

An Opportunity to Grow Deeper 2020
Isaiah 45:18-23, 25 Philippians 2:1-13

Isaiah 45:18-23, 25 (New Revised Standard Version)

For thus says the Lord, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): I am the Lord, and there is no other. I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, "Seek me in chaos." I the Lord speak the truth, I declare what is right. Assemble yourselves and come together, draw near, you survivors of the nations! They have no knowledge— those who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save. Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the Lord? There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is no one besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: "To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear." In the Lord all the offspring of Israel shall triumph and glory.

Philippians 2:1-13 (New Revised Standard Version)

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

**Isn't it a remarkable thing that we can't plan or really know
just when or how we are going to take a step closer to Christ?**

Yet in retrospect aren't there experiences, events & circumstances
from which we clearly move a bit closer to God & our faith deepens?

We never know just when an event or situation may grab us in a way
that shakes our confidence, our plans, comfort & self-assurance,
that forces us to reconsider the path we're traveling in life.

In fact, as I think about it,
most of the more spiritually mature Christians I've known,
have often walked with at least a slight limp, bruised spirit
bearing wounds & scars from troubles & losses they've endured.
It's been something that happened over time, experience & struggle
something beyond their initial conversation to faith in Christ,
a sharp refocusing toward a more meaningful walk of faith.

The text we read from Isaiah was addressed
to a people suffering and struggling as captives in Babylon.
Their world had been completely upset **all was in turmoil.**

The Babylonians claimed to have defeated and crushed Israel
because their gods were mightier than the God of Israel.

It was a very harsh and discouraging time for the Jewish people.
They had been defeated and scattered all over the world,
and they too were **questioning God, God's reign and power.**
Their world didn't look much like God was really in charge,
and there didn't seem to be much of a divine plan or purpose.

So in response, the prophet Isaiah begins by reassuring the people
that God created all that is for a definite purpose,
for humanity to live and enjoy fellowship with God.

But when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit
that turning aside from God produced chaos and death.

But the prophet assures the people, that despite human failure,
God's purpose cannot and will not be thwarted or defeated
for there are no other gods, there are no other options,
and the sovereignty of God will not be overthrown
just because humans choose to sin and rebel.

The victory of the Lord and his will, these are certain,
and eventually, in the end,
everybody is going to know it and bow before God. vs. 22-23, 25

Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn,
from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: "To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall
swear." In the Lord all the offspring of Israel shall triumph and glory.

When we face a difficult situation or overwhelming trouble,
when we mean to be faithful but are fearful or discouraged
when the deck is clearly stacked against us, we too might ask ...

- **where is God, and does my faith really make any difference?**

**What do we really believe about trusting God's love,
or God's power, God's presence and God's promises?**

And what will determine our future, our situation in life?,
will it be our circumstances or the plan and purpose of God?

**When pressed in life, what do we really believe about
God's power to accomplish in this world, in our situation?**

**It is idolatry to trust the power and securities of this world
more than we trust in the power and promises of the Lord our God.**

Our problem, we live in fear & doubt, overwhelmed by circumstances
because the limited god of our thinking
is a false or manufactured god far too small and too distant -
**not big enough to embrace and govern our world
and not close enough to touch our lives
in a powerful, personal and meaningful way.**

Such substitute gods **we've fashioned** are limited, narrow and tame,
do nothing surprising, mysterious, or outside science & reason
an explainable god, boxed-in, & captive to our preconceptions.

Today our world and our culture are unsteady, shaking and shifting,
& the foundations upon which we've built our lives are in turmoil ...

* **... and if God can only watch, powerless, or off in the distance,**
if we have to figure it out for ourselves, rescue ourselves,
then I really don't see that as much hope at all...

... which is why more than ever, I need to hear, **I need to believe,**

as the Apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:18-20

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the **love of Christ that surpasses knowledge**, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ... to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish **abundantly far more** than all we can ask **or imagine**.

The true God, the God Scripture is vast, beyond human explanation,
mysterious, powerful & wonderful far exceeding our imagination,
a God who loves us, even more than he disapproves of our sin.

**Such a God's great love leaves us breathless with astonishment,
and the breadth and length and height and depth of that love,
is infinitely beyond our understanding or comprehension.**

The Gospel describes a God whose love is endless **and who promises**
to fill us up when we are empty, to strengthen us when we are weak
and encourage us when we are fearful, struggling or anxious,
**and perhaps if we will allow and receive it, even bless and use us
to comfort, encourage, strengthen, sustain & bless someone else.**

So what do we believe, and do we really trust God's love?

One time a young woman was holding her baby girl on an airplane,
and telling her little child about Daddy eagerly waiting for them.
Unfortunately,
there was some turbulence, making the flight extremely rough,
which of course was upsetting and hard on the little child.

But the mother
had some fruit and a little Thermos with orange juice in it.

Every time the baby cried, the mother
fed her a little bit more orange juice and a little more fruit.

While this seemed like a good idea at the time, the turbulence
seemed to spread from around the plane to the baby's belly,
and pretty much all that had gone down came spewing back up.

Somehow in the process of coming up
it was considerably messier than going down ,
and seemed to have
increased in volume between the going down and the coming up,
so much so that not only the baby and the mother,
but so were most of the nearby passengers
covered with the contents of the baby's belly.

The baby was screaming. She looked awful, nasty and disgusting.
Even though they didn't cry, the mother and passengers
all looked, felt and smelled – pretty awful, too.

Once they landed and got off the plane, the baby was fine.
The rest of the passengers didn't recover quite so quickly,
also being covered as they were with pre-digested fruit.

A young man who had to be Daddy was waiting for the plane,
looking a bit anxious and holding a single flower,
and wearing a white jacket, white slacks, a white shirt...

... and when that clean Daddy all dressed in white saw his baby
with that sticky, smelly, nasty and disgusting stuff
all over her clothes, her face, hands and even her hair ---

- he ran to his family, **and without pause** picked up the baby,
and he hugged her and he kissed her and stroked her hair.

His love made him seemingly oblivious to the gross and nasty mess
as he held her close, repeating, "Daddy's baby has come home."
All the way to the luggage claim area, holding her close,
he never stopped kissing and welcoming his baby back home.

**So where did we ever get the idea that our Heavenly Father
would be any less loving than an eager young daddy
welcoming with a hug and a flower in his hand?**

Consider what Jesus did and endured for our sake,
though we were lost and covered with sin.

The passage we read from Paul's letter to the Philippians
describes such a God of limitless love, power and mercy,
and urges the people of God to respond to that grace. vs. 5-8

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in
human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

And from that example, Paul is urging the Philippian Christians
also to surrender their status, their rights and desires,
by trying to cooperate and get along for the benefit of all—
- all for the sake of discipleship and their mission,
by serving together to build-up the Kingdom of God.

To let God's grace, Spirit and promises reshape our lives
with mutual commitment to carry out our mission together.

That is an especially important and critical message to hear now –
- for right now not much feels very safe or secure or certain,
and it seems like normal & easy are still a very long way off.

**God loves us, and want us to know him and to live into that grace,
for then we can truly love the Lord with all our heart & strength
from which extravagant gratitude and love will surely flow...**

**... because all are precious, blessed and beloved,
and we all have something of value to contribute.**

So as Paul urged the Philippians, vs. 1-2, 5

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and
sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Let the same
mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Paul's point was, if you've experienced it, then act like it --
for if our faith is authentic and actually means something,
then in gratitude we do cooperate, we do unite in our faith,
with their focus on Jesus instead of their differences...

... yes, even political opinions and our beliefs about Covid---

- because if there is anything

**that will give us the strength, courage and support we need,
it will come from the faith & grace we share in Jesus Christ.**

By this,

Paul isn't saying that we all have to agree on everything,
or that we all must share the same ideas and opinions.
But as Christians, the most important truth in life
is that God loves us and through Jesus we are saved.

**That single and most critical truth unites all Christians,
and to follow Jesus as his disciples becomes our life's priority-
and not all the other stuff that can distract and divide us.**

When Paul writes about 'being saved', the form of the verb he uses
indicates an on-going process rather than just a one-time event.

The definition and meaning of the word he used includes,
to save, to cleanse, to heal, to rescue and to preserve,
a continuous action of 'God is still at work within us' ...
... far from ever being done, the work goes on for our whole lifetime.

Paul is describing this process as **becoming more Christ-like**,
enabling us to serve – so that we can please and glorify God.

It is earnestly seeking to discern what God wants us to perceive,
it is strength amid struggle & chaos, and the courage to ask
**how does God want me to view and respond to this situation?,
and what is it that I'm not seeing that God is trying to reveal?**

And how can even this problem, this struggle or circumstance
help me to draw nearer to my God and grow more like Christ?

Our Christian life of faith is meant to be a continuing process
of growth that happens during struggle, difficulty and trial,
as God's Spirit is at work in our lives and in our world,
toward God's own purpose, which is not necessarily
always for our own comfort, pleasure or delight.

Our goal, as Paul describes it, vs 5, 12-13

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;
for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you
both to will and to work for his good pleasure.