

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Psalm 25:1-9;
Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

It was a happy day on Wednesday in the Brock household – the season premier of "Lost" was on. I made sure I got home in time to ignore my children. If you haven't been watching this show, a brief synopsis follows. A plane load of folks have crash landed on some tropical island, and they are learning how to live on this mysterious island. They encounter many different and strange things. They're learning how to deal with animals that don't belong on tropical islands, like a polar bear; they're learning how to live with smoke that attacks them. There is evidence of other crashes on the island, other airplanes and a ship in the middle of the island; and there is evidence that there are other humans there . . . and those humans are none too keen on the fact that these newcomers are there. And they found a mysterious metal hatch.

We also learned quite a bit about the characters as last season went on. One of them is a fugitive from the law; one of them is bent on a killing revenge; one is a doctor (maybe seeking repentance?); there's a lottery winner plagued by bad luck; there's a married couple struggling with their relationship issues; there's a paraplegic who has regained the use of his legs.

Now season two has begun. They have already addressed several of the mysteries that they left from season one – they've gotten this metal hatch open, and new relationships are forming; but some new mysteries are occurring as well. One of the things that happened during the season opener was a confrontation between the doctor, Jack (who has more or less appointed himself in charge of the whole group) and the apparently recovered paraplegic, Locke. Locke wants to go down the hatch. Now. It doesn't matter that it is nighttime, he wants to go down even though they can't see what is in the murky depths. Jack says "No. At the very least, let's wait until morning. The others are after us and we need to be able to defend ourselves, to protect ourselves." And so they argue (as they had through much of season one) about the intelligence of going down this hatchway into a place they cannot see. "Why do you want to do this?" Jack asks. Locke struggles for a second, then he looks at Jack and answer that he wants to go in because this hatchway represents hope. Well, Jack can't understand this, and Locke replies, "That is because you are a man of science, and I am a man of faith".

All human beings have faith in something; we believe in something. That faith might well be in God. It might be in Buddha or Allah or Shiva or Vishnu. It might be in Wall Street and Alan Greenspan. It might be in the NFL or Tiger Woods. It might be that you have faith in Smith & Wesson. Or a metal hatch in the middle of a tropical island. It doesn't matter what it is, every human being has faith in something.

The people of first century Philippi had faith. They had lots of things in which they could put their faith. They were not fighting for their lives in the middle of a deserted island, but they did live in dangerous time. Philippi, in the northeastern corner of the Roman Empire, had to deal with the barbarians; those not part of the Empire. Philippi, part of the Roman Empire, was founded by Philip of Macedonia who was, as you may remember, the father of Alexander the Great, the one who united the whole Mediterranean area. Philippi is a trading city, but because it was founded by Philip and part of the Greek Empire (which was consumed by the Roman Empire), those people born and raised there, regardless of whether they were of Roman heritage or Greek heritage, had certain rights, among them the right of citizenship, the right of natural citizenship. That meant that they were exempt from certain taxes; they had more rights

due to their birth than those who had purchased their citizenship; it meant that they would not be conscripted into the military service. It also meant, however, that they were expected to take part in worship of the Caesars.

Now these folks, being of either Greek or Roman origin (in other words, gentiles), had very little, if any, Jewish presence in the city (Paul might have even considered them to be pagans). They did have the pantheon of Greek gods, Zeus and Hera, Poseidon or Hades; they had the Roman gods, Jupiter and Juno, Neptune and Pluto; and they had the temples to the Caesars, Julius, Augustus, Tiberius and Nero.

It was easy to be confused in Philippi in the first century from a deity point of view, and Paul realized that these folks were "theologically challenged". And while he thanked them for their assistance, he encouraged them in their faith and he gave them the psalm that we heard this morning in Philippians, a hymn almost, to help them better grasp who Christ is and what Christ did for them, for Christ, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord". Paul reminds those believers in Philippi just who it is in whom they put their trust, who it is in whom they have faith. He reminds them of what Christ did for them, and he reminds us what Christ has done for us.

Unlike the religions to which they were accustomed, worshiping Zeus or Jupiter or the Caesars, Christianity was radically different because it required no action on their part whereas the gods and Caesar were always demanding tribute – action or sacrifice of some kind – before they would fulfill the paltry human requests. Oh there might be the occasional time when Zeus might grant your desire, but eventually it would turn around and get you right in the . . . behind. The gods would never let them off the hook; they always had to do something. Christianity was vastly different than any of those. Christianity didn't require them (or us) to do a thing. There was nothing that they (or we) could do to earn God's love. That's what Paul was trying to get across, the words of that hymn: Jesus did it for us.

You might well ask then, what does he mean then, in verse 12 when he says, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling"? He doesn't mean that we have to work for our salvation, he means work at it, figure it out, and believe. In verse 13, "for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work".

Paul was reminding the citizens of Philippi that they indeed had someone watching over them. The citizens of that tropical island have someone, some higher power watching over them, as well (the writers). The people of Philippi had Christ. We in Pennsylvania have Christ. That higher power watching over us; that power that is at times mysterious and unfathomable, beyond our comprehension, or as we heard in the words of Ezekiel this morning, sometimes even perceived as being unfair. And yet that power, that One, that Being in whom we put our trust is with us nonetheless. And it is that power, that One, before whom every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord. For we are not lost on a tropical island, abandoned by that spirit, that power is with us now, always, and everywhere.

Amen.