

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 6, 2015
Pentecost 15
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 35:1-7
Psalm 146
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:31-37

The words from Isaiah 35 which we've heard this morning were written to a people who were heartbroken and discouraged because they were in exile. They had been uprooted from their homes, their way of life, their familiar surroundings, and their routine. Their freedoms had been taken from them and they were under the control of others. They were discouraged, tired, weary, lonely, and afraid. In Isaiah's words, they suffered from weak hands and feeble knees.

If you pair this with our Gospel lesson, you see that Jesus encounters a man who is both blind and mute. This man lives in his own physical and emotional exile. He is living in the exile of physical darkness and emotional fear. He is a man bowed low in spirit.

One possible connecting link between these two passages is that the persons described in them appear to be *victims*. They appear to be victims of tragic circumstances largely beyond their control.

And us moderns can readily identify with that. We inevitably face times in our lives when *we* may feel like we are victims of circumstances beyond *our*

control. We feel like life has dealt us a terrible hand, with not a single good card to play. We find ourselves in situations where we are frustrated and discouraged. Our energy is low and our morale is even lower.

If you've ever found yourself in such a situation, I'd like to share a secret with you this morning that can literally change your life. A secret that has the power to transform you from being a *victim* to becoming a *victor*. A secret that, when practiced, can radically alter your circumstances and give you back the power and control you feel you may have lost in your life.

This secret is not new, but it is powerful. The writer of the 146th Psalm had discovered it, as well as countless other persons in the Scriptures.

What is this secret? Simply this: You move from being victimized to being victorious in life when ***you make a conscious and intentional choice to praise God and to live a life of gratitude.***

The power *to choose* our attitudes, responses, and thoughts is perhaps the most powerful gift which God has given to us. No one can take that power from us without our consent. It is the power that comes to us as the Holy Spirit dwells within us.

Do you remember Victor Frankl, who wrote about his horrific experience in the Nazi death camps during World War II? In his classic book, *Man's Search for*

Meaning, Frankl writes that his Nazi captors could (and did!) take everything from him and his fellow captors.

Everything, that is, but his ability to *choose* his thoughts and attitudes. Frankl's ability to choose his thoughts carefully -- and his decision to focus those thoughts in positive directions -- literally saved his life as many of his compatriots died.

The Psalmist had learned this lesson long before Victor Frankl did. He made a conscious choice that for the duration of his life he would live from a posture of praise and gratitude to God. This is reflected early in the Psalm, which could literally be translated as, "I am firmly committed or resolved to praise the Lord as long as I live." There is a strong intentionality to the Psalmist's words.

And if you read the rest of Psalm 146, you find that the Psalmist has good reasons for his decision.

One reason for praising God is that our praise is an expression of trust, and only God is fully trustworthy. The Psalmist writes, "don't put your trust in human beings, even if they happen to be influential and powerful human beings. There is no help in them."

Instead, we are encouraged to trust in God, who alone is worthy of our trust. Why? Well, for starters, God keeps his promises. Human beings cannot or do not always do so, even if they want to.

As a father and husband I cannot tell you how many times I have my family down because I did not follow through on a promise. But God is not like that. God keeps his word. God is faithful to his promises in your life.

And there are additional reasons why God is worthy of our praise and trust. God gives justice to the oppressed; God feeds the hungry; God frees prisoners; God provides healing of mind and body; and God lifts up those who are bowed down.

And so, the Psalmist writes, I will praise God as long as I have breath in my lungs.

The secret to taking back your life and being victorious rather than being a victim is to consciously choose to praise God and live your life from a posture of gratitude.

For when your focus is on your problems and difficulties, that's all you see.

But when you shift your thinking to a position of praise and gratitude, you unleash the creative power of the Holy Spirit in your life which moves you toward a focus on *solutions* instead of *problems*. Praise opens the door to the miraculous in your life, because you're changing your focus from what is happening to you to what you *think* about what is happening to you. Choosing to trust in God and to *praise* God lifts you into that realm where all things are possible.

That's why Isaiah can write to a very discouraged and troubled people and say, "Be strong, don't be afraid." It's as if Isaiah says, "Don't give in to fear, but choose to think differently." Choose to trust in God and to praise God.

That's why the Psalmist can say, "I will praise God as long as there is breath in my lungs."

That's why Job could say: "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. But I choose to praise him either way."

That's why Habakkuk, after experiencing a terrible loss, could say: "My crops may fail through lack of rain; the trees may dry up and not yield any fruit, and the grapevines may dry up and not yield any grapes. My herds may all die for lack of water and food. Everything may go up in smoke. But I have a choice to make. And I choose to praise God anyway."

And that's why the Apostle Paul could say: "I've lived through times when I didn't even have the bare necessities, and I've lived in times where I've had more than enough to get by. I've lived through shipwrecks, beatings, and imprisonments. Through it all, I choose to praise God because I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength."

In a few moments, we'll sing a hymn of praise in preparation for Holy Communion. It's called "O Bless the Lord, My Soul." It's a hymn that reveals the secret of the victorious life. That secret involves bringing into your consciousness

all that God has done in your life, and then allowing your soul to burst forth in praise and gratitude.

I encourage you to sing that hymn with intentionality this morning. Make it personal. Then come to the Table and receive what God has for you today.

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