

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 13, 2016
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:8-14
Luke 20:9-19

During this season of Lent, many of the Scripture lessons have shown us the God of the Exodus experience. In leading the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, our Old Testament lessons in particular have shown us a God who is faithful, and whose faithfulness leads Him to do “great things.”

The Psalm writer for today captures this with his joyful expression: “The LORD has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed.”

But the prophet Isaiah touches on an important point in our Old Testament lesson today. Isaiah says that, while God’s work in the past is amazing, it is *nothing compared to what God will do in the future.*

Our epistle lesson today looks toward a still greater Exodus, a new Exodus. That new and greater Exodus has come in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And Christ’s resurrection has *the power to lay hold of every one of us*, just as it has the Apostle Paul.

God is a God with a faithful past. But our God is also a God of the future, not merely the past. And as God’s people, we are to live awaiting that greater and final Exodus. Paul describes it for us: “Forgetting the past and looking forward to

what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven.”

That goal toward which Paul strives is the *last* new thing God promises – the resurrection of the dead. It is the great Exodus in which we all hope to share.

As our Lenten journey reminds us, though, reaching that goal and sharing in Christ’s resurrection only happens as we also share in Christ’s *sufferings*. Ultimately, our life as followers of Jesus is not centered on *information about* Christ. Our life is about *participation* in the life of Christ. And that means sharing in his sufferings.

Notice Paul’s language here. It is *participatory*. The language is *experiential*. It reflects a shared life, where Paul is somehow able to experience in his own life some of the things that marked Jesus’ life. The shape of Paul’s life begins to take on the shape of Jesus’ life, which was *cruciform*. It is a journey of death and resurrection. It is a journey marked by sacrificial love and by suffering. The journey doesn’t merely involve learning *about* Jesus’ life; it involves *participation* in Jesus’ life.

Paul is probably recalling the moments when he was shipwrecked and afraid for his life. Or perhaps he remembers when he was beaten and threatened for preaching the gospel. Perhaps he remembers when the churches he started had difficulty or wandered away from his guidance.

And I can assure you this morning that if you desire to be a follower of Jesus, you will walk the same road that Paul did, because following Jesus means *sharing* in Jesus' life, not merely learning about Jesus' life. There will be times when your life will seem less like a *growth* process and more like a *death* struggle. There will be times when you will be tried and refined in the fires of God's holy love.

Several years ago a woman made an appointment with a Silversmith so that she could watch him do his work. As she watched, the Silversmith held a piece of silver over the fire and began heating it.

The craftsman said to her, "In order to refine silver, you have to hold the silver precisely in the middle of the fire where the flames are hottest, so that all of the impurities can be burned away."

The woman was curious, so she asked: "Do you have to be present and sit with the silver in front of the fire the entire time you are refining it?"

His answer: "Yes, I do. It's important that I keep my eye on the silver the entire time it is in the fire. If the silver is left in the fire a moment too long, it will be destroyed."

The woman sat in silence, thinking. Then she asked: "So how do you know when the time is just right, when the silver is fully refined?"

The Silversmith smiled and said: “I always know the silver is fully refined *when I see my image in it.*”

For Paul, his relationship with Christ was the defining feature of his life. Everything he did, every goal he had, every success he enjoyed, was measured against his desire to *share* his life with Christ.

On this fifth Sunday in our Lenten journey, Paul’s life and experience can inspire us and challenge us at the same time. From Paul’s experience, take comfort in the fact that if you are facing challenges and difficulties in your life right now, those challenges reflect the fact that you are called to *share in Jesus’ life*, not just observe Jesus’ life from a distance.

As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, I would remind you that this table is not merely a place where you “remember” Jesus -- it is a place where you *encounter* him, through these tangible symbols of bread and wine.

So come with faith. Come seeking not merely to know *about* him, but to know him. Receive the grace he offers. Then rise up and go forth, with your eyes firmly on what lies ahead, and the work he is yet to do in your life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.