

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious loving God, each day we are astounded at the glory of your creation. You made each one of us to be faithful, loving members of the Body of Christ and gave us this incredible world to share in. You give us the gifts we need, the gifts that will guide us to fulfillment and salvation. Nevertheless, things are not always easy, God, as you well know. We labor with disagreement, with pain, with afflictions beyond our control, with self-imposed struggles, and with a world that does not care about the benefit of its neighbors. Send your Holy Spirit to change us, to empower us for the work ahead. Ease our troubled minds to receive the peace that can change the world. Hear all on our minds and hearts as we present our prayers to you, O Creator of us all.

Holy God, you give us so much that we cannot fathom. You give us the tools that help us be faithful disciples in this otherwise confusing and difficult world. You give us the resources; we, therefore, are called to respond. With the reason you have endowed to us, help us to draw out the wisdom of scripture, the wisdom for our time and for all time. Help us to use all the tools you have provided well, to foster goodness and care when it is much easier to do neither. We want to be faithful as you are faithful; we want to do as you would have us do, and we ask for your help along the way. We pray all these things in the name of the one who guides us to ultimate Truth, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one...

SERMON

(With back turned to the congregation) Today, I'm going to try something different. I believe God is calling me this day and this time to preach backwards. I will, so to speak, preach to the choir. I feel it deep in my heart that this is the way that I will be able to preach the good Gospel that will embolden your hearts. I can't see you, so I'm going to

assume that you are shaking your heads in agreement. Great, so, let's get started by looking at the scripture passages for today, for they hold a lot of wisdom. I assume that you have opened your bibles to the right spot and are ready to look at them again, right?

Sometimes, you see things that just doesn't make any sense. Why do we drive on a parkway and park in a driveway? Why do we call them a pair of pants when there's only one? Why do dentists talk to you while they work? Why is there Braille lettering on drive-up ATMs? Why is "abbreviated" such a long word? Why, when we are talking about time, do we say "AM" or "PM"? Why not just say "A" or "P" since the "M" should just be understood? That is a question one of my favorite NFL analysts, Dave Dameshek, often asks. We know right away when something makes sense and when something does not. One name is "common sense," but another name for the same thing is "reason." It makes no sense to stand up and preach with my back turned to you. It helps you to connect with me and me to connect with you when we can look each other in the eye. We need our reason to know that walking down a dark alley in the middle of the night isn't really a good idea. Our reason can also be informed by our experiences. After you have done it once, you realize that it's not the brightest idea to lick a frozen pole. You only have to do it once to realize what speed to walk on ice, or you might fall on your bottom. We rely on our reason and experience day after day without realizing it, especially when we are reading scripture. God gives us the means to interpret the timeless wisdom here and now, and we also have the gift of experiencing God's presence to show us how to love others in God's world.

This week, we return to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to complete the discussion. As we remember, the Quadrilateral are four sources that help us recognize how God is working in the world and how we can best connect with God. Two weeks ago, we

discussed parts one and two: Holy Scripture and Christian Tradition. For Wesley and for us, Holy Scripture is the first and primary tool to understand God and God's work in the world. In other words, Scripture is #1 in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, above all the others. Scripture, as Wesley indicated, contains all things needed for salvation. The other three parts illuminate the wisdom of scripture through the history of our Christian tradition, including all of the saints of the past who have guided us and nurtured us back to Christ. The last two pieces help us understand and live the Christian story as best as we can in light of scripture. Those are reason and experience. As our Book of Discipline indicates, the way we seek God and God's work in the world is "grounded in scripture, informed by Christian tradition, enlivened in experience, and tested by reason." Don't get me wrong: we can easily hear those two ideas and think that we can think and feel our way to God. No, we follow the wisdom of scripture first and foremost, and these two tools help us live out the wisdom from scripture. Let us look to our two scripture lessons and these two ideas as we understand how we best use reason looking at difficult passages like Psalm 137 and how we use our experience in light of Acts 9, the calling of the Apostle Paul.

Scripture indeed is an endless source of wisdom. We turn to many beloved passages when we need reassurance and care. We turn to Psalm 23 when we seek the presence of God. We turn to the beloved love chapter of 1 Corinthians 13 when we need a reminder of what love looks like in all its forms. We turn to specific spots where we know we can find exactly what we are looking for. However, the whole of scripture isn't just full of warm fuzzies that make us feel good. Scripture also demonstrates the darkness of humanity, and we often forget that when turning to the happier passages. There is a lot of darkness in our story as we have striven to follow our God, and we start today's discussion there. If you were

confused by the first scripture lesson, Psalm 137, then you were listening. This psalm is dark. This psalm is rough. This psalm is angry. This psalm asks for some very difficult things that I doubt any of us in good mind want to do. So...what do we do with it? We illuminate what it means with our reason. In the final analysis and put simply, what just plain makes sense? A lot here does not. As Wesley said, scripture contains the wisdom we need to live our lives and the wisdom of God's salvation. However, the bible must be interpreted; it cannot be simply read and assumed. That's why we have things like Bible Study and the sermon; we need to interpret scripture to get the wisdom to live well. When we don't interpret scripture, passages like Psalm 137 can be used to validate horrible acts.

Listen to how rough and stark this psalm sounds: "By the rivers of Babylon," it says, "we sat and wept while we remembered Zion." And it goes on to say, "Our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'" The psalm ends with one of the darkest statements of scripture, seeking revenge for all the wrongdoing: "O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us – he who sizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." It's a big statement. It's a scary statement. It's not something we like. But the bottom line is that this is something that is said in Holy Scripture, and because it is, we have to sit with it and we have to understand what it is telling us, and that doesn't come with a single reading.

If we do not interpret it well, it sounds like it advocates killing young children out of anger. Reasonably, we know in our hearts and in the grand scheme of scripture that this is just not right. If we utilize our reason and our discernment to understand what this psalm is really saying, then we get a greater glimpse of our God-given humanity and how to use it best for God's glory. So what is it saying? This psalm speaks of a community mourning for

the loss of its land. This psalm is a lament, a way of expressing deep, painful grief. It was written in the time of the exile, when the Babylonians took over the land of Judah and removed the people to Babylon. It's a way of trying to come to terms with this new and horrible situation they are now in. They were utterly conquered and destroyed, ripped away from the land God had promised to them, and so they were understandably confused, lost, and extremely angry. At the same time, the people were abused by their captors, the Babylonians, who mock them in their grief and struggle to understand what has happened. How does one usually respond when one is angry, mourning, and can find nothing but ridicule from those around them? They get angrier, of course. When we are deeply angry, as anyone would attest, we can easily say some things that are difficult and hurtful to others. We can say things that we never really meant, but nevertheless, we cannot take them back. This is one of those times, preserved in Holy Scripture. Out of anger and frustration, out of lament and grief, the people expressed the desire to hurt their captors.

This psalm helps us understand that even the characters in the Bible outside of Jesus are as flawed as us. They could make big mistakes, and they did. King David had another man killed so he could have his wife. Peter denied Jesus Christ three times. Many flat disobeyed God to God's face. They said things out of anger, maybe even rage, that wasn't appropriate but simply out of the anger of the moment. This is one of them. The timeless truth of this passage is that there is trial and pain, and anger does come. Anger can be misused greatly, but if we use it well, we do not diminish God's creation but glorify God.

Changing gears, let's say I want to learn to become a carpenter. What are my qualifications? Well, my grandfather was an amazing carpenter; he crafted so many beautiful things in his life including the cabinets in my childhood home that have stood the

tests of time. So, by that fact, I can pick up a hammer, some wood, and nails, and I should be able to make things to his quality right now. Sound accurate? Of course not. It takes more than pedigree to be a professional at something. It takes more than booksmarts, too. What it takes to be a top of the line professional is experience. I doubt any of us would disagree. We also need experience when it comes to the Christian life. We need to understand how God has worked in our lives personally and in the life of the world to faithfully follow that God. Think about it this way. How can we preach God's love if we haven't experienced God's love? It's like claiming to be a lawyer and know the law inside and out when you have met a lawyer once. Experience is a necessary part of any well-rounded life.

Offhand, one might think that experience, the fourth and final piece, can overrule the others. Quite the opposite. When we use our experience, we use it to confirm the wisdom of scripture, not to overrule it. Experience brings the wisdom of scripture to life in ways that change our lives. To get a biblical example, we turn to the book of Acts. This is the dramatic telling of the Christian persecutor Saul's transformation into the Apostle Paul, who might be the greatest Apostle and definitely most prolific writer in the history of scripture. This man had an experience on the road to Damascus. He was thrown off his horse by a blinding light and a voice. Only he could "see the light," literally and metaphorically. He was blinded for a while but led into the care of a disciple named Ananias, who cared for him in the midst of his newfound toil. Ananias placed hands on him and told him to receive the Holy Spirit. From there on, there was no more Saul the Persecutor; there was the Apostle Paul. For him, experience was a key component of change, of transformation. He came out of that experience humbled and better understood what the love of God in Jesus Christ meant. God knows that experience is one of our

greatest teachers, and God comes into our lives to teach us those lessons we need to hear. Paul needed it, and we often need it too. God has a way of bringing scripture's wisdom to life in our lives, whether that be a calm and steady voice or a strong slap in the head.

So there you have it: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience. The bottom line is that these pieces of the Quadrilateral are prescriptive. I'm not preaching something new or different that we have no idea how to use. Whether we realize it or not, we use the Quadrilateral, even though we may not have described it that way. Every day, we can turn to the scriptures and read them by ourselves or with others. When we celebrate the church holidays, whenever you open a Christian book by C.S. Lewis or Billy Graham, that is Christian Tradition at work. Whenever we turn to the scriptures and proclaim the word, we use reason to show how to best apply scripture's wisdom. Whenever we get together and chat, we often talk about how God has guided us. We use experience to understand how God is working in our lives and how God guides us. The important thing is when we use all these God-given gifts, we are best able to follow the calling of the Lord Jesus Christ.

God has given us so many gifts that we are called to use for God's service and the betterment of the world. We looked at scripture and tradition; we now have reason and experience. First of all, what just makes sense? We use reason to understand difficult passages like Psalm 137, for its message is not obvious. We also know that scripture must be experienced; we experience the love of Christ before we preach it. Experience brings scripture to life. It happened to Saul in Acts 9, which allowed him to become the Apostle Paul and write all those incredible letters we treasure. This is the well-rounded and full Christian life, and God works in each of these parts to bring us to maturity. We have these

wonderful gifts that we use everyday, whether we realize it or not, so let us consistently seek to use them for God's glory and the love of our neighbor! Amen and amen.