

“You’ve Got a Friend in Thee”

Genesis 16:1-16; 21:1-21

Series: BELIEVE Week 2. Personal God

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“Hi, I’m Pastor Doug and I’m your friend.” I try to be a friend to everyone. That’s a good thing right? A pastor should be friendly.

Well there was a time when I was not a good friend. I was in first grade. This was the first time my new friend Chuck came over to my house. Normally friends play catch or climb trees. That wasn’t good enough for me. Somehow I convinced Chuck to follow me into a dark hole. Behind my house there was a creek and at the end of the street there was a tunnel which carried the water underground below a neighboring subdivision. It ran for hundreds of yards beneath the streets and houses and dumped the water into another stream. Chuck and I followed some older boys to the opening at the far end where the water came out. In single file, with flashlights in hand, we plunged into the dark tunnel and began the trek back toward my neighborhood. Sloshing through the water I began to feel I’d made a big mistake. The older boys knew we were nervous and they made the most of it. They pointed out graffiti which warned us to turn back. They told stories of dead bodies found down there. They said we took the wrong path and were now utterly lost. On and on we sloshed through the water for what seemed like days, surrounded by darkness, fearing we’d never breathe fresh air or see the light of day again. If I ever got out of this I vowed I would never go through a tunnel again.

Just when I was about to abandon all hope, I saw my salvation: the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. I raced toward it. Yet little did I know that my greatest fear was still to come. As I emerged from the darkness...there was my mother waiting for me.

Suddenly the tunnel was looking pretty sweet. How long would I have to hide in there before the storm blew over one, two, three years? I’ve blocked out whatever punishment I received but to this day, I still get claustrophobic when I go through dark tunnels, tight spaces or pull the sheets over my head. It was a while before Chuck’s mom let him come back again.

It’s likely there are times in your life when you feel trapped in some kind of tunnel. A relationship that’s confining or claustrophobic. A job that’s taking you in a direction you didn’t expect or want. A fear that’s making it hard for you to breathe. An illness or addiction that feels like a long dark maze. An unexpected event that looks like a dead end. You’re not even sure you want to come out into the light because you don’t know what’s waiting for you.

Times like these: we all can use a friend.

That’s this week’s theme in BELIEVE. The first week we discovered the God of the Bible is the One True God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This week we take that a step further and learn God is Personal. The key idea is “I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.” God is your companion, your guide, your friend. Or, to slightly alter a quote from that great theologian Woody the Cowboy: “You’ve Got a Friend in Thee.”

Now this may pose some problems for you. Perhaps you wonder, “What kind of friend is He?” Is He a friend like me who led poor Chuck down into a dark tunnel? Is He a friend like those boys who tried to scare us and lead us the wrong way? Is He a friend who is outside my tunnel and completely uninterested and uninvolved in my troubles? Is He waiting for me at the end of the tunnel, ready to punish me for the mess I’ve made?

Levi’s life looks, for all the world, like a twisting, torturous tunnel. At the age of ten his mother abandoned him. Raised by his grandparents he attended school and joined the football and wrestling teams. His dear grandmother passed away right about the time he learned his mother had five children by another man. When his grandfather became ill he dropped out of high school to get a job and support him. By the age of 19 his grandfather also died. By his own admission, Levi fell in with the wrong crowd. They started stealing cars and doing drugs.

At this time I did not care about anything but my drugs. I was out of control. I was 23 years old. We all went to jail for 36 months.

He tried to stay clean. He even went to rehab. He wanted to make his Dad proud but in 1990 his father died. “This is when I lost it because everyone close to me died.” Levi was in and out of rehab but he could not stay clean. Eventually he started living in the hallways of abandoned apartment buildings and then in a tent city near the Delaware Canal. The dark tunnel led Levi to the cycle of addiction and homelessness.

Did God abandon Levi as his mother did? Does God leave you to stumble and struggle through your dark tunnel? There are some who say there is no God. There are others who may believe God is some far off deity who can’t help us or can’t care less or both. There are those who believe God is some energy or force which could be good or bad, have a light or dark side. Yet the Bible declares in no uncertain terms that **God is Good**.

Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. (Psalm 145:9)

God is Your Guide.

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. (Psalm 23:1-3)

God is Present

The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:5-7)

God is Personal.

You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it

completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. (Psalm 139:1-6)

In other words: It blows my mind. You are closer than I can imagine. God is a Person and therefore personal. And because God is personal you can have a relationship with Him just as you can have with any earthly person. In fact this relationship is closer than all others because God is with you all the time.

Finally, **God Has A Plan For You.**

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

With billions of people on the planet, many find it difficult to conceive how God could have a plan for each one of us. Then, along came cell phones apps and suddenly it was not so far-fetched or beyond belief that my direction, my speed, my location, my past history and any upcoming hazards or helpful resources can be plotted and planned just for me and millions of others at the same time. If a human creation can do that, imagine how much greater is the God who created all things.

So if God is a good Guide who has a personal plan for my life, why do Levi, you and me wind up in long dark tunnels? How is God a friend to me? To answer that, let's look at a case study from the Bible. Scripture says Abraham was the friend of God (James 2:23). Yet there were times when they had a rocky relationship. One example is the triangle between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. In His plan, God promises a son to Abraham and Sarah. Yet as the years pass and no boy bounces into their lives, Sarah becomes impatient and decides to give God some help. She takes charge and tells Abraham to sleep with her Egyptian slave named Hagar. For some reason it does not take much for Sarah to convince Abraham this is God's plan. Yet when Hagar conceives she uses her pregnancy to put down Sarah.

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, “You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me.” “Your slave is in your hands,” Abram said. “Do with her whatever you think best.” Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her. (Genesis 16:4-6)

What a tangled triangle. It begins with Abraham and Sarah enslaving another human being and treating her like an object. They each use her to fulfill their desires and Hagar, in turn, uses her pregnancy to get back at Sarah. Abraham and Sarah blame each other and both mistreat Hagar whom they send off into the dry, barren wilderness, great with child and empty handed. This happens not once but twice. First when Hagar was pregnant and second after Sarah bears a son named Isaac. The second time, Sarah tells Abraham to send Hagar and her son Ishmael off into the wilderness for good. He gives them a skin of water and some food and says goodbye.

When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, “I cannot watch the boy die.” And as she sat there, she began to sob.

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. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. (Genesis 21:15-19)

In the darkest moments of her life, God had a plan for an outcast Egyptian slave girl. She was used and abused, despised and rejected by the world but not by God. Hagar gave God a name.

“You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.” (Genesis 16:13)

It may surprise you to see Abraham, the friend of God, and his wife Sarah, engage in such heartless and hurtful actions. Without justifying or defending what they did, let me share that every decision they made – keeping slaves, using a handmaid to have a baby, forcing someone to have sex against their will, sending someone to die in the desert, getting rid of an unwanted pregnancy and an unwanted child were all acceptable practices according to their culture. Yet these were not God’s will. They went against His plan.

There are many practices our culture approves which are neither God’s will nor part of His plan. Often, the pain we feel and the misery we endure is due to our unwillingness to seek and follow God’s plan. Like Sarah and Abraham, we take matters into our own hands, blame one another, and make dreadfully wrong decisions based on our fear and pride. Through our own willfulness, foolishness, selfishness or sinfulness we climb down into the dark tunnel or we follow others in there.

Yet here is the amazing message of Scripture: our mistakes and messes do not prevent God’s plan. The tangled triangle of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar did not stop God’s plan to send the Messiah and save the world. God does not use His power to control us and make us do His will. That would not be love and one truth we know above all others: “**God is Love**” (I John 4:8). In His love, God gives us our freedom – even the freedom to disobey. So God uses His power, not to force His will, but to do something even more remarkable: to bring good out of the mess we make. As Paul says,

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

So when you are trapped in the dark tunnel of doubt, despair and discouragement, the dark tunnel of frustration, failure and fear, the dark tunnel of waiting, worry and weariness, the dark tunnel of self-indulgence, self-hatred and self-pity, don’t ask the culture what to do. In that moment, pause and ask God, “What is your will? What is your plan in this situation? What do you want me to do?” Do that many times throughout your day. God will be with you. God will show you the next right thing to do. He will lead you through the tunnel into His Light.

That's how Levi found the Light. He was living in the tent city with other homeless neighbors. During the coldest nights of the year he was a guest in our Vineyard for Code Blue. Finally he told someone he was tired of living like this. He signed up first for rehab and then joined the Whosoever Gospel Mission. They taught him job readiness, computer skills, decision making. Yet even more essential

They teach you how to get closer to God. They helped me find peace of mind and joy. They taught me how to be patient and humble, how to have integrity, devotion and most of all perseverance. They taught me to trust in the Lord. Now I know the plans the Lord has for me. He wants me to prosper, plans to give me hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11). Nobody can go back and start a new beginning. But anyone can start today and make a new ending.

That was the testimony Levi gave on the stage of the Vineyard at the last Recovery Worship service. God took a homeless guest and turned him into a hopeful guest speaker.

That's the Friend Levi found in God.

That's the Friend you can have in Thee.