

10.6.2019 Trinity 16 (Ephesians 3:13-21; Luke 7:11-17)

According to biblical sources and biblical scholars, St. Paul spent approximately six years in prison during his ministry. Most scholars believe that at the time of his first two-year Roman imprisonment, Paul was inspired to write four books of the Bible that are commonly called the prison epistles: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Two weeks ago our New Testament lesson was found in one of these prison epistles. On that Sunday morning, we heard a passage from the letter to the Philippians in which Paul, while writing from within the walls of a first-century prison, encouraged Christians to be content everywhere and in all things. In those verses St. Paul reminded us that to have Christ is to have everything, and he assured us that in Christ, with Christ, and through Christ who strengthens me, we can do all things, we can press on in every circumstance (Philippians 4:4-13).

The Epistle we heard this morning is also one of the letters that St. Paul wrote from prison, and in his inspired words once again we find the Apostle encouraging Christians not to be discouraged by trials or tribulations. Paul writes, *“I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory. For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...”* (Ephesians 3:13-14). Paul is certainly one of the greatest examples of a saint who was not knocked to his knees by God, but who instead willingly lowered his knee to God, who humbly and faithfully knelt before the Almighty as he endured grief and pain and sorrow. St. Paul tells the Ephesians *faint not at my tribulations*, don't let my trials discourage you, because these crosses I bear are simply opportunities to serve God, to make Him known, and to witness the good and the glorious things that He will bring about through these difficulties.

St. Paul described one of his greatest trials as a *“thorn in the flesh... the messenger of Satan”* (2 Corinthians 12:7) come to torment him, and Scripture tells us that he fervently prayed three times for this thorn to be taken from him. Yet instead of answering his prayer by removing the thorn, God comforted and assured St. Paul with these words, *“My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”* God heard Paul's faithful prayer, but instead of removing this painful cross, He provided His amazing

grace and His perfect strength to bear it. This definitive answer to his repeated prayer caused St. Paul to conclude and declare: *“Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me”* (2 Corinthians 12:9).

St. Paul endured shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonments, this thorn in the flesh, and in the midst of all these things he tells us that he was glad, that he took pleasure in it all, because these trials were opportunities for the power of Christ to *“rest upon me.”* As I researched this particular verse of Scripture, I noticed several translations don’t say *rest upon me*, but instead translate the verse: *“that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”* After considering the difference in these translations, it seems the full meaning of this verse is best communicated by speaking the truth contained in both translations and saying, *“Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me, and dwell in me.”*

The eternal comfort found in the meaning conveyed by those words only increases when you recall the remarkable way that St. John describes our Savior Christ. As you know, in the opening sentences of his Gospel, John wrote, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made.”* Then just a few verses later John tells us, *“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us...”* (John 1:1-3, 14a). The Greek word that is translated *dwelt* in that verse, literally means “to pitch a tent,” and it’s the same word that St. Paul uses when he writes about glorying in his infirmities that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, we see that the Word of God, the Eternal Second Person of the Holy Trinity, who was already with God, who already was God in the beginning, the Word who came down from heaven in the first century to pitch His tent among us, is the very same Word, who in the midst of our trials and tribulations comes to rest upon us, and dwell in us. Almighty God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth has literally pitched His tent within us. The knowledge of this truth is the reason why St. Paul can not only press on in every circumstance, but can even be glad. He glories in it all because he knows that in his weakness the perfect strength of the God of Heaven and Earth rests upon him, and that God Himself dwells in him.

We rest in the knowledge that God is with us in our trials. We believe His promise, *“I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee”* (Hebrews 13:5), yet there are still moments when we wonder why God allows such suffering. I’ve often heard people say that we must endure all of these things simply because we live in a fallen world, but that answer seems to overlook the power of prayer and the fact that God retains sovereign control over His creation. Our Lord, who made the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, and who raised the dead proclaimed the truth that not even a sparrow falls to the ground *“apart from the will of your Father”* (Matthew 10:29). If we believe that God has literally pitched His tent within us, if we believe that all He could ever do He can still do, then we may ask why doesn’t He?

As I considered the prison epistles and the way St. Paul willingly, even joyfully, endured suffering, I was struck by how this truth contrasts so sharply with the miraculous image portrayed by our Gospel reading of people standing in fear and awe and glorifying God after they witnessed Jesus speak one word to a dead man, raising him to life. While I tried to reconcile these two images in my mind, a suffering saint on one side and a young man being miraculously raised from the dead on the other, I was reminded of something Max Lucado wrote concerning the question of why did Jesus raise so few from the dead. He said, “Jesus healed hundreds, fed thousands, but so far as we know He only raised three: the daughter of Jairus, the boy near Nain, and Lazarus.

Max Lucado asks the question, “Why so few?” and then offers these possibilities: “Could it be because He knew He’d be doing them no favors? Could it be because He couldn’t get any volunteers? Could it be that once someone is there, the last place they want to return to is here?” His thoughts are a great reminder that death for a Christian, is life. St. Paul declared to the Philippians, *“For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain”* (1:21), Isaiah tells us that *“those who follow godly paths will rest in peace when they die”* (Isaiah 57:2 NLT), and St. John heard a voice from heaven proclaiming, *“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord”* (Revelation 14:13). From our limited perspective this may be difficult to see, but that is the objective, absolute truth spoken by God, *“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.”*

From a worldly and limited perspective, physical death is certainly the worst

thing that could happen to any of us, definitively worse than our greatest trial, but thanks be to God, because from a Christian and eternal perspective, even death has lost its sting (1 Corinthians 15:55), and if the worst thing that can happen to us, now leads directly to the best thing that can happen to us, what does that say about all of the lesser trials we must endure? All things do work together for good, for those who love God (Romans 8:28). From Genesis to Revelation, the message communicated by Scripture is one of God redeeming all that He allows. Jesus told those who would suffer persecution for His sake that “*great is your reward in heaven*” (Matthew 5:12). The lives of Job, Joseph, and Daniel all encourage us to entrust today’s trial to God in expectation of His blessing tomorrow. This is not to say that we will all be rewarded in this life, St. Paul’s difficult life and martyr’s death is evidence of that fact, but in Paul’s own words we learn that what God doesn’t redeem in this life, He redeems and rewards in the next. Paul wrote, “*There is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing*” (2 Timothy 4:8).

In the prison epistles we find no prosperity gospel, no promise from God that He intends to save us from every trial and make us healthy and wealthy in this world, but instead what we find in God’s Word written from within the walls of a first-century prison is the truth that all God could ever do, He can still do. We have His promise that in the midst of our trials and tribulations the perfect strength of Christ rests upon us, and that God Himself literally dwells in us. So, perhaps the question shouldn’t be one of why doesn’t God do more to alleviate suffering in this world, consider the Cross and tell me what more you would like Him to do than to give the life of His beloved Son. While we still have breath, a better question to be asking ourselves is why don’t we do more?