the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel. For generations, God's people had been looking for deliverance - freedom from physical oppression. But through the prophet Isaiah, God began to reveal a promise of something far greater than rescue from their earthly enemies. He was pointing them toward the One who would bring good news to the poor, freedom for the captives, and healing for the brokenhearted.

The arrival of this Savior was always humanity's only hope of breaking free from the endless "cycle of sin" – the endless patterns of wandering and self-reliance that leave us broken and disconnected from our Creator. Only He could bring the redemption we so desperately needed.

And He was on the way.