

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

July 25, 2021

Psalm 136:1–9, 26 (ESV):

His Steadfast Love Endures Forever

136 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

2 Give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

3 Give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

4 to him who alone does great wonders,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

5 to him who by understanding made the heavens,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

6 to him who spread out the earth above the waters,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

7 to him who made the great lights,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

8 the sun to rule over the day,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

9 the moon and stars to rule over the night,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

26 Give thanks to the God of heaven,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

First Reading: Genesis 9:8–17 (ESV):

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, 10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. 11 I establish my covenant with you, that never again

shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” 12 And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: 13 I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16 When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” 17 God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

EPISTLE: Ephesians 3:14–21 (ESV):

Prayer for Spiritual Strength

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

20 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

THE GOSPEL - Mark 6:45–56 (ESV):

Jesus Walks on the Water

45 Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. **46** And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. **47** And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. **48** And he saw that they were making headway

painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, **49** but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, **50** for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, **“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”** **51** And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, **52** for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

Jesus Heals the Sick in Gennesaret

53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore. **54** And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him **55** and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was. **56** And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.

Sermon 30 – Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

“Watch Me Hear”

Ephesians 3:14-21

Dear friends,

The epistle lesson has a couple of things that stick out, and it is this that I want to address today. Paul talks about power, he talks about strength, and he talks about family, and I am wondering what there is to learn from this. We know God has power, we know we have very little power in any kind of practical way. I've been waiting for Jedi powers like in the movies for years now and none have ever come, so we can perhaps dismiss that. Yet Paul keeps talking like we have something, but what is it? Practically, what is it?

We have sins, we have forgiveness of those sins, we have prayer, but that is not our power that's God's. Are any of these things power? I guess we'll see.

Paul starts off by referring to something before. He says, “for this reason” which demands an explanation. What reason is he talking about? Well, in the sections before this one, Paul referred offhandedly to his personal story of redemption, how Christ had saved Paul though Paul was the least of all the saints. Paul often refers to himself in these humble terms, he calls himself chief of sinners, least of the apostles, in other places. This sounds to our jaded ears like false humility. If you ever find yourself thinking that, though, please remember that Paul's chief occupation before becoming an apostle was the mass persecution of Christians. This means that Paul was in charge and directly responsible for Christians being arrested, tortured, and murdered. I mention this because Paul does, and he refers to this as God's great, deep, wide planning. What was God's plan? To use this aggressive Jew as an even more aggressive tool, for the purpose of bringing people to believe in Jesus. That was God's plan for Paul, and as Paul will say, that is God's plan for the church. Paul knows what his mission is: To make Christians and to strengthen the faith of those who are already Christian. Paul talks about this mission, and how it has hurt him, it has made him suffer, and he implores the Ephesians to remember that the mission comes first. Paul has a close relationship with the Christians in Ephesus, he worked among them longer than any other single church on record, at least two years. Paul says that the mission comes first, and then our lesson starts.

“14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father.” There are a few different ways to handle life's troubles according to the Bible. Some, like the Psalms, like Job, show saints protesting the trials and crosses that the faithful have to endure throughout their life. They show us an example of prayer, that God would come to the aid of His people and rescue them from their troubles. This is one way. Paul shows us another in this verse. You accept them, suffer them, because you know the outcome is worth the trouble, you know the mission comes first. That is what Paul is saying. I bow before the Father's will

that I suffer in prison as I am now, because the mission comes first. Either way is fine, and depending on your trials you will respond both ways throughout your life. Sometimes, you can't stop hammering on God's door to get Him to change things. Sometimes, you will just shrug your shoulders and resign to God's will until He changes it. Either is a display of good Christian faith.

Paul goes on. **“15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being.”** Family is an extremely common metaphor in the book of Ephesians, one that Paul will go back to again and again. Just as we have families that are more important to us than the folks we meet on the street, so too do Christians have a family. That family, Paul says, comes from Christ, and it is the basis and reflection of every family that we make on this earth. The relationship of husband and wife is supposed to reflect the relationship of Christ and His church. That's why God made it. Family is a show of our faith. In our love for our families, we show the love our Father showed us. Self-sacrificial love, giving love. That's how its supposed to work. Sin obviously makes us screw it up and turn that love into selfish serving, but that's not how God designed it.

But Paul just doesn't talk about family, he talks about strength and power. Paul basically says that God wants you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit. So the Holy Spirit is there to strengthen you with His power. Great. What does that mean? Well, we know it is an inner strength, not physical strength. He talks about it being a strength of the inner being. What is your inner being? It is the very person that believes that Jesus is Lord. Inside of you, you have your Christianity, every one of you, if you didn't you wouldn't be here. That person believes in Jesus and trusts Jesus. That person wants to do the right thing and love the neighbor and be good. That person is you. Yes, the sinner is in your flesh, in your body, in your mind, but the real you is the Christian you. So

that deep-inside Christian you is what God wants to strengthen. How do we do that? With His Spirit, I guess, but poking around in that just brings us to the next verses.

“17 So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” God wants Christ to dwell within your hearts. He sends His Spirit to strengthen that within you. So can we chalk this up to what Lutherans are always yakking on about? That we are sinners who have been forgiven by Christ? Sure, but Paul doesn't use those words. Look at the words that he uses. God wants you to be rooted and grounded in love. Whose love? Christ's love. That is your starting point, that is what brings you here. That is your endpoint, that is what will bring you to your grave to die faithfully when God calls you. Christ's love is where you start and where you end, so what Paul is telling you is to take Christ's love for everything in between as well. Rooted in Christ's love, you have strength. Again, strength to do what? To comprehend, Paul says. That's what really struck me here. Strength and comprehension are not things we use side-by-side, usually when we don't understand something, we say we're too stupid, not that we're too weak. So what are you trying to comprehend? What do you Christians need to be strengthened in order to get? Paul says that God wants you to know the breadth, the length, and height and depth. God wants you to know the measurements. The blueprints. The diagrams. Of what?

God wants you to know Him. To know His plans, His purposes. To know His love, His anger, and His care. All that He is, God wants you to see. What a job. God is immense beyond our wildest dreams, He's way too big. We can't know a tenth of what He knows, we're only human. And how are we to learn it?

How do you learn about anyone? You watch what they do and listen to what they say. We talk about having a relationship with God. This is exactly what Paul is referring to. Watch God. Watch what He does in history, in the news. Watch what He does in your life.

Try to see it clearly, try to guess. But if you only do this, you'll never get anywhere or be driven completely stark-raving mad. God is too big. You need to listen as well. You need to hear Him. Thankfully, He speaks to you, and very clearly, today. He wants you know Him, He wants you to watch Him, and He wants you to hear His will for you. A lot of times that will is going to be very confusing, sometimes unclear. Keep watching. Keep listening to His words in the Bible, His promises like the ones He made Noah. God tells you it will all be clear someday. He tells you that as you search Him, as you listen to Him, as you watch this world with Christian eyes, that you will see Him. You will see His anger towards sin. You will see Him mete out justice on those that do wrong. You will see His graciousness. You will see His love. Then, you will hear, and between the two of those, the seeing what happens, and the hearing of His Words, God will draw you close to Him. He will give that strength to you, the strength of seeing and hearing. What will it feel like? I have no idea. What are the specifics? Paul doesn't say beyond this: You will know God. You will know him as a wife knows her husband. You will know Him as a child knows His Father. You will see His heart. You will hear how He feels toward you. You will hear what He has done for you. You will hear what He expects of you. You must be perfect. You are full of sin. Christ is perfect. Now go and show Christ.

Amen