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In 2 Corinthians, Paul addressed a community he knew all too well. He loved them in spite of their petty competitiveness and pretensions to wisdom and holiness. When Paul wrote this passage, he had just finished a surprisingly brief description of his extraordinary experience of visions — what we would think of as mystical experiences.

In the next breath, he added that God kept him from being too complacent by sending an angel of Satan to give him a “thorn in the flesh.” People curious about the details of Paul’s life have speculated over and over about what he was talking about, but Paul didn’t get specific. If he had, readers in later centuries would have been less likely to get caught up in curiosity and have paid more attention to why Paul referred to this problem in the first place.

In talking about his weakness, whatever it was, Paul subtly taught about prayer and ministry. In regard to prayer he says, “I begged the Lord ... that it might leave me.” He tells us that when he begged Christ — three times being a way of saying “a whole lot” — the answer was “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So much for “Ask and you will receive!”

Paul is driving home the point that prayer opens us to God’s will. That leads us to conclude that genuine prayer is a path that always leads us beyond ourselves. When we think of it that way, we realize that prayer, as today’s psalm indicates so beautifully, is our lowly human way of addressing the God whose plans are so much bigger than ours that offering our desires is like our offering of bread and wine in the Eucharist — we bring what we have in order for it to be transformed. God dares us to believe that the raw ingredients of our lives contain the seeds of the kingdom of God.

That brings us to today’s Gospel story of Jesus’ unimpressive showing in his hometown. As had happened before, Jesus surprised the crowds with his teaching, but this time instead of addressing a crowd of strangers in Capernaum, he was doing the equivalent of preaching at a family reunion. His message about the nearness of the kingdom of God and the need to take on a new attitude got its most skeptical reception among his own kindred. People who had known him since his swaddling clothes days knew better than to have outsized expectations about anything that could come from Nazareth.

The crux of the problem was the “scandal of the incarnation,” the shocking possibility that God could reveal self through ordinary people and events, through what the First Epistle of John speaks of as “what we have seen with our eyes ... and touched with our hands.” The scandal of the Incarnation frightens us because God comes so close that we must respond directly and personally, without the protection of rituals and philosophies. The people in the synagogue at Nazareth heard

Jesus' message but they chose familiar limitations over divine possibilities. It was easy enough to have faith in the God who spoke long ago to Abraham and Moses, but such happenings in their own time and place went beyond the limits of credulity — Jesus' message did not fit inside their religious imagination.

Ultimately, the people of Nazareth were following the lead of their Israelite ancestors who begged Moses to tell God not to come too near lest they die of fright (Exodus 20:18-21). Jesus ended up amazed at their lack of faith, a condition that cut short his ability to perform mighty deeds among them. That rather astounding statement presents another dimension of the scandal of the incarnation: Mark is telling us that the all-powerful God can be limited by human disbelief.

Today's Scriptures together remind us that God's ways are not what we would expect, and that God offers us more than we are generally ready to accept. As Marty Haugen's hymn "Here in This Place" celebrates, it's "not in some heaven, light years away, but here in this place," that God chooses to meet us.

Much to everyone's discomfort, God sends prophets to their own people. Not only that, but God doesn't outfit the prophets with superpowers that command belief. The message of God's nearness comes packaged in what looks too familiar for us to take it seriously. Yet, that very familiarity frightens us because it demands that we recognize the incarnational potential of our own time and place. As Paul taught, God chooses to work with and through human weakness.

EZEKIEL 2:2-5

The first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel describes the prophet's initial vision of "the likeness of the glory of the Lord." Ezekiel's vision was literally dumbfounding in its immensity and intensity. This is the kind of experience that leads to what Scripture means by "fear of the Lord" which is not ordinary fright but rather an overwhelming realization of God's greatness. It's an experience of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a phrase that refers to the sense that God is always a mystery (*mysterium*), terrifying to the extent that we perceive God's overwhelming power (*tremendum*), and still so attractive as grace and mercy that we are instinctively drawn near (*fascinans*).

Having witnessed such an incredible sight, Ezekiel says, "I fell upon my face" — a thoroughly understandable response to such a vision. But while Ezekiel was hiding his eyes, God's spirit entered into him and set him on his feet. Ezekiel experienced the spirit of God as a source of energy. In this case, the spirit raised him to his feet. At other times, the spirit propelled, transported and/or energized him or the community. In today's reading, the force of the spirit raised Ezekiel from abject awe and trembling to a position from which he could hear and be commissioned.

The Lord's first explanation of Ezekiel's commission would cause any sensible person to turn and run. God was sending him to his own people, but God referred to them as "a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me" (2:3, NRSV). With that phrase, Ezekiel introduces the inevitable contradiction faced by prophets. They are called by God to speak to their own people, a people who have betrayed their God. If the prophets are faithful to the revelation they have received, they must stand in opposition to their own people.

By describing the people as a nation of rebels, God is pronouncing judgment on the people, saying that by their own actions they have excommunicated themselves, they have betrayed the status of being a chosen people. They have become indistinguishable in their values and allegiance from the nations that surround them. Then, just in case Ezekiel didn't understand the situation well enough, God went on to remind him that this people has been historically consistent in their rebellious nature, so much so that they have evolved to have unresponsive faces and unmovable hearts.

The key that unites this reading with today's Gospel is the last line: "Whether they heed or resist ... they shall know that a prophet has been among them." Small comfort! That simply promised that Ezekiel's mission might not bring about any change of behavior or attitude, but his success would come from being recognized as a prophet who spoke for God.

In the end, it appears that the only real comfort prophets can hope for is that whether or not their words seem to effect any change, when they speak in God's name, they are in solidarity with God. Rejected as they may be, they are still in good company.

PSALMS 123:1-2, 2, 3-4

“To you I lift up my eyes.” Ezekiel surely must have repeated something like this first line of Psalm 123 as he struggled to fulfill his vocation. How many times do we lift up our eyes — sometimes simply as a gesture of exasperation, perhaps as part of a genuine prayer for help or forbearance. In this case, the prayer expresses a plea for God’s help.

This prayer draws attention to what we do with our eyes. Eyes lifted toward heaven express hope and deference. Twice, the psalm uses the interesting image that we look to God as people look to the hands of those they serve. Perhaps not daring to look them in the eye, servants watch the hands of their master or mistress because they have learned how to read their master’s gestures. They have learned how hands can express as much as words and often convey the emotional tone of the words being spoken. The servant who looks to the master in this way is sensitive to the subtleties of signs, an ability cultivated through a long history of attentiveness. These opening lines of the psalm situate us emotionally and physically in relationship to the God to whom we have turned in the past, the God whom we wish to serve.

The psalm goes on to express our personal need for help. We don’t simply consider ourselves servants who will do their job and then be gone. Rather, like children who will not stop looking pleadingly at their parents, we say our eyes are “fixed” on the Lord which means that we are ready to learn from God as well as to receive comfort and help.

The psalm includes a plea for justice like that the prophets would have made. When the powers of evil and injustice rage against them, the faithful turn to God as their only refuge. People who pray like this believe that the only solution to their plight comes from divine love and mercy. When the arrogant and proud wield their control, the grace of God’s love is the only power that can change the situation, the only force that can redeem.

We should be forewarned. This prayer for mercy turns back on those who pray it as a call to conversion. If we ask for God’s help, we must be ready to act as God would act in our situation.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10

When Paul wrote this passage, he had just finished describing his qualifications for ministry including both the sufferings he had undergone for the Gospel and his extraordinary experience of visions — what we would think of as mystical experiences. Then, very mindful that one of the greatest weaknesses of the community to whom he is writing was competition for status, he explains that he has no pretext for elation or self-aggrandizement because he is afflicted by “a thorn in the flesh” that keeps him humble. Rather than tantalize his audience with the marvels he had experienced, Paul ultimately focused on his own weakness more than on anything else.

Great energy has gone into speculation about what Paul’s “thorn” might have been. It is possible that the community knew, but whether or not they did, Paul was not as concerned about what it was as with where it led him, what it did to and for him. Paul spoke of his problem as something that came through an angel of Satan to keep him humble. In that, he may have been identifying with Job whom Satan afflicted when God boasted of Job’s faithfulness. Whatever Paul’s problem might have been, his first interpretation of it was that it had been effective in keeping him from thinking too much of himself; he might be the recipient of divine visions, but he was far from in control. His thorn was enough to cut him down to size, and that was precisely the grace he wanted his readers to understand.

Paul wrote about both sides of his spiritual life in order to teach his community what the spiritual life was all about. Surely, he had received “an abundance of revelations,” but the very wording of that statement indicates that they were a gift of God: No one can earn or achieve a revelation — it is a gift. The other dimension of his spiritual experience, the thorn in his flesh, was also something outside his control. Paul describes it as something given to him like an angel of Satan to beat him. But in this, unlike his drawn-out discussion of what he had suffered for the Gospel (11:24-29), he makes the point that through it he learned how Christ’s grace could work in him. In the end, Paul is telling us that awareness of our unworthiness and weakness is an essential spiritual gift because only to the extent that we recognize our inability will we look for genuine grace and help. The more we think we can accomplish, the less we are open to Christ’s power which as we know from Ephesians 3:10 can do far more than we can ask or imagine.

MARK 6: 1-6

Today’s selection from Mark closes a section of the Gospel (3:7-6:6) and by recounting Jesus’ rejection by his own people, it ends with a failure even more dramatic than the plots the Pharisees and Herodians began to weave against him.

Up to this point in the Gospel, we have heard very little of Jesus' own teaching. Until he told the parable of the sower and the seed, Mark had only told us that Jesus responded to questions and critics and preached the nearness of the kingdom of God. His teaching took place much more through action than words and both his actions and his words demonstrated his unbridled freedom from anything that would constrain the coming of the kingdom of God.

Now Jesus appears in his own hometown. The synagogue in Nazareth is the second synagogue in which Mark tells us that Jesus preached — his first synagogue appearances were in Capernaum, mentioned in Chapters 1 and 3. Mark tells us that Jesus “astonished” the people of Nazareth. The word “astonish” implies that he aroused intense interest but not necessarily any fealty or even real respect. Rather than provoking hope, Jesus' familiar but challenging presence sparked a series of reservations and questions about him and what made him capable of saying and doing what he did.

It's notable that his neighbors didn't ask about the truth or goodness of what he did, but rather about where he got the knowledge, wisdom and power to do it all. The people of Nazareth knew his background and therefore they thought they knew his limits as well as they knew their own. Their problem was the scandal of the Incarnation. As long as God is far off and awesome, it's easy to believe and still avoid the responsibility to be godlike. But when God appears as one of us, the expectations for us to be more become too great. The sad truth seems to be that the very people of Nazareth were the first to question whether anything good could come from Nazareth (John 1:46). Their faith was crippled by their limited expectations. Jesus could work no mighty deeds among them.

The scandal of the incarnation is that God enters our history, speaks our language and can be constrained by our lack of faith. The most frightening and exciting truth about it is that God wants to work miracles in and through our own weakness.

Planning: 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

The readings this week and next call our attention to the role of the prophet. Prophecy is still commonly misunderstood. People think of it as foretelling the future through some kind of miraculous gift of knowledge from God.

Prophets do sometimes tell us what the future will bring, but it is usually a matter of looking at what is going on in the present and seeing the likely consequences. Think, for example, of all the scientists who have been warning us for several decades that our continued use of fossil fuels was going to wreak destruction on our world. They might not have called themselves prophets, but they could see the future on the basis of what was already happening to the carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere.

As today's readings remind us, the message of the prophet is often rejected. When God calls Ezekiel to the ministry of prophecy, he warns him, “And whether they heed or resist — for they are a rebellious house — they shall know that a prophet has been among them.” In today's Gospel, Jesus acknowledges the resistance, too: “A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house.”

The challenge for all of us who claim to seek God's will and follow Christ is to respond to the prophet with receptivity and a willingness to rethink our attitudes and behaviors. It is always hard, because few if any human beings welcome change, especially when the need for change is pointed out by someone else.

When Black Lives Matter or athletes kneeling challenge our conscious or unconscious racism, we instinctively become defensive. When #MeToo raises up the long-standing sexual improprieties in our society, many have trouble facing up to the truth. When those who advocate for the poor challenge our comfortable lifestyles, we find it hard to even consider that we may be living in a way that displeases God.

To make it even more difficult, sometimes the prophetic message comes from people who don't seem at all godlike. Some who oppose abortion may also support racism and discrimination against sexual or ethnic minorities. Does that make their message about life in the womb untrue? When terrorists issue manifestoes calling out our own reliance on war

and violence to achieve our ends, does the messenger invalidate the message? When someone we dislike challenges our behavior, can we hear what they are saying? If the word of truth does not come from our own political party, can we still hear it?

Before attempting to incorporate these thoughts into parish liturgies, planners might spend time considering how open each of us is to God's word, however it comes to our attention.

Prayers: 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Peg Ekerdt

Introduction

Today's readings invite us to reflect on our own ability to recognize the Lord Jesus and God's prophets in our midst. The voice of the prophet may come to us in words of a friend, a member of the faith community or even by someone that we may not particularly like. If we don't like what we hear, chances are we need to listen and seek the Spirit's presence in our resistance. We remember that God's message is often mitigated in human experience, and fear should not stop us from paying attention to the Spirit's whispers and nudges.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you were sent to lift us out of fear: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you transform weakness to strength: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, your words bring us truth and life: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray for the needs of this gathered community and for our world.

Minister For the church, for open hearts to hear the prophets in our midst, for courage to honor the voices who call us to care for the poor, to protect the earth, to practice God's justice ... we pray,

- For leaders of nations, especially our own; for steadfast pursuit of policies that treasure all of life — to protect the vulnerable, to ensure a just wage, to welcome the immigrant ... we pray,
- For all who are burdened by illness or temptation, or worries that are a thorn in the flesh — for willingness to live each day with trust in God's promise: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness," ... we pray,
- For those who live in fear; for those who find it difficult to rely on the Spirit's faithful presence and the mercy of God, ... we pray,
- For our leaders who set public policy and for those who work to negotiate for the common good, and with gratitude for the gift of democracy, ... we pray,

Presider God of insight and God of love, we humbly present our prayers to you, mindful of our failures to recognize your presence in our midst, but confident that your mercy is everlasting and abundant. Open our eyes, heal our hearts, transform our need with your grace. We ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son. Amen

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