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Hiding in the Trees

Genesis, John, 1 John

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If I were the devil, I think what I would do is create a virus and send it all around the world. I would use an irresponsible media to terrify people and to bombard them with so much misinformation no one could figure out what's actually true. I think I would tap into people's fear of death and drive them from every social environment into deep, deep isolation. And I think I would close down churches to silence the message of hope. If I was the devil, I think that's what I'd do.

Today there's no shortage of conspiracy theories related to what is happening. I don't know anything about this. What I offer you this morning is not theory; it's biblical truth. We have an enemy. He's called the adversary. He's called the devil. He's called the god of this world, and he prowls about like a lion, seeking people to devour. I think it would be foolish for us as Christians to not be aware, at the very least, that the enemy has capitalized on what has happened, to do serious damage to people's lives. And I have no doubt, long after the virus is gone, the impact and damage to people's lives will continue.

This trend away from community and toward isolation is not new. It was not started in the season of COVID. It's actually been a trend for decades. Even in the secular world, the culture-watchers have been sounding the alarm for decades that we're moving away from community and into deep isolation, at great peril. I think all the way back to the year 2000 and Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone*. I think about Sebastian Junger's book *Tribe*. I think about Sherry Turkle's book *Alone Together* and *Reclaiming Conversation*—all sounding the alarm of concern that we're losing our humanness and becoming more and more isolated as people. The last six months did not create this trend, but it has clearly poured gas on the fire and driven people into deep, deep isolation.

Ryan mentioned last week that last week and this week we're talking about community as a part of a vision—a RE**NEW**ED vision—to launch Life Groups. If you were not here last week, I strongly encourage you to get Ryan's message. It was excellent. He also talked about the strategy—what will be different—and how we're going forward with these groups. So, if you weren't here, listen to the message; read the transcript. It's very, very good.

This morning, what I'd like to talk about is, biblically, why this trend and what is the solution? I know somebody might ask the question: "What difference does it make? I mean, why is it such a big deal?" I could give you a long list of reasons but let me just give you two. Most people today are very concerned about these social issues that seem to be destroying us. It's important to understand there is virtually no possibility—none—to actually resolving these issues if we don't turn the trend and, once again, learn what it means to be people that live together in community. Second would be, according to the Scriptures, there is no possibility for you to experience the life that your soul longs for apart from true, authentic community.

So, with that in mind, I'd invite you to turn in your Bible to the first chapter of Genesis. There are two primary passages this morning. We're going to start in Genesis. I'm going to go quickly through this part of it. But, in Genesis, Chapter 1, verses 26 and 27, we learn that we are made as people in the image of God and, at the core of what that means, is the capacity—the unique capacity—to be relational. It's really important that you heard what I just said. Community is not an evolutionary

adaptation for the survival of the species; it's how we're made by a Creator. We are literally hardwired for relationship.

In Genesis, Chapter 2, Ryan referred to this passage last week, that Adam is alone in the garden and God says, "This is not good." Ryan mentioned that the word *good* carries the idea that this is not correct; this is not the way it's supposed to be. Now, this is worth pondering a little. For those who think, "It's just me and Jesus, and that's all I need," you need to come to grips with the fact that, even before sin ever entered into this world, Adam was perfect in his relationship with God. Adam was in an environment that God Himself defined as Paradise; and yet God Himself said, "This is not good." It's not correct. It's not the way it's supposed to be. To understand at the core of original creation was not just me as an individual in a relationship with God, but it was to experience true community with others made in the image of God. Chapter 2 ends with the description "Adam and Eve were naked and there was no shame," which gets us to Chapter 3. I want to read verses 1 through 7:

> **Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'" The woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.'" The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.** (*NASB, Genesis 3:1-7)

So I want to identify three specific lies. When the serpent says, **"Indeed, has God said…"** it's a very strange Hebrew phrase that's very difficult to translate. But at the heart of this is this questioning of the goodness of God. *"God is not as good as you think He is*." What is implied in that is, therefore, your way would be better. Second lie is, "*You can be like God and decide for yourself what's good and evil, what's right and wrong."* Today we refer to this as *moral relativism*. God's not as good as you think He is; therefore my way would be better than God's way, and I will decide what's right and wrong; don't tell me what to do. Third lie is, "*You will not die*. *You're free to live as you please, and there are no consequences to those choices."*

Those are the same three big lies that define our culture today: that God is not as good as you think He is; therefore, my way is better than God's way. I will decide what is right and wrong; don't tell me what to do, and there are no consequences to those choices. Adam and Eve believed the lie and they rebelled and sinned against God. And immediately they were aware of their own nakedness. The text is saying that in that moment, they were covered with the shame of their sin, which leads to verse 8, which is the key to our conversation this morning.

> **They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.**

What is the first thing that Adam and Eve did when they sinned? They hid in the trees. God had given the trees to be enjoyed, pleasurable both to look at and to eat from. But now they were covered in shame because of their sin, and the first thing they did was they hid from God in the trees. This is what sin does to us. Because of our shame, we hide. We move into the shadows. We move into the trees. We move into the darkness and we hide. We wear a mask. Now, when I say a mask, I'm not talking about the COVID masks. I'm talking about the masks that we have worn for decades. We, because of the shame of our sin, are so fearful that people will see who we really are, we hide. So, we go to church, and we wear a mask. We go to school, and we wear a mask. We go to work or into social environments, and we wear a mask. And we're terrified that somebody's going to see behind the mask and see who I really am.

This is not new. Jesus talked about this in John, Chapter 3, verses 19 and 20, if you remember this from our study in the Gospel of John. Jesus is speaking, and He says:

> **"This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world,** (He's talking about Himself) **and men loved the darkness rather than the Light,** (Why?) **for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed."**

Sin causes us to hide and to wear masks and to trend into isolation. Some of you have heard this story before, but many years ago, when I lived in Chicago, I was the maintenance man for a whole group of apartments. Some of these apartments were pretty rough, and they would be condemned by the city of Chicago. I would get a condemnation notice and have a certain amount of time to bring the buildings back up to code. There was one particular building that was really rough. And, if I would go there after dark, I could go into the kitchen, leave the lights off, and just quietly listen. And pretty soon I could hear little footsteps all over in the kitchen. Then I would flip the light switch on, and the rats would scatter back into the darkness. That's exactly what Jesus is saying. Jesus is the Light, and the Light exposes our rats, and people don't like their rats being exposed. That's why we hide. So they scramble back into the darkness and move back into the shadows. We wear our masks.

The trend, because of sin and shame, is not to come together, but rather to move apart. Think about dropping a rock into a pond; the ripples all go outward. That is the effect of sin and shame. It doesn't pull us together; it spreads us apart. Therefore, as a culture, the more secular we become, the more confused we become about what to do with our sin and shame, and the more we trend into isolation and hiding. The second thing that happens is: as a result of my sin, I am separated from God. I was created to have a relationship with God, and it is there I find my significance. But now that I'm separated from God, I begin a desperate search to find significance in myself. So, I function as my own God and, on the basis of my own performance, I seek to be significant. The only way performance can be measured is how *my* performance compares with *your* performance. So, every day is a day of comparison. Every day is a day of competition to see how I measure up next to you, and what is at stake is my very significance. As long as that's the operating system, there is no possibility for true, authentic community. None! As long as I'm comparing and competing with you, there is no way I would ever pull the mask down and be authentic and real, because what is at risk is my significance.

Those are the two impacts of sin that drive us apart from one another into deeper isolation. It's my *desperate search for significance* and it's *the shame of my sin*. This has only been intensified in the last 20 years with technology. Our phones, our devices—social media—has become the ideal trees to hide in. Social media allows me to isolate myself more than any people have ever been able to in

the history of the world. It used to be necessary to be a community. We had to live together to survive. We had to neighbor together; we had to work together; we had to trade and do business together; we had to educate together; we had to entertain together. We had to! But we don't have to anymore. We can be totally isolated and still survive. Social media is driven by my desire to hide in the shadows and wear a mask and pretend to be something I'm not. I can hide in my basement and I can pretend to be courageous. I can pretend to be thoughtful. I can pretend to be a social warrior. I can present a version of myself that's cleaned up, that's sanitized, that's exaggerated, that's far more impressive than who I really am. And as long as I never take off my mask, as long as I never come out of the shadows, as long as I never let people see who I really am, I can convince them that Social Media Bryan is who I really am. Never in the history of the world have we had a greater opportunity to hide in the shadows.

This does not come without consequence. After 20 years, there has been significant research that has concluded that the markers for *empathy* among college students over the last 20 years have diminished by 40 percent. Now, stop and think about this. Twenty years! So, we're talking about people that are now husbands and wives. They're now parents of their children. They're now our teachers, our health care workers, our preachers, our law enforcement. They're now the people that run businesses in our community. Yet they are 40 percent less empathetic than previous generations.

I was listening to a talk by Sherry Turkle, and she was talking about a conversation that she had with a reporter from the New York Times who told her that in this six-month period, one of the dynamics of how people have dealt with this deep isolation is they have flooded ChatBox to seek consolation and empathy in their hour of need. Now, just to be clear, ChatBox is not a person; it's a machine. It's artificial intelligence. It's just something programmed into a machine that responds to you. So, in people's hour of need, they are turning to a machine to find the empathy that they long for. That speaks volumes for what has happened to us as a culture.

So what is the solution? I would call it the great reversal—and the great reversal is the gospel. There has to be some way to deal with the shame of our sin. There has to be some way to deal with the search for significance. Jesus talked about that in that same passage in John, Chapter 3. He goes on in verse 21:

> **"But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought** (or born) **in God."**

The message of the gospel is not just the provision of a ticket to heaven. It is the grand reversal of the world as God intended it to be. For a significant change, rather than people trending away from one another into isolation, Jesus makes it possible that we move back into the light and experience relationship together, to at least experience a glimpse of the world as God intended it to be. So John expounds on this conversation in his letter in 1 John. This is the other passage I want to look at quickly. What John says in 1 John, Chapter 1, is actually very interesting. He says:

> **What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life**—
> (What he's saying is, this has always been true, and now it's been manifested or taught to us by Jesus Himself.)
> **and that life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us**— (*1 John 1:1-2)

So, this is what Jesus taught them about eternal life. Verse 3:

> **…what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also,** (Why?) **so that you too may have fellowship with** (Whom?) **with us;**

The word **fellowship** is the Greek word *koinonia*, *community*. It's very interesting that John doesn't say, "I've proclaimed this message of eternal life to you so that you may have a ticket to heaven." He says, "We proclaim this message to you so that you may experience community with us." This is the grand reversal. Rather than life trending into isolation, like those ripples in the pond, the gospel is the grand reversal that pulls people together to the Light. Verse 3:

> **…what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship** (community) **with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. This is the message we have heard from Him and we announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship** (or community) **with Him and *yet* walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth;** (Vs. 3-6)

So, this makes sense. That's what Jesus taught John: that Jesus is the Light and, if you're going to dance with Jesus, you have to dance in the light. If you say you're dancing with Jesus, but you're walking in darkness, you're lying. You're deceived. That's not possible. But what he says next is really interesting:

> **…but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light,** (What happens?) **we have fellowship** (community) **with one another…** (Vs. 7a)

In other words, the only way to dance with Jesus in the light is we dance together. It's the grand reversal. This is the world as God intended it to be. It's not good to be alone. This idea that you can be a Christian, and it's just you and Jesus riding into the sunset, does not exist in the New Testament. What John just said is Jesus is in the light and, if you're going to experience community or intimacy with Jesus, the only way to do that is you come into the light and we do this together. There is no such thing as the Lone Ranger dancing with Jesus. And he finishes it by saying:

> **…and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.** (Vs. 7b)

How does Jesus make this possible? Because He's dealt with our sin problem, there's no shame. And, based on that, He's made it possible for us to, once again, be united with a holy God. So now my significance is found in Him and not in my performance. Therefore, the search for significance and the shame of sin have both been dealt with. The effect of that is not a collection of people all holding tickets to heaven. It's the reversal of the damage of sin, as we now have a basis to come together and dance with Jesus in the light. It, at least, gives people a glimpse of the world as God intended it to be.

So, in the New Testament, there are different terms, metaphors, used for the Church. One is an army; one is a body; one is a family. Let's talk about the family. So, what do we mean by that? Is the family of God a random collection of people who hold tickets to heaven?

So, what if I was to tell you that the only thing I ever wanted was to get married and have children. What does that mean to you when you hear those words? So, 39 years ago, July, 1981, I got married. Check! You say, "What's it been like living with Patti for the last 39 years?" And I say, "I don't know. I haven't seen her in 30 years. I think she moved back to Montana. She lives in a cave somewhere. I just don't know." *(laughter)* You say, "What?" And I say, "Yeah, the goal was to get married, and that happened July 25th, 1981. I have a marriage license to prove it." Check! You say, "Well, you also said you wanted to have kids." "Well, Patti stuck around a little while and we had three beautiful children." "Well, what has that been like sharing life with your children?" "I don't know. I didn't bring them home from the hospital. We just left them there." *(laughter)* You're like, "What?" "Yeah, the goal was to have children. Check! Check! Check!"

When I say *family*, what do I mean? Don't I mean we experience life and relationship together? We live together. We grow together. We teach together. We encourage together. We admonish and correct together. We support and carry one another together. Isn't that what we mean when we say *family*? This is life lived together. So, what do we mean when we say that the church is a family? It's very important to understand, church is not a television show. Church is a family, and families do life together.

Once in a while people will say to me something like, "Well, you know, I can be just as close to Jesus on the lake." "I can be just as close to Jesus in the mountains." "I can be just as close to Jesus at the cabin." To which I would say, "Good for you. So can I. I can be just as close to Jesus on the back of a horse. I can be just as close to Jesus fishing off my boat. I can be just as close to Jesus mowing the lawn or taking out the trash." That has nothing to do with what we're talking about. Nobody's ever said that, when we gather, somehow you have this close-to-Jesus moment and that's why we do it. That's just the mind of a consumer. That's never been the claim. The claim is we're a family and families do life together. We gather to encourage one another, to support one another, to love one another, to celebrate one another, to admonish one another, to correct one another, to carry one another in the most difficult moments of life. That's what a family does. Church is not a TV show.

Now I understand, right now, in this weird season, there are people that have health issues and concerns. They're not comfortable coming back to church. I understand that. That's not what I'm talking about. What I am talking about is there are a lot of people that have just found new rhythms and patterns—kind of like having the weekend off. "I kind of like Sunday off. I kind of like sitting in my pajamas and drinking coffee while I watch the church TV show." Friends, church isn't a TV show. It's a family and families do life together.

It is true—Ryan mentioned this last week. There are a lot of good things that happen when we gather like this on the weekend, but it is limited in such a large group as to the level of community we can experience. And that's why the emphasis is now on a small Life Group experience that makes it possible to experience community together at a much smaller level. We're committed to doing everything possible to make these groups as meaningful as possible. We're not wanting to just add one more thing to the list of things to do, to check a box. We are wanting these groups to breathe life into your souls.

The sign-up for these Life Groups is open. It goes through this week, all the way up until next weekend. All you have to do is go on the website. You'll see a Life Group tab; pull it down; there's lots of options. It's pretty clear. If you have questions, you can just call the church. We are going to do less in some areas of our ministry in order to focus more on going against the trends of the culture and to seek to pull people back together in meaningful community. When you sign up for a Life

Group, you are not signing up for the rest of your life. You're signing up for 10 weeks. At the end of the 10 weeks, you can decide what you do next. I would strongly encourage you to come with us on this journey, to go against the trends of the culture and, in Jesus, come back together and experience authentic community together as the people of God. I have no doubt that the trends of the culture, the hiding in the darkness and the shadows and the wearing of masks, is only going to get worse. I would invite you to very intentionally step out of the darkness, that we might dance with Jesus together in the light.

Our Father, we're thankful that You sent Your Son that, through His death, burial, and resurrection, our sins could be forgiven. Once again, our significance can be found in a relationship with You and, on that basis, we can come together to dance with Jesus in the light. Lord, may we, as Your people, give the world just a glimpse of the world as you intended it to be. Lord, for Your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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