

## *Remembering*

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany  
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February 8, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 40:21-31; I Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our family van shows no trace of the trials I put it through. Last week the bumper was replaced, and the panel below the tail light repaired and repainted. Now every time I look at the van I won't automatically think back to that day in December when I backed rather forcefully into a low stone wall. We just bought that van last fall. And no one wants to be the one who puts the first dent or scratch in a new vehicle. With our previous van, it was my husband Randy who scratched it first. And I was so understanding. But that was a small scratch. No, this time around I throttled our new van backwards into a stone wall. And I was grateful to receive Randy's understanding.

I really don't want to remember that stone wall. Of course, that was the problem in the first place. I **didn't** remember the stone wall. I had parked the van in a rather cozy little parking lot with minimal space for maneuvering. And when I did maneuver, I forgot that behind me was that low stone wall. Remembering it would have made all the difference.

The prophet Isaiah also understands the importance of remembering. Isaiah poses these questions in vs. 21 of our Old Testament lesson, and then repeats them in vs. 28: *Have you not known? Have you not heard?* In fact, Isaiah goes a little further and asks: *Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?* Isaiah is calling the people of God to remember. Isaiah is calling the people of God to remember God.

Because the people have forgotten. Isaiah speaks to Jews in the time roughly 500-600 years prior to Jesus' birth who have been living in forced exile in Babylon for years. Having been removed far from their land, their homes, their temple and its worship, wouldn't it be natural for them to begin to forget the Lord God? Forget the covenant he made with them and the land he safely brought them to centuries earlier? How does someone remember when it's not there in front of them, in fact hasn't been there in front of them for years? How does someone remember when other things get in the way, when other events serve to distract and confuse? One of the reasons I forgot about that low stone wall was because I was paying attention to the gargantuan long bed truck parked next to me as I tried to maneuver my way out of the parking lot. Talk about a distraction. Well, the exiles are distracted in Babylon—initially by their forced dispersion; then by all the things that Babylon has to offer. Some Jews fare poorly in captivity. Others prosper to a degree as they assimilate themselves to Babylonian culture—and religion. See, there were a variety of gods being worshiped in Babylon—Marduk, for one. That's the god the Jewish people in exile heard about *ad nauseum*. These distractions get in the way of remembering the Lord God, who seems strangely silent in response to their situation.

Only Isaiah will not let the memory fade further. He calls the people up short, saying, *Have you not known? Have you not heard?* Turn it from question to statement and it's more like, "Surely you remember! Surely you know and have heard!"

Isaiah is not giving any new information here, unlike other times when a prophet tends to speak about the future. Isaiah is drawing the people back into remembering their identity under a particular God—not Marduk, but the Lord God. And the way to draw them back is to speak about this particular God who creates heaven and earth. This God, and this great God alone, stands above all others, stands above creation, stands above human beings who are miniscule before him, and Isaiah declares this God is still creating.

Of course, one can guess the negative response of the exiles to Isaiah: Hey, it's all well and good to speak of God as creator of heaven and earth; that He put the stars and planets in their courses, and so on and so forth. But did any one bother to tell the Lord God we're stuck here in Babylon? We are weary, we are powerless before our conquerors, we cannot venture one step further. So, Isaiah voices their lament with these words: *My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God.* Translation: Doesn't God even notice us?

It is then that Isaiah brings out the punch line. When their weakness and vulnerability could seem to get the best of them, when they have no control over the outcome of events that simply overwhelm them . . . precisely in **that** moment God's power and empowering are made known. This is a strange paradox, but Isaiah proclaims it as the truth. Isaiah calls the people to remember this mystery—that God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. That God in fact chooses to dwell with those who have no power, who are suffering. That in the midst of their frailty, when they cannot rely on themselves or on Marduk or on anyone else, for that matter, the Lord God will flip around the whole situation for his powerless people; he will lift them up, make them soar free as if on eagles' wings. **He** will do it—no one else. And *they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.*

Remember that, says Isaiah. Don't forget it. And don't let anything distract you from that incredible reality.

It is also a reality for people who follow Jesus Christ. The event of Jesus is this exact same reality where God's power is made known in the midst of frailty. All four Gospels tell stories of ordinary, weary, powerless folks who, in the presence of Christ find his strength lifting them up, his healing power making them new. We read that in today's Gospel in the story of Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Yet this mystery of God's power dwelling in weakness is even more incredible in Jesus Christ himself, who accepts total vulnerability and total loss of control when he dies on that cross—and once again, the mighty power of God shakes the world upside down! Jesus takes all our weakness, our sins, our little deaths, to the cross and grave with him, then he is made alive to be our king, and sin and death are rendered impotent.

But we probably will forget this truth some days. The distractions will come. We'll be maneuvering through tenuous situations in our lives and we'll forget to rely on God. We'll forget to place our trust in him. Those are the moments we'll probably do some damage, hit a wall, feel despair. Thank God we can come back here each week. For when we gather here for

worship, we are saying to each other, in effect, haven't you heard? Don't you know? Surely you remember! And don't forget. Don't let anything distract you from that incredible reality of God's awesome strength at work in your life through his gift of his Son.

Yet there is something beyond simply remembering. And that is taking this story about Jesus Christ—this story of how our God dwells among us in our weakness and strengthens us, and then sharing it in our words and deeds with others beyond these doors. Trouble is, we struggle in our attempts to do that. Being an evangelizing church and being individual people of God who evangelize is not an easy thing—to define or to do.

St. Paul in our 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson suggests how one can share this story about our God. He describes how he shares the Good News of Jesus Christ in his daily work. He writes about he becomes like those he meets, that they might better hear what he has to say. In his words, *To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. . . To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.*

I know our first reaction is, well, how in the world are we supposed to do that? For example, this afternoon I will lead a worship service at Dauphin County Prison. Do I follow Paul's suggestion to become as an inmate if I . . . acquire several tattoos . . . wear a khaki jumpsuit and sandals . . . and take up petty crime in my neighborhood. Is that what Paul intends by his words? Or, for those of you who will staff the homeless shelter at Zion Lutheran Church at month's end—is Paul saying to get rid of your home? Don't take a bath for a week? Carry your belongings with you and lay down in an alley on a cold winter's afternoon? Is that how we become all things to all people?

Or does Paul really intend this—that we allow ourselves to become less of ourselves? That we become transparent for God's light to shine through? Perhaps Paul is suggesting we allow ourselves to be emptied of all the things we think make us who we are, all the things we think are so important for our lives, all the things we think **make** us important, all the things we need to feel in control—to feel powerful. And when we have been emptied of those things, and all those distractions have vanished, then all that's left is an open, accessible space for God to come and fill us with his power. That power will come, and God will be made known to that other person in all of God's goodness and love. In other words, Paul wants us to live this paradoxical truth that God and his power dwell in the midst of our weakness.

See, if I think that I can go into Dauphin County Prison and stand there as SUPER PASTOR (with a big "S" on my chest), and let them have a bit of my superior intellect and my education, my religious upbringing and my morality, dressing it up in nice "churchy" words, then I will be a barrier to the Good News. I won't have shared it at all. The Good News can't get through me 'cause I'm in the way.

And if I go in there, scared about the whole idea of prison worship (and may I say it doesn't need to be prison worship for us to be scared of doing something in the world for God—there are lots of ways God calls us to share our faith, and sometimes the very idea petrifies us!), and I'm so scared of being in that prison and am trying very hard to be in control and cool and tough and powerful, and meanwhile with those distractions I forget to rely on God for strength, instead

thinking I will have to rely on my own strength, then I will be a barrier to the Good News. I will not be able to share it with the people I was sent to serve. The Good News can't get through me 'cause I'm in the way.

Paul encourages you and me to empty ourselves, to be open and accessible, and thus we will be whatever those others we meet need us to be. And we will be whatever God wants us to be. We won't be SUPER TEACHER or SUPER PARENT or SUPER EMPLOYEE or SUPER HEALTH CARE WORKER. But we will be more than enough for God to work God's purposes.

Two weeks ago, several of us from Trinity led worship at the Dauphin County Prison for about 15 male prisoners. At the end of our service a young man came up to me. His name was Devon. Oh, he was young—early 20's—young enough to be my son (I like the way that sounds rather than my saying I was old enough to be his mother). Devon came up to me, and asked rather wistfully, “Will you be back next week?” Will you be back next week?

He wasn't looking for SUPER PASTOR. He wasn't looking for Trinity's SUPER VOLUNTEERS. He was asking for the Good News to come again, so he could hold onto the story and remember in the midst of prison distractions. God's love in Jesus was made known to him through us that evening. Could it be that for one hour in that barred place of powerlessness, Devon was lifted up and made to soar free? **AMEN.**