



(Season of Lent: February 25–April 11, 2009)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, March 1, 2009

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Lection – 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 7b) Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. (v. 8) Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, (v. 9) but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. (v. 10) Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The season of Lent is the forty days prior to Easter which serve as a time of preparation for Easter. In many contexts, there is a focus on repentance, prayer, and fasting as a way to true conversion, meaning “a turn” to Christ. This “turning” or conversion is supposed to prepare the person of faith for sharing in the death (Good Friday) and resurrection (Easter) of Christ. With this approach during Lent, it is also a season of spiritual renewal and reflection in which one realizes his or her weaknesses as a human being before God. During Lent, one recognizes one’s essential need for God. In other words, we say to God, like Smokie Norful said, “I need you now.”

Sometimes, one may hear of people giving up something during Lent as a spiritual exercise, such as eating certain kinds of food, watching television, or surfing the internet daily. I think it is crucial that black churches, rather than give up something, give something, do something, or say something that speaks to the sufficient grace of God which we sorely need and desire as Christians. In this penitential season, as we give ourselves to God, we receive so much more because of this revelation echoing through the hymns, prayers, sermons, and rituals of the Church—“My grace is sufficient for you.”

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

In the most recent presidential primaries and election, all of the candidates presented themselves as the best and strongest. None of them boasted of their weaknesses and shortcomings. All of them attempted to present a perfect picture of power, personal stability and reliability, professional capability, trustworthiness, and intellectual strength. Can we blame them for doing that? How many of us would vote for a so-called weak candidate? None of us would. We want to put the strongest person in political office to lead this country. We’d be scared to put in a weakling. If any one of the candidates created an ad about their own weaknesses and failures, I’m pretty sure that that wouldn’t help them win votes; it would probably cause them to lose the race. No one truly admires a weak person. That’s why we hear in the African American community many times, “Be strong brother. Be strong sister.” It’s as if weakness is wrong when, in fact, we are called to be weak and, in that human weakness, find divine strength.

My ten year-old niece, Christiana, who passed away right before Christmas in 2005, could only say “I am weak.” This little girl had a rare auto immune disease, juvenile dermatomyositis, a long name for a deadly disease which only three out of a million children get. There is no cure for it. One organ at a time stopped functioning. She said “I am weak.” She wrote in her journal, “I feel as weak as a newborn baby or animal.” She was an athlete, but her muscles deteriorated so much that she couldn’t shoot basketball hoops anymore. She became so weak that she couldn’t open jars and bottles or hang up towels in the bathroom or even take off her t-shirt. She was extremely weak, yet Christiana received strength during her weakness.

Here was a little girl in great suffering and pain. She could have easily become so narcissistic and consumed with her predicament that she forgot everyone else. But she didn’t. God filled her with enough strength and power that many times at the end of her journal entries she would pray for her Aunt Gail who was pregnant, her uncle JM who was in the hospital, or for “the little baby

next door in the hospital with the unknown liquid inside her body.” The power of Christ was reaching out to others through her weak body on the cross of her hospital bed. Christiana lived the Lenten spiritual paradox—that “whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Unlike many of us who grasp for prestige and power and are inclined to boast in our strengths, Paul boasts in his weaknesses—imprisonments, floggings, lashes, beatings with rods, being stoned, being shipwrecked, being in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from his own people, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, cold, and nakedness (2 Cor. 11:23-29). He does speak of “exceptional . . . visions and revelations of the Lord” which he receives in which a person is “caught up to a third heaven” and “up into Paradise” (vv. 1, 2, 4,7a), but he does not get caught up in this and remains grounded, and humbly says, “I will not boast, except of my weaknesses” (v. 5). He wants people to remember him for what he says and does even during rough moments, not for his visions.¹

Paul’s life is not a pie-in-the-sky, escape from this world, kind of life. He suffers on earth. He has to deal with his weaknesses, which in this passage are summed up in two words: a thorn. Paul tells the Corinthians, “to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, was sent to harass me.” We are not told what this thorn is, but we do know it is painful for Paul. He indeed suffers. Many people have speculated what this thorn might be: physical or mental illness, spiritual trials, persecution, opposition, or even being single; but we are not told what the exact nature is of this thorn. The “thorn” is not literally a thorn from a bush but is a metaphor for all of Paul’s suffering and weakness. It hurts so bad that he calls it a “messenger of Satan.” He is spiritually harassed because the thorn remains.

Paul believes he receives his thorn to keep him humble and weak, so he can’t take credit for his spiritual powers, those revelations. Three times he asks the Lord to remove his thorn, his suffering, his weakness, but God does not. Nowhere in the text do we hear of God making life easy for Paul, giving him great prosperity, health, and wealth.

Lent challenges us to embrace our weakness in the face of much suffering. Paul lives with the thorn, whether insults, hardships, persecutions, or calamities. Some thorns we experience aren’t self-created because who would knowingly choose to suffer like my niece? Who would knowingly choose to have blood transfusions, high blood pressure, and seizures as a ten year-old child? Who would knowingly choose to have their kidneys fail and go on dialysis? Who would knowingly put themselves at death’s doorway? That’s the way it is with thorns. Things happen. Life happens. Thorns happen as we walk along in the garden of life; yet, “in the garden alone” God is there, telling us that we are his own.

Paul says, “I am weak,” and he is left to wade, not in the water but in his weakness. But, he does not drown in these waters because of a divine promise. “God knows;” at least that’s what Paul believes (vv. 2-3). When Paul has the vision of Paradise, he knows that he doesn’t know everything, but God does; so he says, “God knows.” God knows that Paul has a thorn in his

flesh, too. God knows, and God wants us to know that God knows everything we're going through, too.

Though God does not remove Paul's thorn, God assures him by saying "my grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness." God tells Paul that strength will come right in the midst of weakness. God tells Paul that he will endure. God tells Paul, "My grace will lead you home." God wants Paul to realize that divine power is perfected or completed in weakness. Literally, God's power accomplishes its goal when we are weak. God is at God's best when we are weak. Paul receives strength in his weak moments of desperation.

No one else can take the credit for this but God. And that is Paul's major point in this passage. That's why he says, "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." Paul receives divine empowerment because he claims his human frailty. Our glamorous culture grasps for fame, prestige, and power as we climb up the ladder of success, but Christianity embraces weakness. Paul realizes that God works with us when we are weak and needy, or, as Walter Brueggemann says, "Where life is not rent [torn apart or wrecked], the God of Israel is not inclined to be present."² Paul discovers that God tabernacles in weakness.³ If we boast in our power, we deny God's power, but if we acknowledge our weakness, we will see God's wonder-working strength. "The more we recognize that we are weak and try to depend on God, the more we experience his power."⁴ Lent challenges us to claim our human weakness in the face of the cross because, by doing so, we will find divine strength in the power of Christ. God gives Paul strength when he is weak for "whenever [we are] weak, then [we are] strong."

Celebration

God's grace is sufficient for us. God's grace will see us through any hard time, even those that try our very souls. When you are weak, you don't have to give in to your pain and give up, because God's sufficient grace will strengthen you. The power of Christ dwells in you. I am weak, but thou art strong! With all of our thorns, there is a sweet smelling rose—the Rose of Sharon!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: Hear Paul appeal to the Lord to remove his thorn; hear God's response to Paul about grace;

Sights: The thorn in Paul's flesh; see some of Paul's hardships and calamities; and

Touch: Feel the thorn in the flesh, and feel the power of Christ dwelling within.

III. Sermonic Suggestions

- Utilize the image of thorns throughout the sermon; the thorns may represent bad news, in the earlier portion of the sermon, but in the end of the sermon the thorn discussed should be the crown of thorns placed on the head of Jesus Christ, which can lead you to Calvary and to resurrection—the good news.
- Also, Langston Hughes’ poem, Still Here, can be related to how Paul and we, despite our suffering and weaknesses and thorns, still survive and thrive by the grace of God. His poem says the following:

I been scarred and battered.
 My hopes the wind done scattered.
 Snow has froz me,
 Sun has baked me,
 Looks like between ‘em they done
 tried to make me
 Stop laughin’, stop lovin’, stop livin’ —
 But I don’t care!
 I’m still here!

Notes

1. Coulibaly, Issiaka. “2 Corinthians.” Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 Africa Scholars. Ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo. New York, NY: Zondervan, 2006. p. 1411.
2. Brueggemann, Walter. Israel’s Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1988. p. 129.
3. Marva J. Dawn speaks of God in this way in her book, Powers, Weakness, And the Tabernacling of God. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001.
4. Coulibaly, Issiaka. “2 Corinthians.” Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 Africa Scholars. p. 1411.