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From Genesis to Jesus: How Quickly We Forget Matthew 11:20-24

It was a different kind of Advent, wasn't it? We spent a month reminding ourselves that God didn't just start saving us at Bethlehem; he had been saving us from the beginning of time. God saved by calling two pagans, Abram and Sarai, to create a great nation and bless the world. God saved by giving them a son, Isaac, even though they were old and barren. 400 years later, God saved by sending Moses to deliver his people from Egypt. Passover... the parting of the Red Sea... Mt. Sinai ...all of this was God keeping his promise...to bless His world. Then, finally, on Christmas Eve, the world-blessor arrived. Jesus. Just as God had promised.

This New Year Sunday we follow God's Old Testament salvation story into the New Testament. **And of all the gospel writers, no one spilled more ink pointing to fulfilled Old Testament scripture than this one.** No one was more interested in revealing Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. And no gospel writer presents Jesus as the savior who was greater than Moses...like this one does. Which gospel? Matthew!

Maybe you weren't aware of this...but let me remind you. **(As you listen you will say, "Ahhhhh....of course! I see it now!")** Which of the gospel writers traces the genealogy of Jesus back to Abraham? Matthew! Which is the only gospel that tells us about pagan worshippers from the east who come to Canaan to receive the blessing of God...just like Abram and Sarai? Which is the only gospel that tells us about the Holy family's escape to Egypt ...and back out again...just like Israel? And which is the only gospel that starts the ministry of Jesus on a mountain—like Moses did—teaching his people how to live? Matthew! Do you see?

Only Matthew starts with the Sermon on the Mount. And let me remind you of the audacity of Matthew's Jesus. Moses went up on Sinai and RECEIVED the law from God. But Jesus---the new and greater Moses---doesn't **receive** the law. He **gives** the law. Do you remember? "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not murder' ... but **I** tell you, do not be angry. You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery,' but **I** tell you, do not even lust in your heart!"

You have heard that it was said... but **I** tell you..." Who was Jesus talking about? **MOSES!** The giver of the law. And who gave Moses that law? God! Yet Jesus presumes to say, "...but **I** tell you..." In other words, "I'm going to tell you what Moses **really** meant!" How **dares** Jesus interpret the law...unless HE was the giver of the law in the first place?

Do you see what I mean? Matthew portrays Jesus as the perfect fulfillment of the Old Testament promises to Abraham...as the perfect Moses...as the perfect savior...as the perfect sacrificial lamb. In a way that no other gospel writer tries to. So...if we want to continue the salvation story that we started reviewing back on the first Sunday of Advent 2009...way back in Genesis... there is no better way to do it than to resume our study of Matthew's gospel. For the next few months, we will sit at Matthew's feet as he reminds us that Jesus is the fulfillment of ALL the Old Testament promises of God.

We jump back in Matthew at a hard place. Jesus is turning the focus of his attention from the crowds that have been following him toward his disciples who are going to carry on his work. As I read the text, listen carefully: you'll hear a **new word** from Jesus.

So...what is the new word that we hear from Jesus' lips? "Woe!" It's an unusual word. When was the last time you heard someone say, "Woe is me?" It almost sounds silly. But "woe" was a terrible word in the Old Testament. It was the word of mourning used at a funeral. And it was a terrible word in Greek. It meant calamity, grief, distress! It meant, "How horrible it will be for you!" Put those meanings together and this is what Jesus was saying: "Korazin...Bethsaida...you don't even know that you are sick yet. But I'm already conducting your funeral! Cry woe! It will be horrible for you!"

These are harsh words of judgment...something we haven't heard much of from Jesus so far in Matthew. So what's with the "woe?" Who is Jesus mad at? We don't know much about Korazin or Bethsaida. They aren't mentioned elsewhere. They were both located near the northern part of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus was always moving from place to place and everywhere he went, he healed and cast out demons. Apparently, Jesus did many of those miracles in these towns.

But there is one city on that list that we DO know something about. Which one? Capernaum. (add to map) Capernaum was Jesus' adopted hometown. It sits beautifully on the Sea of Galilee. It was in the Capernaum synagogue that Jesus began his preaching ministry and cast out his first demon. In Capernaum Jesus healed the centurion's slave and Peter's mother-in-law. Near here he preached the Sermon on the Mount, walked on the water and calmed the storm. At one point we read that so many people were coming to be near the miraculous Jesus that the streets were packed. He was their hero!

Jesus' heavenly exploits in Capernaum became so famous that they apparently adopted a motto for their town: "Lifted to Heaven." In fact, an ancient street sign was recently discovered on the road leading into Capernaum where every visitor would have seen it. It reads, "Capernaum-A Little Closer to Heaven."

All right...I'm making that up. But the rest of it is true...including the fact that Capernaum apparently thought themselves to be pretty hot stuff! **Nowhere was Jesus' divine power more on display than in Capernaum.** His best miracles, his best teaching...Jesus gave his very, very best to Capernaum.

So...can you see how SHOCKING Jesus' words would have been? The first time he "woes" anybody, Capernaum is at the top of the list. **"And YOOOOOU, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths."** Let me be clearer: "And you, Capernaum, you claim that you are close to heaven? In fact, you are going straight to hell!" He goes on: "If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the Day of Judgment than for you!"

Sodom was the Old Testament town that was destroyed by God because of its perversion. Sodom is synonymous for "judgment." But Jesus says that it will go easier on Sodom on the Day of Judgment...and on Tyre and Sidon...two notoriously pagan cities...than it will go on Korazin and Bethsaida...and Capernaum... Jesus' base of operations; the places where he did his greatest miracles.

If you lived in Capernaum, you would have been horrified. These are terrible words of judgment. So WHY did Capernaum stand under harsh judgment...harsher than the pagan cities of Tyre or Sidon...or Sodom? Well...what did Capernaum have that those other cities didn't have? **Jesus! In the flesh!** Jesus' powerful ministry! But Jesus had become for them a kind of benevolent carnival freak show. "Step right up. Watch miracle boy restore sight to the blind. Watch him raise the dead! Step right up!" **And they were impressed! But they weren't changed.**

When Jesus did miracles, the people said, "Wow! Wow...isn't he fantastic. Look at all those cool tricks. Amazing!" But Jesus didn't do miracles to make the crowds say, "Wow." He did them to make them say, "Whoa...whoaaaa...hold on there. Stop the bus! What is happening here? Who can do such things but God? And if He is God, I'd better pay attention to him. I'd better change the way I live so that how I live pleases HIM instead of me."

They should have said, "Whoa!" Instead, they said, "Wow." And an angry Jesus says, "Woe! Woe unto you!" If you lived in Capernaum, you SHOULD be horrified. These are horrible words of judgment.

But you know what? If you live in Gig Harbor, you should be horrified, too! Why? For the same reason! Jesus has been here. In a powerful way. Unlike the people of Kabul or Tehran or Hong Kong...we have freely and often seen the Spirit of Jesus at work in our midst. It's not so free...not so easy...for Jesus to work in Afghanistan or Iran or China right now. If those people's lives haven't been changed... if they are not passionate followers of Jesus...they have an excuse. **They haven't seen him! Not like we have. They haven't met him. Not like we have.** Perhaps they, like Tyre or Sidon or Sodom...perhaps they will know greater mercy on the day of judgment. Because they did not know.

But we know. Gig Harbor knows. Jesus is at work here in powerful and numerous ways. It is an embarrassment of riches, the number of Christ-honoring, vital churches we have in this town. Any Sunday you can show up in a church in Gig Harbor and listen as the word of Jesus is proclaimed. You can pray and be prayed for. You can worship freely and safely. But if you are surrounded by the evidence of the Spirit of Jesus and the teaching of Jesus...and then go home and

sleep with your boyfriend or girlfriend...go home and cheat on your spouse...go home and treat your parents as if you'd never heard about respecting them...go home and ignore your children as if you hadn't been told that they are precious in Jesus' sight... go home and spend more money on stuff you don't need while ignoring the poor that Jesus said he loves...in short, if you can be surrounded by the power, presence and teaching of Jesus...and not live any differently than the pagans who have never even heard of Jesus.....**if you can do that**.....

...well...you tell me...what does the word "woe" mean to you? The harshest words of judgment from Jesus so far were not for the broken, sinful outsiders. They weren't even for the religious hypocrites. (They're coming, though. Trust me.) They were for his own people...the people who should have known him best but who treated him like a sideshow freak.

The word "remember" appears 181 times in the Old Testament. Why does God say "remember" so many times? Because they forgot. All the time, they forgot! God said, "Don't forget what I have done to save you. Don't forget!" But they forgot anyhow. I think Capernaum forgot, too. They forgot the wonder they first felt when they saw and heard Jesus. At first they knew that they were listening to the voice of God...that they were watching God at work. But they grew dull and indifferent. They forgot.

Here is the hard word from Judge Jesus. We who have known him best...we who have seen and heard and been touched by him... we are accountable for our lives. If we really know him...we better be changed. And changing.

Baptism is the reminder of what God has done. It reminds us of our Passover. Of our own Red Sea baptism. It reminds us of our salvation...bought for us at great price by Jesus. It ALSO reminds us that those who belong to him are different. They are marked people. They should stand out as evidence of their salvation and as a witness to the rest of the world that needs saving. And Capernaum is a reminder of how harsh it will be for those of us who had the incredible gift of salvation handed to us...and let it slip through our fingers. Because we forgot.

Today, as you come forward, make this more than a ritual. Make this the prayer of your heart. The New Year...New Start...New Life prayer of your heart. When we make the sign of the cross upon you, we will say, "Remember your baptism and be thankful." This year, I want you to respond, "I will never forget!" (Repeat)

Sermon Questions

1. The Book of Matthew starts with the Sermon on the Mount, which is the only gospel that starts the ministry of Jesus on a mountain, teaching his people how to live. What did Jesus mean when he said, "You have heard it said... but I tell you..."? What was he trying to make people understand?
2. What was Jesus' warning to Capernaum? Why? Did they change?
3. If you live in Gig Harbor, why should you be horrified? Is there any excuse for not changing the way you live?
4. The word "remember" appears 181 times in the Old Testament. Why does God say "remember" so many times? What do you hope to remember?