

Visions and Obstacles

The Scripture that I just read is one that has had deep meaning for me over the years and I hope that it does or will for you all as well. I'll touch just lightly on its historical context this morning because, frankly, I find Paul's words so personal, so intimate that it seems to me they speak across the centuries clearly and with very little need for a careful contextualization. Instead, I'll focus on that personal experience of Paul and on how I see it reflected in the world around us, in my life and in our lives together as Good Shepherd Baptist Church.

In Paul's two surviving letters to the Corinthians, we find a correspondence between the apostle and a church which he had founded, where many still deeply respected his opinion but also where there were many serious problems and a significant number had rejected his ongoing attempts at guiding the church from afar by means of his letters. In I and II Corinthians, we can see both Paul's appreciation and encouragement for the Christians of this important Greek trading port and his strong admonishments and wrangling with some of them. This difficult relationship has blessed followers of Christ over the centuries as it has given us not only our oldest written account of Jesus' passion and resurrection appearances but also the basics of our theology of those events as well as Paul's famous description of love.

A significant portion of II Corinthians concerns an ongoing contest for influence over the congregation between Paul and a group known to scholars as the "Super-Apostles": a group of charismatic Christian leaders who arrived in Corinth following Paul's departure and claimed to be more spiritual, more gifted and all-round more qualified to guide the church than their founder. They especially boasted about their many mystical experiences of the presence of God as part of their credentials. In our short passage, Paul answers their boasting with a story of his own but then points out that such an emphasis on these experiences misses the point. It is not in the private spiritual strengths of these leaders, exaggerated or not, that the path of Jesus is found but rather in the everyday experience of all persons as wounded and broken. The strength of God in our lives is revealed in our weaknesses.

Let's look at what Paul says about what we might call visions or direct experience of the divine and how such phenomena have continued to be a part of religion and spirituality into our own time. First of all, we should not be deceived by Paul's circumlocution as he describes his own experience. Those who've studied this passage since early times have been convinced that it is his own mystic encounter with God that Paul is writing about. Part of his point is that he refuses to boast about such a thing as his opponents are doing. This kind of experience is not what imbues apostolic authority. And unless he is describing the Damascus Road event, which seems unlikely, he never discusses it again. In the vision, he says, he was "caught up to the third heaven." This is language that would have been widely understood at the time he wrote, when a widespread understanding of the heavens included a lower level which held the earth's atmosphere, the region of the stars, and finally, the third heaven where God dwells and is seen as God truly is.

If we place this mystical occurrence into our own context, we might say that Paul, perhaps as the result of one of the many beatings he suffered, has had a Near Death Experience. I will leave it to others here more expert than I in this field but it seems to me that Paul describes the prototypical hallmarks of such an occurrence: the sensation of being "caught up" to a glorious place, an encounter with the Divine, witnessing and hearing things that cannot be explained or

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even recounted. Such a happening also meshes with accounts of mystic encounters from saints over the ages.

Because of these accounts from prominent mystics such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, and others, believers throughout Christian history have sought to “storm the gates of heaven” with incessant prayers and various techniques to gain access to the unmediated presence of God. Indeed, one commentator I read this week suggests that the impetus to raise oneself out of mundane existence to numinous encounter is so deeply engrained a hunger within us that it is in part responsible for modern explorations into psychotropic drugs and opiates.

But whether the motive is enlightenment, worship or escape, the team writing for the “Preaching Peace” online commentary for this passage reminds us that, “Those who seek mystical experiences often find themselves disappointed; this is because these kinds of experiences cannot be sought, they must be given.” Paul understands the primacy of God in the encounter between Creator and created being. This is why he feels he cannot boast about his own experience – he was only the open vessel into which God poured God’s Spirit. I feel the same. I will go so far as to tell you that I have had such experiences in my own life. The first happened when I was a pre-teen. This led me as a teenager and in my early twenties to explore the writings of the great Christian mystics and to practice various meditative techniques to “storm the gates of heaven” myself. I had some interesting and even inspirational moments during those years but it actually wasn’t until I’d stopped striving for such encounters with the Holy that I ever had another. I likewise agree with the writer for “Preaching Peace,” who says, “They give a certain grounding to why I do what I do. But they are intensely personal and thus private.” Like Paul, I do not feel comfortable in boasting about that which was a gift given without regard to merit. We will leave it to the Super-Apostles to make such claims.

Although this is not directly addressed in our passage from II Corinthians, I’m also of the opinion that such private and personal visions as Paul experienced are ultimately less important to the church community, and therefore overall, than visions shared by the community. Over the course of my life, I’ve learned the importance of shared vision in a number of settings. In my second executive level post at a regional theatre, I began to hear a demand for “visioning.” In that faith-based company, a verse from Proverbs was cited as the reason: “Without vision, the people perish.” It was just a couple of years later when I was introduced to the business version of this concept through the work of Jim Collins and Jerry Porras in their then-new book, Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies. These were lessons I began to apply at every institution and church I served and when I heard that Good Shepherd Baptist had undergone a visioning process in 2002, I knew we would be a good fit in that regard.

In the seven years plus that we have served God’s Kingdom together, we have worked from that platform of the vision developed among you with the Spirit’s guidance and to which I have added my allegiance. It is a bold vision, giving birth to what the business writer Jim Collins might call Big Hairy Audacious Goals. I believe we can rightly point to God’s involvement in the development of that vision because key goals have been achieved against all odds of doing so with such a small group. Shepherd’s Garden has been made a reality along with the continuance of the Community Gardens program, even when our campus seemed too small for both. In

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meetings in 2008 and again this year, we have affirmed the vision and continued to work towards its overall fulfillment. The shared vision, inspired by God, has welded us into an even stronger community of faith. Had there been no vision, it is likely that this people, Good Shepherd Baptist Church, would have perished. We will continue to refer to and to refine this vision in our work together. Just in case you haven't seen enough of it lately, you'll find it printed on the insert in your bulletin.

But we certainly know the hard truths of opposition and obstacles to the outworking of that vision and that brings us to the second half of our passage for the morning. Paul says that in order to keep him from being "too elated," he was given "a thorn in the flesh." Unlike the consensus that Paul is describing his own life in the first part of chapter 12, there is no agreement, historically or otherwise, about what this thorn in the flesh entailed. Scholars have variously hypothesized conditions of the flesh (epilepsy, lameness or just the fact that Paul may have been ugly) and conditions of the spirit (depression or a bipolar condition are popular choices). They have guessed that the Lord may have blessed him with a wife and that the Devil may have cursed him with a mother-in-law. Conversely and especially in the last century, they have speculated that Paul may have been gay. There is absolutely no way to know and I suspect that some of these scholars have ascribed to Paul what they most fear themselves.

I've described to you all before and quite recently my training as an actor in setting an overall objective for a character in a play and then the moment-to-moment objectives that flow from that "super-objective" or "spine." Part of that process is also recognizing obstacles in the path of a character's objectives. Frankly, with very few exceptions, a character who doesn't have obstacles to overcome isn't very interesting, dramatically speaking. Two exceptions might be characters like "Chorus" or "Messenger" in Jean Anouilh's adaptation of "Antigone," roles undertaken by myself and my roommate John McConnell in a Rice Players production in 1980. My role as Chorus was to observe the action and comment upon it to the audience. John's was to come onstage and deliver important news to the characters and depart. Only Anouilh's brilliant writing made these characters interesting. But where would the drama of Hamlet be if the Prince of Denmark didn't doubt his own sanity and efficacy of action in solving the death of his father and avenging it? Where would the comedy be in "The Taming of the Shrew" if Kate simply acquiesced to her marriage to Petruchio? To put it in more contemporary terms, would we remember Tim Burton's "Batman" or Christopher Nolan's "The Dark Knight" if their respective Bruce Waynes, portrayed by Michael Keaton in the first and Christian Bale in the second, had not been opposed by such effective Jokers as Jack Nicholson and, latterly, Heath Ledger? And who can forget the comedy of "I Love Lucy," when Lucy Ricardo was matched against, not a human opponent, but an over-speeded chocolate packaging line?

And although we might like to experience it from time to time, what would our own lives really be without obstacles? We learn and grow as people when we have to overcome hard tests, challenges, barriers. There's nothing quite like the feeling of satisfaction at the end of a long but successful day or the ability to look back at a crisis and say, "yes, with the grace of God, we got through that and we're better as a result;" better people, a better team, a better company, a better couple, a better church. Would the final success of Shepherd's Garden have been as satisfying and instructive had we not faced so much opposition? It's undoubtedly true that the year's delay we experienced because of that opposition gave us a better building. Because of the completion

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of major reconstruction on the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina, prices of construction materials went down and due to the onset of our national recession, labor prices came down. Our partners at ABHOW, Environmental Works, and Walsh Construction were able to restore several amenities to the budget we'd previously had to cut.

And what about challenges we can't overcome? What about the thorns in our flesh that we pray for God to remove only to receive a negative answer? There is, of course, the philosophy of the noted atheist, Friedrich Nietzsche: "What does not kill me, makes me stronger." This rather startling supposition is almost a confession of faith! Ernest Hemingway put it this way: "Life breaks all of us, but some of us are strong in the broken places." I suppose I have no real quarrel with that outlook, although I think it works better when one has a sustaining faith in God. And sometimes, I think that the best strength we find in having been beaten or damaged by life or by the action of others is the strength of compassion.

Let's return to Paul. Ultimately, I think the importance of the "thorn" is as Paul describes and as Australian scholar William Loader remarks: "The 'thorn' keeps him in touch with his fallibility as a human being. It keeps him from thinking he can succeed in building his own personal Tower of Babel to achieve and sustain his worth." If we are "too elated," if we are out of touch with our own fallibility, it can be hard to maintain compassion, love, for those we see as broken. The prophet Micah, in one of my favorite verses of the Bible, reminds us that what Yahweh requires of us is not only a commitment to justice but also to mercy and to spiritual humility: "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God." Our weaknesses can lead us to be more forgiving, more understanding of others. I think of the premature death of my mother and how poorly I handled grief as a teenager. It was a dreadful experience and I would not wish it on anyone. Nor would I claim that God "caused" it to teach me something I need to know. But I can see the hand of God shaping my reaction over time so that I learned to have compassion and understanding for those who've suffered loss. I think of my own dubious behavior in the years immediately following that loss and the poor choices I made. Did God lead me into those choices? Of course not! But God has granted me the ability and the help of others to escape those bonds so that I can look with compassion on others who make bad choices and speak to them of our shared experience.

Online writers for the Northwest United Methodist Foundation make a succinct and practical breakdown of the matter: "When we claim our weaknesses, many things can happen: (1) we can learn to identify and seek healing for our own places of brokenness before (and while) we attempt to do so with others; (2) we may be better able to enter into relationship with those who experience weakness and brokenness – knowing that their weaknesses are shared by both ourselves and Christ; (3) we might get beyond the notion that we somehow can live without grace; (4) as with Paul, we can help reveal to the world what grace – independent from human ingenuity and strength – can do; and (5) we can touch those places in our lives and in the world in which God is most actively bringing about the work of healing." Rev. Gene Beerens gives the idea an even tighter focus: "Our journey into weakness is absolutely essential for us to minister [with] the poor and to discern the true meaning and significance of the good news in our contemporary historical context." In order to truly be servants of our gracious God, we must learn to sometimes embrace and not simply struggle against our weakness. Then God, in God's grace, can set us free.

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This is why we started our time together today with the old hymn that uses language that has rather fallen out of favor: “Come, ye sinners, poor and needy, weak and wounded, sick and sore.” This is why we repeated together the ancient prayer, “Have mercy upon us, O Yahweh, have mercy upon us!” We are God’s frail children of dust and feeble as frail. We do need the guidance, protection, nurturing of Great Jehovah. We need to remember, again in the words of the “Preaching Peace” commentary, that “Just as God was most fully active in the cross of Christ, reconciling the world to God’s self, so also it is in the cross of our lives that God does God’s best work... for it is in darkness that light is most fully revealed, where God’s grace is sufficient for our every need, where we become open-handed and utterly dependent on the goodness of God, trusting in God to bring about good from evil, grace in sin and life from death.”

I have one last quotation for you this morning. Sometimes I give into the temptation to “wrap myself in quotations - as a beggar would enfold himself in the purple of Emperors.” Sorry, that was a quote too, from Rudyard Kipling. But the one that is germane is this from the 14th century Persian poet, Hafiz, on what God can do with us in our weakness: “I am a hole in a flute that Christ’s breath moves through – listen to this music.” May God, the all-merciful, grant us delivery from our weaknesses but not before Christ has played the music of redemption through the holes in our lives. Amen.