

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

July 4, 2021

Psalm 123:1–4 (ESV):

1 To you I lift up my eyes,

O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

2 Behold, as the eyes of servants

look to the hand of their master,

as the eyes of a maidservant

to the hand of her mistress,

so our eyes look to the LORD our God,

till he has mercy upon us.

3 Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,

for we have had more than enough of contempt.

4 Our soul has had more than enough

of the scorn of those who are at ease,

of the contempt of the proud.

First Reading: Ezekiel 2:1-5 (ESV): Ezekiel's Call

Ezekiel's Call

2 And he said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you." 2 And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. 3 And he said to me, "Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. 4 The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' 5 And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.

EPISTLE: 2 Corinthians 12:1–10 (ESV):

Paul's Visions and His Thorn

12 I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. 3 And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— 4 and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. 5 On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— 6 though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. 7 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”** Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

THE GOSPEL - Mark 6:1–13 (ESV):

Jesus Rejected at Nazareth

6 He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. 2 And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, “Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? 3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. 4 And Jesus said to them, **“A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.”** 5 And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. 6 And he marveled because of their unbelief. And he went about among the villages teaching.

Jesus Sends Out the Twelve Apostles

7 And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. 8 **He charged them to take nothing for their journey**

except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts— 9 but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. 10 And he said to them, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. 11 And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” 12 So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. 13 And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.

Sermon 27 – Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

“Thorn Boast”

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Dear friends,

We have thorns and visions to deal with today. Paul says these two things are related to each other, and that makes sense for him, but what about us? You and I do not have visions of the Lord, and Paul is talking about something specific to him, so perhaps this is something just for him. Does it explain why God sends us crosses, why God sends us troubles? Not really. Other parts of the Scriptures do that. It does explain what we do with such things, and that is helpful in a way that doesn't make a lot of sense emotionally. I think most of you know what the punch line to all of this is, but there are questions to answer along the way. What is it that is driving Paul to say these things? Why all the talk about boasting? I thought that was something we were supposed to avoid. What is all this business with the third heaven and so on? The thorn stuff sticks out because its fairly straightforward for us, the rest of Paul's words are connected to what he does throughout the letter, so let's start there.

Paul has a very tense relationship with the Christians at Corinth. These two are not best friends. Paul is their apostle, and the Corinthians had a lot of problems, and so Paul has to knock them over the head a bit to get them back into the game of behaving properly Christian. Most of the knocking over the head happens in 1 Corinthians, this is 2

Corinthians, the relationship between them is better but there is still a lot of misunderstanding and rebelliousness to deal with. One of the reasons why these two parties did not get along is that the Corinthians were listening to some of Paul's enemies at the time. Paul had a fair few enemies, even in the Christian church, which is perhaps understandable when you remember that back when Paul was called Saul he was in the business of arresting and murdering Christians. Other than that small detail, there is also the issue of Paul's apostleship, and that is what he is addressing here.

The twelve apostles are straightforward. They are the ones who were with Jesus when Jesus walked the earth. Eleven of them survive to see the resurrection, as Judas would commit suicide instead of repenting of his sin. Matthias was the replacement for Judas, you can read about that early in Acts. So you have your twelve. Then Paul comes in, and he also is counted an apostle, because the Holy Spirit does miracles through him and because Paul saw the resurrected Jesus, something that he refers to in this epistle. Not everybody was on board with Paul's apostleship, though. Throughout his life people doubted that this guy actually had the authority to preach, teach, do miracles, and tell the church what God's will was. They doubted Paul was actually an apostle. Paul has to defend himself against these people because God wants Paul to be an apostle, to be teaching the church, and God wants Paul to bring many people to faith. Those people need to know that the guy teaching them is on the level, that he is approved, that he's not some wacko out to do this on his own. So some of Paul's letters contain these instances where Paul sounds defensive and braggy.

“I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.” There is much here to explain. Paul talks about boasting. That is what his opponents accused him of, that Paul is just doing all this because he loved power, that Paul has no right to be called an apostle. So Paul sarcastically takes their words and uses

them. He continually calls what he is doing boasting, though he isn't bragging about himself, he's talking about Jesus instead, and everything Jesus has done to him and through him. In this way, he shames his opponents. They think that Paul is boasting, but Paul is just preaching, talking about Jesus and the wonderful things Jesus has done.

This particular wonderful thing is the miracle that happened to Paul himself on the road to Damascus. Don't get hung up on how Paul describes this, I know he says the third heaven, as if there was some kind of layer cake of heavens and Paul was at the top or something, but that's not what's important. We think that Paul is referring to the time when Jesus knocked him on his rear end as he rode to Damascus, the time when Paul was rather forcibly confronted with his sin. Paul seems at a loss to fully explain this, he doesn't know if he saw a vision, or if what was happening was happening around him, did time freeze, there's all sorts of questions. Paul dismisses these with, "I don't know, God knows." Then he goes on to his point.

"3 And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— 4 and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter." Why is Paul saying this? He's defending his position, he's defending his right to be there. Remember, Paul did not walk with Jesus like the rest of the twelve. That is the most stringent of criteria for an apostle, you had to have seen and been given your apostleship by Jesus. Paul says that his apostleship came to him when he was on the road to Damascus, he describes himself as entering paradise, the third heaven, in some crazy way that he can't even describe. He says he saw things he can't even talk about. He mentions all this to prove that Jesus made him an apostle, that Jesus works through him.

Again, this is not ego. A lot of people, a lot of people, are in Christian churches right now because Paul preached to them, because Paul taught them. Imagine if those people heard that Paul was a fake, a fraud. They'd start doubting their faith, doubting Jesus. Paul doesn't want that. He's here to bring trust in Christ, not doubt in Christ, and to keep that

going, he has to establish his credentials. The Corinthians can trust that God speaks through Paul, because Paul saw it all when Jesus visited him, Paul saw heaven, Paul saw paradise, Paul saw Jesus Himself telling him what his mission would be.

“7 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.” Paul says all this happened to him, and this was the result, a thorn. What exactly was bothering him is something we don't know, we suspect it was a health problem. The current thought is that Paul's eyes never quite recovered from whatever the Lord did to them when Paul was blinded by Jesus. Maybe he had eyestrain, got headaches, and in his later letters, when he signs them, he talks about how big he writes. Why am I mentioning this? Because I want you to appreciate the nuance to this thorn. We Christians like to use the phrase “thorn in the flesh” for just about anything that bugs us, that's the way I use it and it's fine. Let's say that Paul couldn't see, that this thorn in the flesh was a real case of bad eyes. It's not just that this was hard for him, it was specifically hard for him to do the job that Jesus Himself told him to do. Jesus told Paul to preach, to teach, and to write, and then gave Paul an affliction that made all three of those things harder and more painful than they needed to be. That is what God does sometimes. Paul seems to understand the purpose of this straightaway, he talks about this as a check, to keep him from becoming conceited. Why? Well, Paul did enjoy something you or I have never had, he saw Jesus face to face, he saw heaven, he talked to his Savior. That is quite a gift, it made Paul special, Paul was an apostle, and there was a limited number of those. I suppose that does require a bit of an ego check now and again.

“8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” This is one the statements of the Scriptures that I can never get out of my head because it is so incredibly nonintuitive. Let me get this straight, God. You want me

to do a job. This job is important. It would be extremely helpful in doing that job that you gave me if I could see, Paul says. But instead of letting me see, you gave me this problem with my eyes. You gave me a job, God, and now you're making it even harder. And God's answer to this is, why yes, that's exactly what I'm doing. Why? Because I want people to see me, not you.

Paul's job is to preach Jesus. Jesus is here to forgive us our sins and give us new life through the Holy Spirit. Jesus is here to bring us faith, to give us the things we need, to get us through our life as Christians who believe in Him. We know from other parts of the Bible that only Jesus can make us believe, only the Holy Spirit can take our sinful hearts and make them pure, believing hearts. Jesus is content with leaving us as human beings, weak, fallible, often stupid, with failing bodies and failing hearts and withered hopes and all the messy ugly things that being human means. He does this so that His grace, His love, and His power shines through us.

Each of you is here because of Jesus, not because of me or any other pastor. Each of you is here because Jesus worked through those men, through your parents, and through all the other people that have influenced your Christian walk throughout your life. Jesus is behind all of that. It is easy to assume that you're here because of their love, or because of your own devotion, or because of that pastor and how great he was. Jesus reminds us here that none of that is the reason you are here. Those people are tools that Jesus uses, nothing more, Jesus is the power that drives you to the cross. Jesus is what makes you repent and believe. Jesus is what makes all of this mean something to you, through the faith that He gives you.

You are not apostles. I'm not either. We don't have the incredibly intimidating job of building the church from the ground up, we're just garden-variety Christians round here. But these words are just as true for you as they are for Paul. I know some of your thorns in the flesh, the health problems, the ways age has effected you, family trouble, and all that. You all have them, I do too. **“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my**

weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Lovely words. True words. God's own words to you. Now go put them into practice. Be content and at peace with your thorns. They are, after all, God's will for you. Speak to God in your prayers today and tell God, it's okay, I don't mind, your will be done. Go ahead. I'll wait.

I can't either. A thorn, a cross, is at its most infuriating when God seems to design it, to customize it, specifically for you. When it touches the one raw nerve that you don't want to touch, when God takes the one thing you don't want to take, when God completely railroads your plans and intentions to do His own plans and intentions. That is God's design for you, that frustration, that sense of if this one thing were changed, everything would be okay. Maybe God will change it, take it away someday, maybe He won't. God's words here stand for all of us. What encouragement do I have for you in the face of your thorns? They don't change who you are. They don't change how God sees you, and they don't change the good you can do, even when it seems like your thorn in the flesh is preventing you from doing good. When your health is so bad you can barely get out of bed, it's easy to think that you're useless to God. When your body just won't cooperate, when you become the needy person, you feel like you can't serve God when everybody has to serve you all the time.

Remember God's words then. Neediness is not a failing, it is exactly what God wants. Strength is not what God demands from you, results is not what God demands from you, the only thing God demands from you is repentance and trust in His promises. Out of that frustration, out of that pain, out of that loss and loneliness, that embarrassment of being the one that everyone has to wait on, the one that everyone has to help, God will sharpen and strengthen your Christian heart. It is the forge that will hammer out your Christian faith harder and stronger. It is the mercy that God shows to you in the pain that keeps you strong.

He knows when to stop hammering. He knows when it is time to stay and time to go. He knows what you really are. Whether you are young and can do everything, or bedridden and can't even get up without help, Jesus promises that He is strong and you are weak and that is just the way He wants it. No thorn lasts forever. Jesus does.

Amen