

There are a small number of Gospel readings that come up every three years in our lectionary that make, I'm sure, every preacher in the country sigh and groan, and the one we had today is one of them. Nobody wants to talk about the unforgivable sin or speculate as to what that might be. There are two options for rectors when faced with this Gospel. The first is to invite one's colleague to speak that Sunday. I couldn't do that because I've already played that card last week in getting Rebecca to speak on Trinity Sunday, so I'm going to go with the second option, which is to ignore the Gospel reading entirely and talk about the epistle. Which works fine today, because it's a wonderful epistle, and there's a theme in there that I've wanted to be speaking about for some time. I'm going to delve into Paul's a wonderful book of 2 Corinthians and that golden passage that is set for today.

The first phrase that grabbed me in that epistle when I read it was this. St. Paul says, "So, we do not lose heart." Paul was writing this letter to the church in Corinth because he had some opponents there. That's why he was giving the church particular attention. These opponents, the super apostles as Paul labeled them, their big gripe was that St. Paul couldn't really be an effective leader because he was simply so frail and weak and suffered so much. If he was truly blessed by God, then he wouldn't have to endure these constant sufferings. That was the opposition for within the church. Of course, St. Paul also faced severe opposition from those outside the church. He was persecuted by the civic authorities too. St. Paul was persecuted, frail, faced opposition from within. He had many reasons to be discouraged, to lose heart, but he was adamant: "So, we do not lose heart."

We too might find ourselves discouraged as we slowly emerge from this pandemic. It's been such a challenging time for many of us. Here at St. James we've had a relatively good pandemic, if there is such a thing, in the sense that due to the generosity of our parishioners, our finances have remained stable. We've had a wonderful technical team who've been able to provide these excellent online services each week, and we made a very seamless switch to that. I'm very aware that many of my colleagues haven't been as fortunate during this time of pandemic. But yet, as we emerge from this pandemic, I'm finding this the most difficult time of all to negotiate. All of a sudden there are decisions to make. How quickly do we go back to normal? Do we want the new normal to be back as the same old

normal? We're all going at different paces, and we're all frayed, and tired, and drained.

It would be all too easy to be discouraged. What can we learn from St. Paul? How did he not lose heart, even under all the strain and stresses which he lived his life? Well, if St. Paul had a secret it's declared in that reading that we heard. He said, "We look not at what can be seen, but what cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal." In the words of the psalmists, St. Paul lifted his eyes. He looked beyond his immediate circumstances and savored the thought of that which is eternal. He looked beyond the material to the spiritual. The writer to the Hebrews says, "Faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we cannot see."

My favorite biblical illustration of hope comes from the Old Testament and the story of Noah. You'll know that Noah was cooped up for 40 days in his ark with all the animals and various members of his family. Eventually the rain stopped, and as he looked out from the ark, all he could see all around him was water, which wasn't surprising, as it had rained for 40 days solid. After a couple of days he let a dove go, and the dove brought back sprig of olive. That, to Noah, was a great encouragement. Because he knew then that there was something beyond all the water that he could see, that that dove had found an olive tree, and had brought back for Noah a sprig. He concentrated and focused on the sprig. He knew there was life beyond the waters that stretched out beyond before him.

I know something of this principle from the yoga class I try and go to each week. The teacher will sometimes say, "Well, stand on one leg." Well, they dress it up in fancy terms, but what they're basically saying is, "Stand on one leg." Now, left to my own devices, if I was just invited here and now to stand on one leg, I'd be very wobbly. But, what I've learned in yoga is you focus on a Drishti, something in the distance. And as you focus in the distance on your Drishti, it works. I can stand on one leg. Or, rather, I wobble less if I'm focusing in the distance. But that does work, to look beyond. St. Paul calls us to look beyond this material world, not to focus on just what's in front of us, all the struggles which might be assailing us.

This world is not all that there is. There is a spiritual world which grants us a perspective from which we can see and understand this world. In that great film The

Shawshank Redemption there's a scene where two inmates in a prison are having a conversation about hope. The old lad who's been in prison a long time says to the younger man, "Hope is a dangerous thing. Makes men go insane. It makes them think of life beyond these walls." He was suggesting to the younger prisoner that he give up hope and be content and make the most of prison life. But the young man wouldn't do that. He was prepared to keep hope alive, even though that meant that he would never be truly happy or content within the prison.

By lifting his eyes and looking beyond the material world to what is unseen, St. Paul is able to get a better perspective on this life. It gives him a context in which to understand his situation. It helps him bear his suffering and afflictions. He sees his life from the perspective of eternity so he can say, "This slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory." He's using a play on words there, to draw a contrast between the lightness, or the relative lightness, of his current suffering, when compared with the weight of eternity. Which means that St. Paul was less concerned than he might be when he saw himself wasting away. He says this, "So we do not lose heart, even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day." St. Paul is like all of us, in noticing that our outer nature is wasting away. It's inevitable. And yet, we go to such great lengths to resist it.

Someone told me this week how ironic it is that we spend the first part of our life abusing our health to make money, and then we spend the second part of our life using money to restore our health. But no matter how much we spend we will all die. I hope that doesn't come as too much of a shock to you. We live in such a death-denying culture that one does meet people sometimes who seem completely unaware of their own mortality. I read, this week, in the paper about some new diet that some scientist has concocted. The scientist that was pushing it, claimed that if we followed his rigorous diet which, as I say, consisted mainly of greens, we could add decades to our life. I thought, is that it? Is that the best he has to offer? That I eat like a rabbit and live to 120? No, thank you. That's not the kind of hope that I'm looking for.

Very striking, moving to California, how much of our resources we put into trying to prevent our outer nature from wasting away. We keep our doctors very

busy by asking them to do more and more procedures to keep us alive. The best they can ever do is to delay the inevitable. We'd be better off following St. Paul's lead and ensuring that our inner nature is being renewed, day by day. We can choose to invest in the spiritual realm and live our lives from the perspective of eternity.

We meet on Sundays, the day of resurrection, and St. Paul reminds us that "...the one who raised the Lord Jesus, will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us into his presence."

I want to add a story that John Nichols sent me. It's about a teenager, a very ill teenager, who was terminally ill and he was dying. He called the priest to see him for one last time. They went through various things that needed sorting out, the readings for the funeral, all that kind of thing.

Then the boy called him back and said, "There's just one more thing. One important thing." And the priest said, "Well, what's that?" The boy said, "Well, I want to be buried with a fork in my hand." The priest said, "That's a strange request. Why is that?" He said, "Well, I want people to know, I want it to be a symbol." He said, "Because I've enjoyed so many family meals, and one thing I've noticed is that after the main course is cleared away. If somebody just says, 'Keep your fork,' it's always a good sign because it means that something better is coming. Apple pie, or chocolatey velvet cake. Something like that. So I like it when someone says, 'Keep hold of your fork,' and I want that to be a reminder to people when I die, that I'm holding a fork because the best is yet to come."

If we live with that hope, if we live with our focus on things that we cannot see, then we, like that young man, like St. Paul, will be able to join in saying, "So, we do not lose hope."

Amen.