



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for the Third Sunday after Trinity

**1 St. Peter 5:5b-11 &
St. Luke 15:1-10**

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As we read in our Old Testament lesson this morning, the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed:

Thus says the LORD: “The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the LORD appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. (Jeremiah 31:2-3)

Jeremiah gave this word of encouragement by reminding the Jewish people of their past. Their ancestors were rescued from the sword and torment of Pharaoh, and by God’s guidance found their way into the wilderness of Sinai, where he met them at the mountain, gave them the Law, and made them his people. God saved his chosen people from suffering and showed them grace, promising them that he was their God and they were his people. It’s the great event of redemption history that backs up the words of assurance spoken through the prophet saying, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.” And yet these words of loving encouragement—words of God assuring his people that he has been, is now, and always will be faithful to his people—were spoken by Jeremiah, whom we know as the “weeping prophet.” These words were written to a downtrodden and defeated people living in a wasteland that had once been the kingdom of Judah—the great kingdom built by David and brought to worldwide preeminence by Solomon.

The kingdom of God’s chosen people had fallen to Babylon, and the policy of the Babylonian king was to consolidate his empire by destroying a conquered nation and exiling her people. Relocating them in a land foreign to them so that others could

be settled in that country, rebuilding it, and making it their own. He had learned how to destroy cultural and national identity, and that became the foundation of the Babylonian Empire’s stability and greatness. The people of Judah had been taken away—the royal family, the court, the merchant and entrepreneurial class, the artisans, and the scholars had been exiled to Babylon, and all that remained were the poorest of the poor, picking through the rubble that had once been Jerusalem as they looked for shelter and some meagre scraps of food to keep themselves alive. Jeremiah wrote his words of encouragement as he saw that destruction. He draws on the words used by Amos: “Fallen is the virgin Israel.” Israel’s slavery in Egypt had been bad, but at least they had maintained their identity as God’s people, but this captivity under the Babylonian king was worse, because the people no doubt saw themselves losing not only their promised land, but their identity too. It had *never* been this bad for God’s people. And yet Jeremiah stepped into the despair and proclaimed the love of God for his people. He preached to them the loving and gracious message of God—that in his providence he had seen fit to bring them low, but only so that he could bring them up to greater heights than they had ever known:

For thus says the LORD: “Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, ‘The LORD has saved his people, the remnant of Israel.’ Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her who is in travail, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my first-born. (Jeremiah 31:7-9)

Today we see the fulfilment of that prophecy in the person of Jesus in our Gospel lesson, as St. Luke shows us the Messiah preaching Good News to those downtrodden by sin and as he presents himself as the Good Shepherd gathering in his wayward and lost sheep. The problem is that most of us won’t listen to him, won’t follow him, won’t even

acknowledge our need for him, because we’re too proud to admit that we need a Saviour.

It is passages like our Old Testament lesson that remind us that when God’s people think too highly of themselves and rely too little on him, he will take away his blessing and put them in a desperate *physical* state as a way to underscore their desperate *spiritual* state. It is only when we truly understand where we stand before a holy, righteous, and just God as sinners that we can appreciate the love, mercy, and grace that he has shown us in giving up his Son to make the payment for our unrighteousness. It is only in understanding the just wrath from which we have been saved, that we can understand the full measure of grace we have been given. And it is only when we understand the grace that we have been given that we can effectively be the Church—the Body of Christ and people of God—in bearing witness to the rest of the World of the power of God and the immeasurable sweetness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

St. Peter reminds us of all this in his first epistle which we read earlier:

Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time he may exalt you. Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:5b-7)

The apostle quotes from Proverbs 3:34: “Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor.” It was pride that got Adam and Eve into trouble and it’s pride that still gets us into trouble today. Pride hurts our witness as individuals, but it also hurts the ministry of the Church collectively. The gateway to God’s grace is humility, and taking up the sin of pride is to turn our backs on the grace of God. If you look back to Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount and his description of Christian character in the Beatitudes, you’ll remember that he starts by telling us that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are poor in spirit—to those who know they are spiritually dead. He then goes on to describe the Christian as one who mourns for his sins and who is meek in his character. The Christian is one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness.

You see, we can never—we *will* never—turn to the righteousness of Christ if we are not first humble. The proud man has no need of a saviour, because as he sees it he's not so bad off and can fix any problems he's got all on his own. But the humble man knows his own sinfulness and knows his inability to redeem himself. He knows that if he is to enter God's holy presence it can only be to beg for mercy. And so that person, when he finds God's grace through the sacrifice that Jesus made for him, can do nothing but continue in his humility—continuing to mourn his unrighteousness, treating others as better than himself (because he knows that anything good he has is Christ's, not his own), and he hungers and thirsts first for the righteous covering of the shed blood of Jesus which makes him acceptable to God. But it doesn't stop there, because he also seeks for the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in his life so that he can gradually grow to be more like his redeemer and put away the unrighteousness that drives away our holy God.

And so here St. Peter gives us a warning that God gives his people throughout Scripture: clothe yourselves with humility. We are not to seek to exalt ourselves, but to wait for God to lift us up. Look at the example of Jacob. He spent his whole life trying to exalt himself—even his name means "supplanter." He was born holding onto Esau's, his twin brother's, foot as if even at birth he was trying desperately to make his claim on being the firstborn. He lied, and cheated, and stole to get ahead in life, always wanting to get on top of the situation he was in, to have the better hand. He was the man God had chosen to be the father of his chosen people, but before he could use him he had to be humbled. And so we see God meeting Jacob not in the comfort of his parents affluent home in Palestine, but on the wilderness road as he was fleeing from the murderous rage of his brother. God came to him and made a promise to exalt him, but Jacob wasn't ready yet. He took God's promise and went on with his life in the same old way, looking to exalt himself by his own hand. Again Jacob got himself into trouble, and again God met him in the wilderness while he was on the run. This became the pattern of Jacob's life: every time he tried to exalt himself, God brought him low and then came to him with his

promise – and as Jacob failed to grasp the divine message, each time God brought him lower and lower. Finally, at rock bottom, Jacob finally learned the lesson that God was trying to teach him. He finally learned that God will exalt those who humbly turn to him for life. Jacob ended his days in prosperity in Egypt, living there at the invitation and on the royal hospitality of Pharaoh—but not until God had taught him the necessity of humility.

God also brought low the children of Jacob. In his providence he allowed the Israelites to become slaves to the Egyptians. In Exodus we read about their plight and the abuse and oppression they suffered at the hands of the Egyptians. But God allowed them to be brought low so that he could lead them out and show his gracious love to them in the wilderness and make them his bride. Without being brought low, they would never have appreciated their need for a redeemer. The story of redemption as we see it played out in the pages of Scripture teaches us that men and women only come to God when they understand that they can't save themselves.

Most of us know people who found Christ only after hitting rock bottom. And we want to ask why God has to bring people so low—allowing them to lose their jobs, their homes, even their families. Why couldn't God simply show them their own sinfulness and their need for a redeemer? It goes back to Jesus' words in Matthew 9:5, "For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk?'" The people around Jesus considered it blasphemy when he proclaimed the forgiveness of sins—that could only be found by going to the priests at the Temple to offer an atoning sacrifice—only God could forgive sins. Anyone can claim to have forgiven sins and give a false assurance of pardon, but only God can make good on that claim. So Jesus did something that only God can do: he healed a lame man's physical ailment to demonstrate that he had the power to forgive his sins.

Jesus still does that very same thing. We hear the message over and over and over that Jesus forgives us. Maybe we even pick up a Bible and read it there. But we don't believe it until God takes away everything and leaves us not just

spiritually empty, but physically empty too. At that point we have to put away our pride—because we've got nothing left to be proud of—and as we see God lifting us up both spiritually and physically we have the assurance that he'll make good on his promises to us.

In the Gospel today we heard Jesus parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin:

The shepherd notices that one of his hundred sheep is missing from the flock, and so he heads off into the night—knowing full well that he could run into a bear or a lion in the dark—to track down that one lost sheep so that he can then carry it back on his shoulders rejoicing. The poor woman who lost a small coin searches everywhere for it, looking under the furniture with a lamp and desperately sweeping the floor in the hope that it will turn up, and when she finds it she rejoices.

The third parable in the series the familiar story of the prodigal son in which the father waits daily at the end of the road anxiously waiting for the return of his son—the son who had wronged him and squandered his inheritance partying in a foreign city—but awaiting his return nonetheless, so that he could lovingly embrace him and welcome him back to restored fellowship in his family, not just as one of his hired hands, held at a distance because of the wrong he had done, but truly as his own son.

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, and so is it any wonder that he told those three parables to answer the accusation of the Pharisees: "This man receives sinners and eats with them." We can take a lesson from our Gospel as we see that Jesus went not to the self-righteous Pharisees, smug in the false assurance that their good works would earn them a place in Heaven; Jesus went to the lowest of the low, to the people who knew they were sinners – they were the ones ready to hear his message of hope and salvation, knowing that they could never please God on their own. And Jesus went to them earnestly, just as the shepherd went into the dangers of the night looking for his lost sheep, just as the old widow turned her house upside-down looking for the lost coin, and just as that father looked longingly down the road, awaiting the return of his lost son.

Contrary to the world's way of thinking, our assurance lies not in what we do, but in the fact that we can do nothing good of ourselves. The world is like the Pharisees, finding a false assurance in its own flawed works, but the Christian finds his assurance in the perfect work of Christ. True assurance belonged to the "tax collectors and sinners" scorned by the Pharisees, because in knowing their own nothingness they were ready to grasp the lifeline of grace extended by the Saviour. I'm reminded here of God's promise made through St. Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). It is God's strength that we rely on, not our own. It's by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that the Christian lives his life and overcomes the world, the flesh, and the devil. But we can only find that assurance when we are humble enough—when we are poor in spirit—and ready to give ourselves over to the grace of God. And so St. Peter continues on in our Epistle saying,

Be sober-minded, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, and strengthen and establish you. To him be the dominion for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 5:8-11)

Sometimes we feel overwhelmed as we live the Christian life. I'm reminded of Martin Luther who one time was so conscious of Satan's presence opposing his work that he threw his bottle of ink at the place where he felt that presence—to this day you can see the ink spatter on the wall. But God reminds us here that what we're experiencing is nothing more than what our brothers and sisters in faith around the world and throughout history have experienced—those saints who overcame by the Spirit's power and are now with the Lord in Glory. They serve as reminders to us that the God of all grace will see us through this present suffering and has assured us not only of his presence here, but also of eternal glory.

We live today much like those poor peasants did in Jeremiah's time, picking through the rubble of Jerusalem, looking for shelter, a bit of food, and wondering when the next foreign attack might come to destroy what little we have left. Do the trials and tribulations you face make you feel like that? But we have hope. Just as God promised the Israelites that he would restore their joy, he promises that in his timing he will call us to eternal glory, and that through Christ we will be restored, established, and strengthened.

We have confidence in God's grace, because that promise of grace is founded on our justification—it's already a done deal. The God of grace has called each of us and has made us his justified and accepted children. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul writes, "We have obtained access by faith to this grace in which we stand" (Romans 5:2). The grace that God gave us in forgiving our sins is also a promise that he will continue to pour out his sustaining grace on us. He will work in us with his grace to perfect our Christlike character and give us the courage to stand up for the cause of the Gospel. He takes raw Christian recruits who are afraid to face the battle line and turns them into experienced veterans.

Our call now is to march on as people assured of the grace of God and the power of his Spirit, confronting the world head-on, not condemning it self-righteously as the Pharisees did, but by humbly sharing the grace of God with sinners as, following the example of Jesus—taking the Good News of salvation to the world as one beggar to another—as one who was lost, but is now found, as one who was blind, but now sees—taking Good News of new life in Jesus Christ to those still lost and to those still blind.

Please pray with me: Almighty God, we thank you for the amazing gift of grace that you have extended to each one of us through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Remind us, Lord, that our redemption is accomplished in him and not by our own works. Keep us humble, we pray, even if it means bringing us low as you did the Israelites, to bring us back to a knowledge of our own lowliness and your greatness. Remind us daily of our confidence in you, knowing that your promises never fail. And Lord, we ask

you, turn that security we find in your grace into a boldness to share your message of redemption with the world. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.