



Liturgical Day: The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: September 20, 2009

Sermon Title: Trust – in God Alone

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

How many of you grew up in the Roman Catholic Church? Some of the best Lutherans are the ones we have stolen from the Catholic Church, you know. I guess that makes sense, because before Luther was kicked out of the church, we were Catholics too. Anyway, I'd guess that most of you who grew up Catholic had to learn, at some point, the four cardinal virtues. The word cardinal is related to the Latin word "cardo" and is literally translated as "hinge." In Catholic theology, all other virtues hinge around these four cardinal virtues. And you memorized them, right? They are:

Prudence
Temperance
Courage
Justice

I've been reading about these virtues in a book on Christian ethics, and the author makes the case that prudish behavior and the temperance movement have taken away both the breadth and the depth of these concepts for many Americans. But we can recover these constructs by realizing that the ethical life has to do with making prudent decisions, and being temperate about what we enjoy, and having courage when it is necessary, and living in a way that promotes justice.

I bring that up this morning, because I believe that each of these virtues comes into play as we respond to today's first lesson.

This past Wednesday, as we reflected on this text at our mid-week Bible study, we talked about how quickly Israel forgot the awesome power of God. They had just witnessed the ten plagues. They had escaped from 400 years of slavery. They had miraculously passed through the Red Sea, and turned to watch the entire army of Pharaoh be destroyed as the waters closed in on them. Israel had been first-hand witnesses to a series of events that were almost beyond belief. If you or I had been in the presence of any one of these experiences, it would have completely changed our lives. But not these people: eight verses after all this culminates in them being free and on their own, Israel forgets it all. Eight verses later, they realize that they are hungry. And even though they had just seen God do the unimaginable, they can't imagine who might possibly help them with their lack of food.

In the shadow of an unprecedented show of God's power, Ancient Israel is still unable to imagine how God could be their strength and hope.

That, of course, is why the Exodus lasted forty years. God could have had them travel from Egypt to the Promised Land in a matter of months, but they were not ready. They needed to learn how to trust God. And in the years of wandering in the wilderness, that is what God would teach them. They would learn to look to God instead of to themselves. And only when they learned this would God give them the land they wanted so dearly.

We see that in a general way in today's text. Israel becomes aware of being hungry. They complain to Moses and Aaron (accusing them that they only brought Israel out into the wilderness to make them starve to death). God responds by paying attention to their concern, by responding with compassion, and by taking care of them through an act of power: through providing the food they needed – manna

FIRST LESSON

JEREMIAH 11:18-20

OR

WISDOM OF SOLOMON

1:16-2:1, 12-22

PSALM

PSALM 54

SECOND LESSON

JAMES 3:13-4:3, 7-8A

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. MARK 9:30-37

SEMICONTINUOUS SERIES:

PROVERBS 31:10-31

PSALM 1

BIBLE IN 90 DAYS READING

EXODUS

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**O GOD, OUR TEACHER
AND GUIDE, YOU DRAW
US TO YOURSELF AND
WELCOME US AS
BELOVED CHILDREN.
HELP US TO LAY ASIDE
ALL ENVY AND SELFISH
AMBITION, THAT WE MAY
WALK IN YOUR WAYS OF
WISDOM AND
UNDERSTANDING AS
SERVANTS OF YOUR SON,
JESUS CHRIST, OUR
SAVIOR AND LORD.
AMEN.**

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God's work. Our hands.

from heaven, which showed up every morning for the entire length of the 40-year journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. That is the nature of our God: attentive, compassionate and powerful. And there is a message of hope in that for us.

There is no small number of us who are dealing with difficult realities these days. Some are faced with economic uncertainty, as jobs have become less secure and investments have become less valuable. Some of us face challenges in raising our children. Some of us face the difficulties of injury or illness. Some of us are grappling with tough end-of-life issues in our families. When the chips are down, and it feels as though life has dealt us a tough hand, we can sometimes forget and lose hope – just as Israel did on the far side of the Red Sea. In those times, today's text comes as a word of good news. Our God is attentive and compassionate and powerful. And our God wants to be the source of our hope. That doesn't mean all our difficulties will go away. It will still be hard to face these life-challenges. But what Ancient Israel would eventually learn, and what God wants us to know, is that even when our circumstances don't show much promise, there is reason to not give up, because that is when God becomes our hope. And that's the kind of hope that can overcome anything at all.

So the general message of today's text is one of hopefulness. That is good news – great news – for anyone who is dealing with adversity today.

But there is another message buried in this text that has intrigued me for a number of years. In verse 4, when God responds to the grumbling of the people, we are given a completely new and different way of looking at our prosperity. Israel is frightened. The desert is a hard place to live, and they are about to head out into it for an undetermined amount of time. God's response to them is simple: "Trust me." God says, "I will give you all the food you need, but I will give it to you as a test – a test to see whether or not you will trust me and me alone."

They immediately fail, of course. If you read the verses that follow today's text, you will learn that rather than just gathering enough for a day, some of the Israelites tried to store up a day or two's supply, just in case God doesn't come through. But when they woke up the morning, the manna they had stored had become rancid. This is just one of many tests Israel will face. Their wilderness journey will help them to reflect on what it means to trust in God, and in God alone.

Now let me give you a little warning here: I'm about to start meddling. You know the difference between preaching and meddling, don't you? There is a story about a Pastor who moved to a new church. Every Sunday after worship, this senior citizen would come out the door and thank him for preaching God's word. He gave a sermon on lying, and she said, "Pastor, thank you for bringing the word of God to us today." He gave a sermon on mistreating family members and she said, "Pastor, thank you for bringing the word of God to us today." He gave a sermon on breaking the command to keep Sabbath and she said, "Pastor, thank you for bringing the word of God to us today." He gave a sermon on hypocrisy in the church and she said, "Pastor, thank you for bringing the word of God to us today." But then he gave a sermon on the evils of drinking. She liked to have her martini every evening, so that day she came out of the church and said, "Pastor, you've been preaching the word of God to us for four weeks. But now you've gone to meddling."

Well, I'm going to meddle a bit here.

Because this text is not just a history lesson about something that happened to the people of Israel many years ago. This lesson is also an admonition to people like you and me that can cause us to look differently at everything we own. What if, as God says to Israel, all that we have has been given to us as a test. Not a test to see whether or not we'll go to heaven (that has already been taken care of by Christ), but a test to see whether or not we will trust God above all things. A test to see whether or not we will be faithful with what has been given to us. A test to see whether we will make use of our prosperity in a way that is pleasing to God. What if we thought of everything that is at our disposal as a test, to see whether we will store up what we have and depend on ourselves, or whether we will trust God in all things.

If that is what we learn from this text, then we'll need to circle back to the beginning of this sermon, and take stock of the four cardinal virtues that I've been reading about lately. To pass that test, we'll need to make

prudent decisions about our resources, and use them very thoughtfully. We'll need to be temperate in what we do – not over-indulging in anything, but creating a healthy balance in our lives. We'll need to be courageous, and make faithful decisions about what to do, even when it isn't easy. And we'll need to promote justice in all that we do – making sure that our lifestyle doesn't cause others to suffer.

And so these four cardinal virtues help us to approach the test God has placed before us – the test of prosperity – the test of thoughtfully and faithfully managing the resources that God has sent into our lives as a blessing. Our support of this congregation, our work on behalf of the poor and the hungry, our contributions to the work of those who struggle against injustice... each of these is a concrete way for us to place trust in our God ahead of anything else in our lives. That's what Ancient Israel learned as they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. That is what we will learn, as we live, mindful of these realities.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (September 20, 2009)

The Bible in 90 Days; English Text: ⁱ

^{16:2} The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³ The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." ⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷ and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?" ⁸ And Moses said, "When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him-what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord."

⁹ Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.' " ¹⁰ And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. ¹¹ The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ¹² "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.' " "

¹³ In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. " ⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson; English Text: ⁱⁱⁱ

^{9:30} They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." ³² But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. ³³ Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down,

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Worship/Lectionary.aspx>

ⁱⁱ Exodus 16:2-15, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Worship/Lectionary.aspx>

called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."³⁶ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."^{iv}

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

9:30 Κακείθεν ἐξελθόντες παρεπορεύοντο διὰ τῆς Γαλιλαίας, καὶ οὐκ θέλεν να τις γνοῖ·³¹ ἐδίδασκεν γὰρ τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ καὶ λεγεν αὐτοῖς τι ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου παραδίδοται εἰς χεῖρας ἀνθρώπων, καὶ ἀποκτενοῦσιν αὐτόν, καὶ ἀποκτανθεὶς μετὰ τρεῖς ἡμέρας ἀναστήσεται.³² οἱ δὲ ἠγνόουν τὸ ῥῆμα, καὶ ἐφοβοῦντο αὐτόν ἐπερωτῆσαι.³³ Καὶ ἦλθον εἰς Καφαρναοῦμ. Καὶ ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ γενόμενος ἐπηρώτα αὐτοῦ· τί ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ διελογίζεσθε;³⁴ οἱ δὲ ἐσιώπων· πρὸς ἀλλήλους γὰρ διελέχθησαν ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ τίς μείζων.³⁵ καὶ καθίσας ἐφώνησεν τοὺς δώδεκα καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· εε τις θέλει πρῶτος εἶναι, ἔσται πάντων σχατος καὶ πάντων διάκονος.³⁶ καὶ λαβὼν παιδίον στησεν αὐτὸ ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῶν καὶ ἐναγκαλισάμενος αὐτὸ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς·³⁷ ὅς ν ν τῶν τοιούτων παιδίων δέξεται ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι μου, ἐμὲ δέχεται· καὶ ς ν ἐμὲ δέχεται, οὐκ ἐμὲ δέχεται ἀλλὰ τὸν ἀποστείλαντα με.^v

^{iv} St. Mark 9:30-37, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

^v St. Mark 9:30-37, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).