

I was on the road this past week with Donna on one of her business trips. When she went off to do her work I was able to veg by the pool or stroll by the Ocean. Yep, there I was suffering' for Jesus near Vero Beach. ☺ In a moment of some guilt when I realized that I was having such a good time while my wife was working, I decided to check in with Jill and JoAnne here in the office. I tried to plug my laptop into the hotel outlet, but the light bulb in the overhead lamp wouldn't come on. So I started feeling around trying to determine where the electrical plug holes were, using my fingers that were still damp from the shower. Now, I might not be the brightest spark in the box,

but even I had a moment when I stood up straight and said, "Barnhill, this is NOT the best idea you've ever had." "This morning, Isaiah tells us that "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-on them light has shined. (Is.9:2) One of the reason's people avoid the dark is that it's really easy to hurt yourself, just like I was close to doing there in that dark hotel room. And we are also told constantly that God loves us more than we can comprehend. So why would a loving God put his people in a situation fraught with fear, like the faithless darkness of this broken world? Well, it seems to me that, just like I told the children last Sunday, there must be darkness before we can recognize light for what it is. God created both the night and the day. And so God's people must be willing to face situations of adversity and even pain if they are to perceive and appreciate His grace that swoops down to save us. Pain is part of the Christian witness, though some protagonists of the Prosperity Gospel would have you believe otherwise. These are the people who declare that if you will only be faithful enough, and pray enough, and give tax-deductable contributions to their causes, you will be blessed with wealth and prosperity in a life free of pain and want. Good people, please don't go down this path. I assure you that the extolers of the so called "Prosperity Gospel" end up in the ruins of this life and will have so much to answer for in the next one.

In verse 3 of Chapter 9, Isaiah declares, "They (the People of God) rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder." They (the People of God) rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest" For me, this first part of verse 9 indicates an important characteristics of God's mercy: There was some controversy stirred up recently in TV marketing circles by the giant agricultural firm Land O Lakes' use of the classic poem by Emilia Barr, which she wrote praising the American famer. The words that caught my ear when I heard them during the TV spot were these: "The farmer's trade is one of worth; He's partner with the sky and earth, He's partner with the sun and rain, And no man loses for his gain." I think this describes God's mercy too. It springs from nowhere – certainly not from anything **we've** done – and it causes no unrighteous loss to anyone. It's usually absolutely free. Oh, we might have to work for it for a while, but then isn't that why we're here?

If one of the characteristics of God's grace is that it is freely given and free of unrighteousness, the second part of this verse from Isaiah illustrates to me how God's grace is wholly undeserved. Isaiah says, "They (the People of God) exult as a people dividing plunder." Now, I realize that this might seem a little violent, even unjust to our modern ears, But not when you consider the context in which Isaiah is writing.

The concept of Victory in battle for the Children of Israel was that God had given their enemies into their hands The first account I could find of God's chosen people being involved in battle was all the way back in Genesis 14 when Abraham defeated the Kings near Sodom and Gamoroh and Melchizadech, the Priest King of Salemn attribtues the victory to God. (See Gen. 14) In Numbers Chapter 21 under Moses' leadership, we read that "The Lord listened to Israel's request, the Canaanites were defeated, and Israel completely destroyed them and their city." (See Num. 21:3)



The *Book of Joshua* is full to bursting with this model of God giving unmerited victory over Israel's enemies, just because they are His people. In Joshua 6, the walls of Jericho come tumbling down. In Chapter 8, Joshua conquers the Royal City of Ai. (See Joshua 8:1-2) In Chapter 10 God gives victory to his people over the 5 kings of the mighty Amorites (See Joshua 10:2) In 1st Samuel 17, the model of God given, meritless victory is contained in David's inexplicable victory over Goliath, followed by the same act of God giving the enemies of David into his hands when he fought against the Ammonites (See 1Chron.19), the Arameans, the Benjamites (See 2 Sam 2-4), the Jebusites (See 2 Sam 5:6-10), the Philistines, **again** (See 2 Sam 5:22-25 1 Chron 14:9-17), the Arameans **again** (See 1Chron 19-20), and the Amonites **again**(See 2 Sam 11-12), , In fact all the way up to the sin with Bathsheba (See 2 Sam.11-12), David is constantly victorious, but not because of his own abilities. So, when we read of the people of Israel rejoicing over the victorious gain of their struggles, it should be with a sense of their celebrating the wholly undeserved blessings of God, simply because he has made them His people, and chosen them as His people, and loved them as His people.

The same model of grace and mercy applies in our own lives. There's nothing you and I can ever do to be entitled to this blessing from God. But we are asked to rejoice, to rejoice, again I say rejoice in this grace and mercies from the almighty. Oh, and you understand the difference between God's grace and God's mercy don't you. God's grace comes when we receive from God what we do not deserve. God's mercy is when we don't receive from God what we do deserve. In my own twisting and turning pathway toward the Cross, I will never be able to tell you which of these two blessings from my God has been more critical to me. I am surely blessed and highly favored by His grace. But I am also fully aware of how different my life could have turned out, if my Lord were not a God quick to bless and slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (See Ps.103:8 Joel 2:13) I'm sure you've heard people say when talking of someone who is in a particular state of pain and suffering say, "There but for the grace of God, go I." Perhaps. But in my case, I have often thought, "There but for God's infinite mercy, go I."

As I was preparing the sermon for this Third Sunday in Epiphany, God laid it on my heart that I needed to remind you that our appointed Psalm for any given Sunday is actually the people's response to the Old Testament reading by the Lector. That's why we read the Psalm together. And so much of this "people's response" to the Word of God is from the pen of David. Here David says in recognizing God's blessings of him, "You speak in my heart and say, "Seek my face." "Your face, Lord, will I seek." (Ps. 27:11) This is a very old motive held dear by the Children of Israel. Early on, the first priestly blessing was prescribed by God in Numbers 6. *"The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, 'The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.' So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them."* (Num. 6:22-27-ESV) This blessing is the oldest existing piece of the early Hebrew language that we have¹ It's interesting that so early on, God would require this blessing to be made by his appointed representative for the people, and that it would involve seeing the face of God. It's apparent then that even in Israel's day, the welfare of God's people, if they are to have His blessing, they would need to actually see His face. Even before the Israelites cross the Jordan River, there as already manifest in their hearts this hunger to actually behold the face of God. And guess what? With the manger in the stable, we have! Because you and I live beyond the Cross, we have actually seen his face of grace and mercy, and truth, and love, and infinite salvation.

God said to his servant Moses of this blessing, *"So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them."* (Num6:27) So, for us to actually receive these full blessings of God we have to be named, to be identified as His people. And this morning, Paul is very specific to talk to the Corinthians about living up to their name. This is the second time in as many Sundays that we've run into this concept of the power in a name.

¹ See Footnote, ESV Study Bible, p. 275, vv.6:22-27.

I love the fact that Jesus gives Peter a new name, when that fisherman becomes a Disciple. Evidently, for God names are important. The Bible says that God calls us all by name (See Is.43:1; 2:17; Joel 2:32, Acts 2:31; Rom.10:13; Rev.2:17) For Jesus, the giving of a new name to Peter was important (See Jn.1:42) as it had been for Abram and Jacob. (See Gen.17:5; 32:28). But the power of that name is dependent on the honor of the family. And, in the family of God, we each of us either contribute to or detract from the name of “Christian,” by the deeds we do and the words we speak. Thus, as Max Lucado says in his new book *Because of Bethlehem*, although we Christians can never be sinless, surely we should sin less!

Finally, in the Gospel passage for today, we read that Jesus went to live in Capernaum specifically so that the prophecy about Him which we heard this morning from Isaiah 9:1 could be fulfilled: *“But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time, he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.”* (See Mt.4:14 quoting Is. 9:1-ESV) It has struck me particularly this year that we too participate in the fulfilling of prophecy. We are told that we participate with Jesus as Adopted children of God (Gal. 3:26; i:5) and we pray each Sunday that we may earnestly desire and work for the bringing of God’s Kingdom here on Earth as it is in Heaven. We are instructed in our Bibles to bear much fruit for God (Jn. 15:8) doing great things in the name of Jesus (See Jn.14:13-14). We are told that God’s children inspired by the faith that comes from the power of His Holy Spirit will move mountains (See Mt.21:21; Mk.11:23) So, I’ve begun to wonder, just how much of what you and I will do this year has already been planned out by God so that we may participate in the fulfillment of our own prophecy that we proclaim each and every Sunday. “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.”

JWB+ 1-19-17