

Thank you to worship team (Rob, Suzie, Daniel, Trevor); and to the Retreat team (Rebecca, Leslie, Michelle, Rachel, Laurie, Jen and our fearless leader, Chris)...

Gas Mask Introduction:

When I was in the Army several years ago there was one training exercise that we only had to do one time—and one time was enough to learn the lesson. The idea was to teach us to trust our gas masks... and so we told to put on our masks and enter a tent filled with CS gas—a “mild” chemical agent used in riot control, also know as “tear gas.” So, we went into the tent we were do some regular tasks, play some games, have conversations.

After spending some time in the tent—we adjusted to the atmosphere; a little burning on our necks, a little hazy inside perhaps; but we could do our work, we could play a game, we could communicate and after a while it just seemed normal that everyone around was wearing green and a funky looking mask.

And then (much to the enjoyment of our instructors) we were told to take off our masks. The instructors made us stay in the tent long enough to get a good breath of the poisoned air. Ironically, they made say the pledge of allegiance—and if we finished that without breathing they made us sing the star spangled banner. Wow. I didn’t make through the pledge... basically my whole body rejected the bad air—my eyes were weeping and burning and I couldn’t keep them open, my throat and lungs were stinging and I couldn’t stop coughing; but mostly my nose was just dripping and dripping and we had to be led out of the tent.

-- This weekend is about taking off our masks and looking squarely at the poisonous surroundings we live and breathe in. We have learned to cope and not be aware of the danger that lurks among us, the poison we’re immersed in. The world is like that.

But more importantly, this weekend is about God—who desires to rescue us from the world of lies in which we are immersed, from this oppressive and poisonous slavery and bring us to a freedom of fresh air—in which our first response is ahhhhhhhhh! God desires our return to him and desires to fill us with grace, with life, with worship—“Praise God from whom all blessings flow!” Our first and returning response is worship. He invites us to live and breathe and have our being in him.

Let’s pray... God as we turn to your word that tells a story from many years ago, speak to us in our hearts, even Today.

Exodus 3:7-8:

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. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey...”

Tell the story of Exodus:

The book of Exodus begins with the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob. You may recall that Joseph was sold into servitude by his brothers (the ones named here in Exod 1:2-4), served in the household of Potiphar, even rising to be in charge of the household (Gen 39). He was then falsely accused of sexual misconduct with Potiphar's wife, thrown in prison, and forgotten for over two years. Eventually, however, he (with God's help) interprets the Pharaoh's dreams, wisely suggests a plan of action to counteract the coming famine, and is placed in charge of the whole land of Egypt; second only to Pharaoh (Gen 41:40-43). When the famine spread across Egypt and Canaan, Joseph's family (father Jacob and his brothers) came to live in Egypt—as a place of refuge, a place which had food because of Joseph's wise plan to store up grain. And the sons of Israel, "the Israelites," were fruitful in Egypt and grew in numbers (Exod 1:6-7).

In fact, listen to the language used to describe them... they were *fruitful* and *multiplied* greatly; the *land was filled* with them. This is the language of the original creation of humanity (Gen 1:28: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land..."), and this is to notify the reader that this marks the creation of the Israelite nation. The promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is being fulfilled! There is one problem however... they are immersed within another nation, and though they have some freedoms, they are not free. And even these freedoms will soon be taken away.

Eventually a new king, a new Pharaoh, comes to power who does not know Joseph and in fact he feels threatened by the numerous Israelites. So he enslaves them, puts them to work in his building campaigns, and tries to limit their numbers by killing every Hebrew boy born (Exod 1:16,22). Moses is born just at this time of oppression and attempted genocide, and he is cleverly and miraculously saved from death by being presented to and adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter. After growing up in the court of Pharaoh, Moses witnesses the oppression of his people firsthand and kills an Egyptian responsible for beating a fellow Hebrew. When this crime is found out, Pharaoh tries to kill Moses, and so Moses flees Egypt and becomes a shepherd in the wilderness of Midian (2:11-22). While tending a flock at Horeb, "the mountain of God," Moses witnesses a bush on fire which is not being consumed and hears his name being called from the midst of it. God, making himself known to Moses, therefore begins to reveal his plan to bring the Israelites, God's people, out of Egypt—and so sends Moses back to Pharaoh, to deliver God's people from Egypt to the promised land (3:7-10).

The people of God have been in Egypt, enduring harsh oppression at the hands of a human being who is considered within his cultural and religious context to be a god—the Pharaoh of Egypt, son of the sun-god Re and becoming, after death, the god Osiris. This god-king has enslaved Israel—a harsh, oppressive and ruthless slavery. Ancient Egypt was a true superpower, doing commerce with and holding sway over many surrounding nation-states. At the heart of their political, cultural and religious life (one really couldn't separate these things in the actual life of ancient Egyptians) was the cult of the Pharaoh. Building programs and campaigns were undertaken to honor him and assure an even better afterlife—for the Pharaoh and the court. In one remarkable case,

Imhotep (considered a genius or a kind of “Leonardo Da Vinci” of Egypt) built a replica Egyptian palace made completely of stones (in 2650 B.C.). Since he first associated stones with immortality, he decided to reproduce in stone every material element in Egyptian daily life. In effect he took a working Egyptian palace and petrified it into a tomb in order to ensure the immortality of the king and his dependents (including himself)... He stocked the tomb with petrified goods, everyday straw baskets reproduced in stone down to the last weave, and metal pots down to the last rivet.

Into this culture of power and wealth—led by a king who believes and perpetuates the idea that he is a god—the true and living God says:

“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. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey...”

God has come to set us free—from what we may not even be totally aware. But God has not forgotten us; God has heard our groaning, our crying out as we work and live in a world which builds cities and monuments—skyscrapers—to efficiency, productivity, and profitability; to human achievement. We’re expected to join in—for the good of the economy, our nation, our family, even the next generation. What gets pushed to the margins of our lives is the worship of God. And we play a part in this as well—we’re not passive victims here. But God has come to set us free, he has come that we may go out to celebrate a festival, to worship, to give our lives in dependence upon him. This is why he wants to deliver his people out of Egypt and this is why he comes to save us as well. But Pharaoh wasn’t about to just let them go...

This part of the story (Ex. 5-6) when God through Moses begins the confrontation with Pharaoh is the subject of your Bible study this morning... and this really is a confrontation between a human who thinks he is ‘god’ against the true and living God. Pharaoh’s classic response to Moses is, “Who is the LORD (YHWH), that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go.”

As my kids would say, ‘busted.’ Score one for Pharaoh. He doesn’t get two. Anyway, you’ll discuss in your small groups what kind of cultural idols were present in Egypt that impacted their people as well as God’s people, but the one I want to focus on here briefly because it is so obvious in this passage is the self-idolatry of Pharaoh. The ultimate worship of self is making oneself out to be god... this is what the Pharaoh did and it remains a strong temptation and reality today.

Scholars point to the original lie and rebellion in the garden as the root of idol worship and self-idolatry. As humans made in the image of the living God—we are the crown of creation—and we are afforded an awesome dignity which is a source of wonderment in Genesis 1-2 and sung about in Psalm 8:

“What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? ⁵ You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. ⁶ You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: ⁷ all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, ⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. ⁹ O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

But this great dignity is also a powerful temptation... one in which the serpent in the garden takes advantage of. The serpent distracts the humans from the great generosity of God who said “You may eat freely of any tree in the garden”—and suggests that God is rather unreasonably restrictive, “Did God say, you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?” The temptation here is for the humans to take control of the situation, to fulfill human potential to know and judge what is best for ourselves. One author writes, “The human pair seek to grasp equality with God and have come to believe (by their actions) that the image of God in human beings is something to be worshipped rather than received as a gift and used for service to the Creator and creation.” They have not *become* God but chosen to *act* as if they were. Self-worship is idolatry of the deepest kind; and the cult of self-worship is alive and well today.

Self-worship is found everywhere we turn in our culture... corporations would classify as self-worshipping entities. Education, Business, Entertainment industries are environments in which we willingly serve... they will take what you give and ask for more. Perhaps you can even imagine your employer or CEO or your professor or university president saying, “Who is the LORD that I should listen to him? I do not know the LORD...” These institutions, even with the soft human faces of our bosses or teachers, are harsh and demanding masters. [I hear your stories of how difficult is it to live a God-centered life when you’re asked to put in 70+ hours at work or to compromise your values to meet the bottom line.]

I’m not asking you to quit your job or drop out of school—but I am asking you to listen and be attentive to God. This world pushes God and the worship of God to the margins—we might like to think it doesn’t or that it will get over it and wake up soon to the reality we have come to understand—we don’t like to be marginalized. It is true, sometimes we get “press” or take center stage; responding to disasters or providing prayers at an inauguration, but prayer, worship and humble service to God do not regularly make headlines. Life, with a capital ‘L’, is not demonstrated on the pages of newspapers or on ESPN or in the latest Science journal or serial drama series. No, there are only echoes of Life there. And that is fine with me. The true and living God is inviting you to worship... to live and breathe and have your being in him. And the word that is used most often of a life lived God-ward? Rest. Rest.

Peterson’s quote of being fed up with the world of lies... and turning to the world of grace:

“A person has to be thoroughly disgusted with the way things are to find the motivation to set out on the Christian way. As long as we think that the next election might eliminate crime and establish justice or another scientific

breakthrough might save the environment or another pay raise might push us over the edge of anxiety into a life of tranquility, we are not likely to risk the arduous uncertainties of the life of faith. *A person has to get fed up with the ways of the world before he, before she, acquires an appetite for the world of grace.*"

-- Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

Peterson's prayer of which we need to adopt as our own... Rescue us from the lies of advertisers who claim to know what I need and what I desire, from the lies of entertainers who promise a cheap way to joy, from the lies of politicians who pretend to instruct us in power and morality, from the lies of psychologists who offer to shape my behavior and my morals so that I will live long, happily, and successfully, from the lies of moralists who pretend to promote me to the office of captain of my fate, from the lies of pastors who "leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men (Mk 7:8). Rescue me from the person who tells me of life and omits Christ, who is wise in the ways of the world and ignores the movement of the Spirit." Amen.

We need a God bigger than us or anything we could create. What we learn from this extraordinary section of Scripture is that this God, the true and living God does exist and that this God, our God, has not forgotten us, he hears and sees us. God seeks and draws us out of whatever culture entraps us; God means to properly orient our worship to the only one worthy of glory and honor—and to deliver us to new life with him.

We know this because there is one who is the Son of God who chose not to consider equality with God something to be grasped—but in effect doing what the first Adam couldn't do—humbled himself and became obedient. As Php 2:5-11 sings it:

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

I don't have all the answers to the specific questions you have about what this looks like in your life, I only know the direction in which to point you and the reality to consider. There are no shortcuts in the life of faith, the world of grace. The direction is God-ward. The direction is Christ-ward. "Do not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but make yourself nothing."

Did you ever wonder what people must have thought when they found out that the earth was not the center with heavenly bodies revolving around it? What was it like to find out that the earth revolves around the Sun and not vice versa?

Pierre de Berulle's (French cardinal, lived 1575-1629) "Copernican revolution":

"An excellent mind of this century wishes to hold that the sun is at the center of the world and not the earth; that it is immovable, and that the earth, in proportion to its round shape moves in reference to the sun This new opinion, scarcely followed in the science of the stars, is useful and ought to be followed in the science of salvation. Because Jesus is the sun, immovable in his grandeur and moving all things—Jesus is the true center of the world and the world ought to be in continual movement toward him."

His biographer wrote, 'Bérulle was about thirty when he experienced his "Copernican revolution." It had been prepared for by years of effort and struggle to do God's will. In the midst of his struggle he came to the gradual realization that human effort was not enough. During his twenties Bérulle recognized that we cannot become holy by sheer effort nor can we do good things for God and the church solely by applying ourselves to the task. He had to surrender his dreams of reform and what he wished to do for the church. It was not that he became apathetic and passive as a result of this surrender. He spent his life in the extension of religious life and in the creation of a spirituality and community for secular priests. *But he had to let go of two things: his identification of himself with his work for the church, and his identification of his goals for church reform with the will of God.*

After this conversion Bérulle's consciousness of himself and his works shifted. He was no longer at the center of his universe. His preoccupation with his own talents, efforts, and good works was converted to a "preoccupation" with God. He thought of himself as the earth revolving around the sun who is Christ. This shift meant that Bérulle was no longer driven by a need to do good things for God and the church. Instead he began to allow God to work in his life.

Let's let God do work in our life this weekend. My goal is not to simply say, let's identify our idols and stop doing worshipping them. Rather it is to point you toward the only God and Savior worthy of our attention and our preoccupation, Jesus Christ.

You've come away from the routine so make the most of this weekend, make it a time set apart to worship God among brothers and sisters, to explore how you can encourage and exhort each other to live God-ward. May God's grace fill your heart with gratefulness and peace this weekend.