October 23, 2016 - Camilla Bjorklund

"A Walk With God"

When Pastor Nathan said he was going to be gone this Sunday and asked me to do something for the service, my first reaction was kind of like a stationary panic. But then some ideas miraculously began to form in my mind and after about a week I thought, as long as I don’t have to preach, I’ll be okay. So today I won’t be preaching. Instead, I’ll be telling a story. But this isn’t just any story… It’s the greatest story ever told. There’s war, betrayal, deceit, heroes and villains. But most importantly, it’s a story of love, a lost love, and a grand scheme to get it back.

This epic love story starts in Genesis. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” You know this part; God speaks four words and burning, celestial giants illuminate the heavens and the earth; He speaks again and immense bodies of waters are moved and land begins to form, and the land begins to sprout plants and bushes and beautiful flowers and trees. And suddenly billions and billions of stars come into existence and begin burning and moving, and planets begin moving in sequence, like a dance that is all orchestrated by one conductor. And the waters become filled with fish and gorgeous coral reefs and tiny plankton, and giant whales to eat the plankton, and everything in between, and at the same time there are birds of every kind in the sky, singing praises to God, and all kinds of animals begin to roam the earth according to their kind. What once was nothing, darkness, a shapeless void, is now teeming with life and motion and beauty. And God says it is good. (Genesis 1:26) “Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” And so he did, and God looked and said “It is very good.” And everything he had just created, he gave to mankind.

The story of creation can be compared to the picture of a happy couple expecting a baby. In the 9 months leading up to the baby’s birth, the couple buys a cradle, a car seat, diapers, food, everything a baby might need. But they also paint a room and decorate it, and fill it with stuffed animals and toys. And it looks great; they did a good job. But what they’re really waiting for is the baby. And when it comes, it’s their pride and joy. In the same way, God created this wonderful playhouse, the Earth and the universe. But his purpose, his end goal, was to create man in his image.

And God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden. This was his plan: to create mankind in his image, to adopt them as His sons and daughters, and to walk with them, to have a relationship with them. It was perfect.

There was just one problem: In order for there to be true love, there has to be a choice. God gave humans free will so that when they chose God, it would be meaningful. Adam and Eve had one rule: “do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

That’s pretty cut and dry. They have the boundaries, they have the consequences.

But then another character enters the scene: the serpent. And one day he begins talking to Eve. “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?” Already he’s twisting God’s commands. And Eve says “No, he said we can eat from any tree except the middle one. If we eat it or touch it, we’ll die.”

And the serpent scoffs, probably beckons Eve a little closer like he’s about to share a secret. “You will not certainly die, for God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

What the serpent is doing here is throwing dirt on God’s character. He paints God as being selfish and insecure, wanting to rule over Adam and Eve and not wanting them to enjoy being god-like themselves.

It says Eve looked at the fruit, and she saw it was 1) good for food 2) it looked really good and 3) it was desirable for gaining wisdom. She ate it. Eve ate the fruit because she believed the lies spoken to her by this serpent instead of trusting in the character of God that she had seen and witnessed first-hand. She ate it because she valued what this fruit could give her more than what God had already given her. She ate it, and gave some to her husband also. The bible says their eyes were opened, they found they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together for clothing.

By and by God came walking along in the cool of the day, looking for Adam and Eve so he could enjoy walking with them as was their habit, but they had hidden themselves in the trees. And God said “Where are you?”

I just want to pause and point something out here… God knows everything. He’s everywhere. Jesus says he sees the hearts of men. God didn’t have to ask where they were, he already knew. He knew exactly what had happened, but God waited for Adam and Eve to take the first step toward Him. Just remember that; it’ll be important later.

So Adam and Eve come out and tell God what happened, and he ladles out the consequences like he said he would. But then in the middle of it is this verse that I think is one of the most beautiful verses in the bible.

(Genesis 3:21) “The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”

In the midst of their sin, their shame, God met their needs and provided for them. He shed the first blood in order to cover their shame. Did you know that? It hadn’t even occurred to Adam and Eve to make garments of skin, to shed the blood of a living animal. But God provided.

The Old Testament is a saga of how God woos his people, actively pursuing them with his love, and revealing his character to them, in spite of mankind’s numerous failings.

However, a lot of people have a hard time coming to grips with the “God of the Old Testament” as if that God is different from the God we have today. But Hebrews 13:9 says “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” and Jesus himself said whoever has known him has known the Father who sent him. But there seems to be a dissonance between the loving, merciful God of the New Testament and the violent, vengeful God of the Old Testament. But I challenge you, when you read through the bible, look for the verses like the one in Genesis. “The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.” Look for the people like Moses, who complained and made excuses and lacked in faith, but that God used and blessed anyway. Look for situations God used to reveal his character to his people, and to all generations that come after, and you will find it.

Here are a few ways in which God revealed himself to the nation of Israel and subsequently the whole world:

**God who listens**

When Hagar and Ishmael, Sarah’s slave woman and Abraham’s son, were cast out into the wilderness, God heard their cry. (Genesis 21:17) “God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her,’What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there.’”

When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt and were groaning under the weight of their labors, God heard them. (Exodus 3:7) “The Lord said, ‘I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.’”

**God who fights/protects**

Just after the Israelites left Egypt, Pharaoh and 600 chariots chased after them, but God caused the waters to part for his people, and fall on the Egyptians, destroying them. (Exodus 14:21-30)

When the Amalekites attacked, God gave his supernatural power so that the Israelites would not be overcome. (Exodus 17:10-13)

**God who provides**

When Israel was wandering the desert and was hungry, God gave them quail in the evening and bread from heaven in the morning (Exodus 16)

When they were thirsty, God told Moses to strike a rock, and water came out for all the people to drink (Exodus 17:1-7)

**God who is perfect**

Have you ever read through Exodus and Leviticus? They’re not the most popular books, but they reveal a very important part of God’s character: there are literally hundreds of laws. These laws show that God is perfect, and requires perfection in order to dwell with him.

**God who is just**

Along with every law, comes a consequence of what will happen if that law is broken. With God, there is no room for sin.

**God who is holy**

This is closely related to being perfect, but holy means “to be set apart.” The extensive blueprints for the tabernacle laid out in Exodus 25-27 is a visual representation of how God is set apart from us. I was reading the book “Rhythms of Grace” and the author talks about how the multiple layers of curtains and rooms and the hierarchy of the priests wasn’t to distance God from his people, but rather to offer protection from his intense holiness so that he could dwell with his people and not harm them. When we were perfect in the garden, we didn’t need any protection, but mankind had fallen a long way since then.

**God who lets his children choose**

In the garden, Adam and Eve had a choice: to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree, or to follow God’s rule.

When the Israelites demanded a king, God granted their wish, even though he knew that wasn’t what was best for them. And they suffered for it.

Each of us have choices ahead of us every day, and God lets us choose.

**God who always fulfills his promises**

After waiting 25 years, God fulfilled his promise to Abraham and gave him a son, Isaac. After 22 years of being a slave in Egypt, God fulfilled his promise to Joseph and reunited him with his brothers. Even when the Israelites built false idols, strayed from their faith, made bad decisions that led to them being enslaved, God never abandoned them. He kept his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He led his people to the Promised Land. He gave them the Messiah after hundreds of years of prophecies. He never went back on his promises.

**And finally… God who loves**

Exodus 34:6-7a “And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”

Psalm 25:6-7, 10 “Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, Lord, are good…. All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant”

Psalm 36:7 “How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.”

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

I John 4:8 “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

However, God is just. And the wages of sin is death. There were tons of sacrifices made in the Old Testament in order to pay for the sins of God’s people. But this was all building up to God’s plan to get his people back that had been set in motion since the beginning: the ultimate sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ. This plan would put into harmony God Who Is Perfect and Just, and God Who Is Love. By sacrificing his son, his blood covered all sin. Just as God shed blood in the garden to cover the shame of Adam and Eve, the blood of his son would cover all sin. Sin is no longer an issue.

As Christians, it’s easy to focus on sin. That’s why Jesus died, right? To take away our sin.

Well, yes. That is why he died. But it was *so that we might be able to walk with him.* That’s the end goal. When Jesus died, the veil tore. (Matthew 27:50-51) “And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” What is this curtain? This was a curtain that hung in the tabernacle, separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, and symbolized our separation from God. When Jesus died, that separation was no longer needed; sin was taken care of and we were now free to walk uninhibited with God.

Sin was just a detail, keeping us from God, and he’s already taken care of it. (Romans 8:1-2) “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.”

So… what now?

Now, it’s our move.

Remember when God called to Adam in the garden after the first sin? It was Adam’s job to step out of his hiding place. When God called Abram, he said (Genesis 12:1-3) “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” God promised all these things, and all Abram had to do was to go.

When God called Moses to be an advocate for his people, God gave him the specific words, the signs, even a spokesperson. All Moses had to do was go.

Being a Christian doesn’t mean coming to church every sunday and being sorry for our sins. It means repenting of our sins and walking with God right here, right now.

The word “Repent” means to turn away, not just to be sorry for something, but to actually turn 180 degrees away from sin. To take a step toward God.

The eternal life that Jesus talked about in John 3:16 isn’t some far off hypothetical life, but streams of living water in us right now.

God doesn’t want to give us a get into heaven free card. He wants to walk with us! Right here, right now. He revealed his character to the nation of Israel and to all the world. He sent Jesus to teach us about who he is. He took care of the detail of sin by dying on the cross and rising up again. And he sent us his Holy Spirit so that we could walk with him on a personal, daily basis.

You might be thinking “Well great, but how does one do that? What does that look like?” And I’m here to say, I don’t have it all figured out. It looks different for every person, because not everyone is called to be a missionary or a pastor. The kingdom of God needs mothers, doctors, cashiers, garbage truck drivers; it doesn’t matter what you do, as long as you’re walking with God. So here are a few practical things you can do in order to work on your own personal walk with God.

1. Recognize that we are not of this world.

Romans 8:5-8 “Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.”

2. Renew your minds

Romans 12:2 “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Dive into the word, set aside time to pray, come to church to build one another up, consciously choose what to let your mind dwell on. It’s hard; it takes self-discipline, but there are scientific studies that show that choosing to focus on positive things makes a huge impact on your daily life. Choose to think about God. Choose to dwell on his character and his love.

3. Make it a daily commitment

Being a Christian isn’t a twice a year for Christmas and Easter time commitment, it isn’t even a once a week go to church time commitment. It’s a daily choice to follow God and to walk with him in everything you do. So take a few moments out of your morning routine to say “God, I choose to walk with you today. Please show me how to do that.” You might find yourself having to say that multiple times in a day, too; even better!

4. Join or start a support group

We are all relational beings. We’re all in the same boat. We’ve all struggled. God didn’t create people to do it alone; we’re supposed to walk together and build one another up.

Ephesians 4:14-16 “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Ephesians 4:25 “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.”

So let’s step out together, and walk with God today, building one another up and asking him to bring about his will for our lives.