

Isaiah 55:8,9; Philippians 1:20b-21, 27-30; St. Matthew 20:15

Dear Friends in Christ,

The Office Hymn for this morning was “What God Ordains Is Always Good.” We’ve sung it many times over the years. We sing the words. We embrace them. Or...do we? You know, when life is moving along in a fairly okay sort of way we willingly sing the words. And then the bottom drops out, as the old cliché goes. And it does. It will. And, maybe, we would rather not sing some of the words.

How about these: “I take content What He has sent; His hand that sends me sadness Will turn my tears to gladness”? He “sends me sadness.” Are you ready for that? Or maybe you’re already in it. We’ve been there, haven’t we? How about these: “Now I may know Both joy and woe; Someday I shall see clearly That He has loved me dearly”? So, are you in some sort of woe crying out to see clearly? How about these words: “Though I the cup am drinking Which savors now of bitterness, I take it without shrinking”? Maybe you’re thinking, “Are you kidding? I want to run away and hide!” No wonder the contemporary crowd dismisses the old stuff as “boring.” And how about these words: “I fear no harm, For with His arm He shall embrace and shield me; So to my God I yield me”? I’ve got a funny feeling that “I fear no harm” are hard words for everyone here.

If you are a student of Scripture - if you truly study and embrace them - there are those moments in which we are each . . .

## LIKE A DEER CAUGHT IN THE HEADLIGHTS

### I. In Spite of Ourselves. (Is. 55:8,9)

That’s another one of those old clichés. It’s defined as “To be visibly startled and frozen with fear.” Well, let’s consider these words from our Old Testament text:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Is. 55:8,9)

Our Old Testament lesson is a hard lesson because we like to guide God in His thinking. We want Him to think the way we think! “If God would just do this or that? Why doesn’t God do...? When is God going to do...? I don’t understand why God doesn’t do...? Friend, it hits: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” We’ve got to listen to that. We can’t run through life ignoring it!

Do you know why we have such a difficult time with this? Sin, of course! After the Flood, God described humanity this way: “For the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” (Gen. 8:21b) And Jesus would later echo those words with, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.” (Matt. 15:19) And Paul further nailed it when he quoted the Psalms: “None is righteous no not one, no one understands; no one seeks God.” (Rom 3:10)

So here’s the point - and we know this!: As people whose sins have been paid for and covered by the suffering and death of Christ, who have been promised forgiveness and eternal life in Christ, we have received an unquestionably undeserved gift from God through Jesus. He owed and owes us nothing but unending wrath. Our business (and we know this!) - our life - in the first sense is to learn everything about this Great, Loving Triune God as revealed in Scripture and hold on to that and witness to it! That is our supreme business!

### II. It’s for Real! (Matt. 20:15)

But he replied to one of them, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose

to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" (Matt. 20:13-15)

Our Gospel lesson for this morning is the "Laborers in the Vineyard." You'll remember that it begins with "For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." Keep that in mind: "The kingdom of heaven is like."

You'll remember that the owner of the vineyard hired three groups of people at three separate times during the same day. The ones that worked the least amount of time received the same wages as the ones who had started early in the morning. And then came the complaint: "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." (Matt. 20:12) And the owner (we should say, God, Who owns every atom of the universe) responded: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" Again, keep that in mind when it comes to your life, its changes; its good and bad moments. ***Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?*** Connect the truth of that to this Word of God: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28)

### III. Headlights or Light?

And that brings us to the Epistle Lesson - 2 parts. First, Paul writes:

Yes, and I will rejoice (that is, Paul would rejoice in the imprisonment he was experiencing because of the Gospel), for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance... For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

I've had brothers and sisters say to me, "You know, that's all just fine, but we still have to live in this world." Listen: We live here as God's people in Christ, the Lord Jesus Who explicitly entered this world to secure our eternal life! Let's keep that straight. And let's keep this straight: Again, we are called to be witnesses to the Gospel and that comes with various degrees of rejection from this world. And I know there are people here who don't want to hear that. So, what are you going to do with Scripture?

And so, the second part:

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ... For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. (portion of vv. 27-30)

Such a setting as this may or may not happen to us. However, we cannot ignore the words of our Lord Jesus: "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matt. 5:11)

Americanized Christianity (Americanity) has mostly emphasized living a carefree, earthly life. The Scriptures put it quite differently - don't they? - which is why many do not want to study Scripture with any consistency. It's clear: "**to live is Christ, and to die is gain.**" That's Scripture, not a prosperity preacher's mantra.

Realistically, brothers and sisters, so much of this greatly burdens the flesh. The realities of Scripture can leave us each **like a deer caught in the headlights**. But, listen: We're not! We are God's people being held by Him in the eternal light of Christ! Jesus said:

“I am the door of the sheep...if anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture....

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” (Jn. 10:7,9, 27-30)

“I have given them eternal life.” That says it all. And for those moments when we are blinded by the reality that our horrible sin is still there, we are given this light:

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us (He has eternally removed them). (Ps. 103:10-12)

You see? The Word doesn’t blind us. It sharpens our focus. It comforts us with the light and life of Christ’s love

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott

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## ***“Like a Deer Caught in the Headlights”***

*I. In Spite of Ourselves (Is. 55:8,9)*

*II. It's for Real! (Matt. 20:15)*

*III. Headlights or Light?*

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