

Progressive Understanding

Sermon by Matthew Helmke

July 8, 2018

New Song Episcopal Church

(All lectionary passages are included below the sermon text.)

My thoughts on today's readings are all over the place.

To whom does God send prophets? Why?

Whom did Jesus serve? Why?

With whom was the psalmist identifying when he cried out, "Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy, for *WE* (emphasis mine) have had more than enough of contempt, too much of the scorn of the indolent rich, and of the derision of the proud."?

The Apostle Paul in today's reading talked about a "thorn in the flesh" that kept him from boasting or being too proud of the things he had accomplished.

What is this "third heaven" he mentions, yet does not explain further, here or anywhere else in his writings? (I have read about religious cosmology, and none of the various explanations are particularly satisfying to me.)

It feels to me as if today's readings are peppered with distractions while all touching on the topic of pride versus humility.

The people in Jesus's home town were amazed that this son of a carpenter could and would say and do the things they witnessed...and they followed that amazement up by:

- noting his humble upbringing
- enumerating his relatives that they all knew
- being offended that Jesus would dare step up and out of the humble role

in which they saw him.

Barbara Brown Taylor said, “Jesus was not killed by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix. Beware those who claim to know the mind of God and who are prepared to use force, if necessary, to make others conform. Beware those who cannot tell God’s will from their own. Temple police are always a bad sign. When chaplains start wearing guns and hanging out at the sheriff’s office, watch out. Someone is about to have no king but Caesar.”

Religious people frequently base their world view on deeply held beliefs. The thing is, not all of those beliefs come from the faith they claim. You can take passages out of context and use them to *prove* that you have every right to be angry, hateful, and judgmental, but you cannot take the faith as a whole and present valid logical arguments for these things.

I grew up in a faith tradition that values the concept of *holiness*. What that word means varied widely among adherents. To some, the term applied to external measures, to how well a person measured up against a list of dos and don’ts. To others, the main point was an internal struggle against selfishness and pride, with holiness being measured by how much love, joy, peace, and kindness were present in your interactions with the world (along with the rest of the things listed in Galatians 5 and called the *fruit of the Spirit*).

When the Lord speaks to Ezekiel and calls the people to whom he is sent “impudent and stubborn” and says that it is likely they will refuse to hear as they are rebellious, I wonder what was meant.

Was the tone angry and arrogant? I’ve heard the passage read that way, as if to say, “Those people will get what’s coming to them for not pursuing holiness the way I understand it.” Perhaps language has changed over millennia and time and translation

cannot help but change how the message is perceived.

Maybe the intended tone was soft and sad? I've heard the passage read that way, as if to day, "It is my hope that the message I am sending you to deliver will soften hearts and urge people to humble themselves to receive love, joy, peace, and so on."

To be honest, we are not given enough context in today's reading to know which way to read this. From personal experience, I think you could read the majority of Ezekiel and still wonder. The message was clear, "change or be destroyed in the following horrible ways," but the emotional context is not clear at all. Is it a loving warning, saying, "There is time to prevent this if..." or is it a angry diatribe saying, "You blew it, here is what is coming"?

I have a strong opinion about this. I think the Christian scriptures reveal God little by little, progressively over time. Perhaps it is that God has revealed more and more of his nature to us over time. Perhaps it is humanity's conceptual understanding of God which has grown deeper and more able to express what it has learned.

Is it a progressive revelation or a progressive comprehension? Whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows...

It seems clear, however, that concepts that were present, but which were not the primary focus early on, become more and more pronounced over time: humility, compassion, love, acceptance, forgiveness.

There still exists the idea of "shaking off the dust as a testimony against them" in Jesus's words, but there is also a clearer message of reconciliation, help, and hope. There is a message of trust in the sender that is softer, but with just as strong of a faith.

Ezekiel had to trust in a sender who comes across as direct and imperative. "I am sending you. Do this."

Paul talks about a sender who has a grace that is made perfect in Paul's

weaknesses, about a sender who actually makes Paul content in his weaknesses, because when Paul is weak, then Christ is strong.

Christ ordered his disciples to go and preach a message of repentance, but one accompanied by miraculous deeds that demonstrate a loving redemption of those in need.

Where are *we* today?

What message do *we* have for those crying out with the psalmist, “Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy, for we have had more than enough of contempt, Too much of the scorn of the indolent rich, and of the derision of the proud?” How are *we* presenting that message?

Amen.

Ezekiel 2:1-5

The Lord said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord GOD.” Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

Psalm 123

Ad te levavi oculos meos

1 To you I lift up my eyes, *

to you enthroned in the heavens.

2 As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, *

and the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,

3 So our eyes look to the LORD our God, *

until he show us his mercy.

4 Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy, *
for we have had more than enough of contempt,

5 Too much of the scorn of the indolent rich, *
and of the derision of the proud.

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Mark 6:1-13

Jesus came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.