

Hope of Restoration to Wholeness
Genesis 1-3; Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 4:14-21
12/12/21

Opening Prayer

Humble Jesus, hope of our broken world, into our weakness, into our darkness, into our broken places, speak the words of hope and promise you have for us today.

The newspapers and simple observation make it clear. We are broken people living in a broken world. The first three chapters of Genesis outline the way it is supposed to be, and the way things currently are.

God created out of love. His creatures then responded with love. It was a perfect union as humans walked with each other and their Creator in beautiful harmony. But it was not to last.

One of the spiritual beings God created didn't like being less than God. Knowing how important these humans were to God, he tempted them with the promise of gaining something better than what God had given. The humans embraced the lie and rebelled against the One who loved them.

In that singular moment, sin entered creation. With it came fear, guilt, shame, self-centeredness, self-protection, relational distance and twisted all desire, emotion, thought, word and deed. These became our reality.

Interdependence and community were replaced by independence and autonomy. Rather than using things and loving people, humanity began using people and loving things.

As a result, people began to suffer. Whether that pain came from nature, coincidence, accident or other people, for the first time human beings suffered and caused others to suffer with them. Death and decay became our reality. Over time it became all we knew. It felt normal and was to be expected.

But deep inside there was the memory, the hope, the knowledge that this is not the way it was supposed to be.

The Creator knew this would happen and knew what He was going to do about it. Immediately following that first rebellion, He announced that one day a person would come and destroy the power of death and decay. This is the good news!

In the years that followed, Creator God kept filling in the picture of who this anointed servant would be and what He would do. Eight hundred years before Messiah's birth, God used His prophet, Isaiah, to offer this detail. We find it in the opening verses of Isaiah 61.

¹ The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me, for the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted

and to proclaim that captives will be released, and prisoners will be freed.

² He has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of the LORD's favor has come,

The Lord's restoration of all things is the good news the people were waiting for. That's why Mark begins his gospel with these words: "The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Early in His public ministry, Jesus taught in his hometown synagogue. We don't know if it was assigned to Him or chosen by Him, but Luke (4:14-21) tells us that Jesus read the words from Isaiah.

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, ¹⁹ and that the time of the LORD's favor has come."

When He finished, Jesus sat down to teach them and explain what this text means. Luke adds, "All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. ²¹ Then he began to speak to them. "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!"

Jesus told them that He was the One God had promised, the One who would fulfill Isaiah's prophecy and bring God's wholeness back to all creation. He was the One the people had waited centuries to see! The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled! Death and decay have lost their power! The curse has been lifted!

And in the same way that Adam and Eve had to learn what it was like to live into what was for them a new reality of death and decay, I think we need to learn what it is like to live into this new reality of our restoration to wholeness. And this isn't easy, because all we've known all our lives is the curse placed on creation.

We are broken people living in a broken world. While we all know this, we don't always see it. We are so used to living in a broken world that the dysfunction seems natural, right, the way it is supposed to be.

In the basement of my childhood home was a yellow, touch tone phone from Bell Telephone Company. It was top of the line and our entire family was grateful for it. Whenever we talked to grandparents (which was about once a month and always after 9:00 PM or on the weekends when the rates dropped), we could have one person in the kitchen and another on the basement line. Two people could be on the same line at the same time. It was like magic.

There were a few issues with the downstairs phone, though. For instance, you couldn't dial out on it. Something was either wrong with the huge cable that connected it to the wall or on the phone itself, but that was okay. The person in the kitchen could dial out and shout down the stairs when it was time to pick up the phone. It all worked...well mostly.

True, it didn't ring on an incoming call, either. But that was okay because the kitchen phone was loud enough to hear. But then when the kitchen phone rang you couldn't answer the downstairs phone because no one could hear you talking. That basement phone let you hear the conversation but not engage with it.

So, the phone couldn't dial out, didn't ring, and muted your voice. But we had that phone for a long time. That's the way that phone has always been and because you could still hear the conversation it wasn't truly broken and didn't need to be fixed or replaced.

Sometimes, we become so used to living in a broken world that the dysfunction seems natural, right, the way it is supposed to be. So the family just sort of steers around a grumpy uncle's anger or understands not to bring up certain topics with certain people or to question the wisdom of a person's rules, regulations and organization system.

And in some cases, we learn not to share a personal weakness or fear because we know they will only use it one day to shame us. We are silent. They don't change. We don't change. It is broken but it doesn't seem like it is because it has always been this way and, after all, we found a way to make it work.

Our lives are like that basement phone. At that time the phone was a technological masterpiece. It was a broken masterpiece, but a masterpiece nonetheless. Upgrading or restoring that old phone required someone who knew what it was intended to do and knew how to get it back to that brand new condition.

Ephesians 2:10 says that you and I are God's workmanship. We are God's masterpiece, and He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good work he planned for us to do long ago.

Updating the illustration, we are a high-tech smart phone with a badly cracked screen, outdated software, aging battery, full memory and ports that are clogged with dust! We are so broken that we are unable to do the good things our Creator intended for us to do. We need Jesus to restore us so that we can do those things.

We know that restoring anything in this world—whether a phone, car, piece of furniture or anything—takes time and work and the outcome is not always certain. While the time and effort is the same for our restoration, the outcome is not uncertain. The outcome is known and guaranteed.

1 Corinthians 3:18. ¹⁸ So all of us who have had that veil removed [that is, turned to the Lord in faith] can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.

Galatians 4:19 Paul writes, "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you..."

“Until Christ is formed in you.” You see, when we come to faith in Christ the Holy Spirit of Jesus comes to live inside of us. He is in us, but He is not yet formed in us. We are saved by His grace but are not yet fully transformed into His glorious image. Like the pains of childbirth, that restoration requires some time and effort.

This is called spiritual formation or discipleship. Robert Mullholland says that “Spiritual Formation is a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.” It is not about me or my feelings or what I get out of it. It is about Christians being conformed to the image of Christ so that they can display the beauty of Christ’s character and the certainty of His kingdom to others in this world.

Empowered by His Spirit we grow as His ambassadors proclaiming the good news of restoration to broken people living in a broken world.

Christians carry Christ but still need to be spiritually formed into the image of Christ. This requires a conscious choice that is expressed over time. While growth in this is not automatic, it is guaranteed. When we placed our trust in Jesus, God began in us a great work of transformation. We join Him in that work now knowing that He will bring it to completion when Christ returns (Phil 1:6).

Restoration has begun. It is already here; it is just not yet fully complete. And while we wait for Christ to return, we are to be about the task of helping one another be formed into Christ’s image so that we can experience and express God’s restoration to one another and the world.

Remember how I said that sin entering the world caused independence to replace interdependence? Formation in Christ is a community event. While some of it can be done alone, it is best experienced with others. As iron sharpens iron so we need each other.

The first community is our family or closest circle of friends. This is where the most effective work is done because we are with these people the most. Another community is with the church, your grow group, your spiritual friends who meet you where you are and help you more fully integrate scripture into your life. Our work colleagues and neighbors are part of other communities too. God even uses people we don’t know to be a catalyst for spiritual growth and formation...if we let Him.

This takes work and time. The power is God’s but the choice to engage the effort is ours. Colossians 1:27-29. ²⁸ [Jesus] is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. ²⁹ To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

Because the curse of Genesis 3 is all we know, much of the brokenness we experience in ourselves—the damage we carry that limits us from more clearly reflecting Christ’s character—is hidden from us and requires that we see it first before it can be restored. We cannot surrender to God that which we do not even know we possess.

Many times, God uses the obvious brokenness of the world to show us our hidden brokenness. It is that moment when the Spirit in us helps us question why we think we are right to be so angry at that other driver or why our impatience is justified. If we practice curiosity, listen to Him and ask questions, He will show us why He is bringing this up. Most times the Holy Spirit is working to bring another slight tweak in our motive or action. And other times, God uses the brokenness of the moment to expose major issues in us that we can't even see.

Like in 1987 when, after two days of psychological testing to see if I was a good fit for pastoral ministry, a psychologist told me that I was a young man filled with rage and I didn't even know it. I laughed at him.

But he planted a seed and three weeks later I began to see how what I called frustration or sadness, or fatigue actually was anger, and how I was using it to crush my new wife. If I am willing to believe and respond to the Holy Spirit (and not ignore or discount what He says), that moment becomes a humbling, paradigm-shifting, life-changing catalyst that helps conform me to the gentleness of Christ.

I needed someone else to point it out to me and I needed those who loved me to let me practice a new way of living with them.

In 1993 I spent a painful two months daily crying out for God to heal my newborn son. In that time, I watched God miraculously heal another newborn, but not mine, and I started having a lot of questions about the efficacy of prayer and what a good God might be doing in this moment. Then, in late October, God answered my prayer in a way I never expected. Rather than heal my son, he started to heal me.

That night, as I cried out and listed all the reasons it would be good for God to heal my son, God showed me how the true motive of my nice-sounding prayers was actually for my benefit and not his. I didn't want to believe what I was hearing but the evidence was clear. I had to admit it and so this became a humbling, paradigm-shifting, life-changing moment that revealed what was hidden and advanced the process of conforming me to the selflessness of Christ, something I continue to work on today.

I needed someone else to point it out to me (in this case a newborn child) and I needed those who loved me to let me practice a new way of living with them.

If we let Him, God uses the brokenness of the world and the brokenness of other people to expose the brokenness in us that we can't even see. And when we see it, we then must choose to join with Him in His life-long work of conforming us to the image of His Son and restoring us to the perfect wholeness He always intended for us to know so that we can be equipped to do the good work God prepared for us to do.

To apply Paul's words in Colossians to all of us, we help each other do this by admonishing and teaching each other with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully

mature in Christ. ²⁹To this end we strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in us.

Friends! Hear the good news! The long season of death and decay is over. We no longer need to fear it or be ruled by it. Yes, things will be difficult. As Brently said last week, the sin, pain and suffering from this broken world spills on us all the time...but in Christ it doesn't have to stain us or stick to us.

For all who put their trust in Him, Jesus' first coming as a helpless infant began our restoration to wholeness and His second coming as victorious king will complete it. As the beloved disciple, John, said in his first Epistle,

"Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. ³All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:2-3).

There is so much more to say here, but that must be left for another time. So let me close with this. Romans 5:6-8 tells us that God didn't wait for us to make things right or restore ourselves. In fact, when we were deep in our sin, an offense to God and of no use to Him whatsoever, He still loved us and expressed His love by offering His Son's life as a payment for our sins.

When you think about all He went through it is so clear: Jesus is serious about our restoration to wholeness. He paid a terrible price to start and guarantee that process. It has happened, it is happening and it will happen (Phil 1:6).

The babe born in the dirty manger reminds us that you don't have to be perfect and clean. Jesus will come to you, to meet you where you are and as you are. He is not afraid of the mud and dirt of your sin. He is right there with you, Emmanuel, God with us. Restoring us to what the Father always intended us to be. This is the good news of this season and the reason we celebrate.

Closing Prayer

From our deep and dark places we call to you and ask for your mercy. Show us the hidden places that keep us from experiencing your restoration and displaying your character to the world around us. We know this restoration is a process, Lord and that you will finish the work when you come again so our hope is in you alone.

Even when splashed by the brokenness around us, help us wait for you and rely on your word until you come to make all things new.

Benediction: Hebrews 13:20-21

²⁰ Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, ²¹ equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.