

Sermon 7-19-09¹
Jeremiah 23:1-6
Ephesians 1:15-23
Immeasurable Greatness

There was a wicked storm raging for days in the Midwest, and as the rain continued to steadily fall, the Mississippi River slowly began to rise above its' banks. Now, there was a man whose home was threatened by the rising waters that were quickly approaching. He did all he could to keep the waters at bay but it wasn't enough. As the rain continued to fall the waters were almost upon the house. The man looked at his car and thought about leaving, but instead he decided to turn the matter over to God and prayed, "God deliver me from this mess. I'll wait upon you until you deliver me." Soon after, the river came upon his house. The man ran up to the second floor, through the attic, and finally made his way onto the roof. Once safe, the man prayed again, "Almighty Lord, deliver me from this mess like your children in Israel. I'll wait upon you until you deliver me."

At this point, the river was just up to the base of the roof. Just then, a group of emergency workers came by in a small boat offering to help the man get out of the mess he was in. But the man refused, saying, "I'm a man of faith and I prayed for God to deliver me from this mess. I'll just wait on him." And so the emergency workers left. As the waters continued to rise, the man prayed again, "Holy God, I've been faithful for my entire life, deliver me from this mess. I'll wait upon you until you deliver me." Soon after a rescue helicopter came by, the rescue worker lowered a basket, and urged the man to get in. But the man protested, saying, "I've been a man of faith all of my life, I won't dismiss God's power now. I'll just keep waiting on him." Just as the helicopter was leaving, the man's house began to shake and shudder, finally breaking loose and being swept away in a rush of water. Sadly, the man drowned.

Following his death, the man caught sight of Jesus and stormed over to talk to him. Poking his finger into Jesus' chest, the man heatedly commented, "What's the big idea letting me die like that? I've been faithful all of my life and when I asked you a simple thing like "save me from the waters" you let me

¹ Sermon preached by the Rev. Tom Moore on Sunday, July 19, 2009 at Emsworth UP Church.

die! Why?” Calmly, Jesus responded to him saying, “Son, I’ve done everything I could do for you. I allowed you ample time to leave your house before the flood waters got too high. When you didn’t take it, I sent the emergency crew to get you off of your roof. When that didn’t work, I sent the rescue helicopter to you because your house was going to be swept away any minute. All of these things you refused. I even gave you that inflatable raft a few years ago that you stored away in your attic. What else could I do for you?” The man stood there in stunned silence as he realized all the ways God was working in his final hours and he never even realized it.

Some version of this viral joke has been passed around through email for a number of years now. While on the one hand it is not very biblical and clearly a piece of fiction, it serves as a poignant parable; reminding us to be attentive to the ways God is working and moving within our lives and the life of the world. What it clearly shows is that all too often we are blind or inattentive to the ways God is working. We’re prone to speaking of Jesus in terms of “Lord” or “Savior,” talking about the things God has done in the past, but at the end of the day we don’t always reflect on what it means even now that Jesus is our living, reigning, active, and present Lord and Savior in the midst of our day-to-day, ordinary lives. We aren’t always attentive to the immeasurable greatness of God on our behalf. To open us up to that greater reality, we turn to the apostle Paul.

In writing to the Ephesian Church, Paul is concerned that Christians far and wide see their lives wrapped up in and implicated within the living and reigning life of Christ. Living one’s life “in Christ” is everything for Paul. And so after praising them for their faithfulness and commitment, Paul prays for the Ephesians, praying for his brothers and sisters in Christ that they would continue to grow into this identity; being filled with the Holy Spirit that they might know what is the hope God has called them to, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for those who believe. The hope Paul speaks of is our place in the kingdom of God as those who belong to Christ, our inheritance is that what God has promised to us in Christ will come true, and

finally, there isn't any great secret as to what this immeasurable greatness of power for those who believe is either.

While the hope and the inheritance that Paul speaks of contains a future element, knowing the immeasurable greatness of God is something we experience here and now. We principally see and hear and know of the immeasurable greatness of God manifested in the world because rather than holding back his love and compassion for creation, standing aloof and doing nothing, the Lord our God penetrated to the depth of our sin-filled situation in, through and as the man Jesus Christ, taking on our sin and brokenness to bend back the will of humanity for the purposes of God; healing our brokenness through his cross, forgiving our sins, and restoring us into communion with the Father through his resurrection and ascension. The immeasurable greatness that Paul speaks of is the power of God to put sin and death to death through Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension; effectively breaking their grip on creation that we might be opened up to the new life we share in him.

And yet we aren't left to focus solely on the past as if there were no lasting influence until the fullness of redemption comes. Because his ministry is resurrected, and Jesus is Lord, and we are joined in union with him through the power of the Holy Spirit, then the power of his immeasurable greatness is alive and at work even now within the world. Just when we might want to narrow or limit the scope and range of his immeasurable greatness and power, Paul thrusts us towards an understanding of who God is for us that defies all words; reminding us of his lordship, grace, mercy, and love. The effects of our Lord's immeasurable greatness manifested in the cross of Christ continues to shape and form us even now in our day-to-day, ordinary lives because we live our lives in Christ.

Too often in life, we want everything to work out according to our cookie-cutter plans and dreams and desires. But that's not the way life really works. Deep down we know this, but for some reason we can't let it go. The problem is we can get so focused on our cookie-cutter plans that we miss out on the larger things that might be happening around; we might lose sight of what Jesus is up to in our midst because our attention is focused elsewhere. What Paul reminds us in our reading from Ephesians is to

have an almost child-like way of approaching the ministry of God. What I mean by this is, allowing the Holy Spirit to do his work, moving amongst us and filling us that we might have a sense of awe and wonder in terms of the immeasurable greatness within the things God is doing and becoming attentive to what's around us. Because we live, and move, and have our being in Christ, leaving behind the shackles of sin and death, we are opened up to new life in Christ; opened up for seeing and knowing the ways God is blessing us and working amongst us.

A few months ago I talked about looking for those God moments; being attentive to those experiences in our day-to-day lives where Jesus, in his resurrected ministry, shows us and we know or recognize that we're in a place or a moment for some reason that bears witness to his glory. Being aware of the immeasurable greatness of God is similar. It's being attentive to the reality that we really do live our lives "in Christ," that Jesus is working, out of the freedom of his love and in the power of the Spirit, in the midst of our day-to-day lives even when we don't realize it. We don't have to look upon the world with a cynical, secular eye; rather we can look with the eyes of faith and know the places Jesus himself is working and rediscover the immeasurable greatness of his grace, peace, power, and love. As one author puts it, "the practice of attentiveness involves noticing what God notices and seeing the world through God's eyes. It takes a passionate attentiveness rather than a groggy indifference to notice the movement of the Spirit, to hear whispers of God's grace, to discern the presence and power of (Jesus) among us, to identify the calling of God. It takes discipline and intentional practicing of attentiveness for us to develop the interior life, the life of the Spirit, the life of love, grace, forgiveness, mercy, justice, and hope."²

We shouldn't expect that we'll be attentive to the immeasurable greatness of God in our daily lives right off the bat. It needs to be cultivated and the Spirit needs to continually prune our lives and lead us in our discerning. But through prayer, times of listening for God's word, dwelling in the scriptures and immersing ourselves in the life that God is calling us to lead, we will soon begin to ask the really pertinent questions of life. "How is God using me in this particular situation? Where is Jesus involved, what is he

² Robert Schnase, *The Balancing Act*, 37.

already doing that I've missed so far. What has God been up to in my life for the last few days? What is God's purpose for his church here and now? What are the things in my life that are getting in the way of my discipleship? What is Jesus asking me to give up or leave behind for the sake of his immeasurable greatness manifested in his cross and resurrection; what sins and desires is he calling me to turn away from that I might embrace more fully my life in him?"

I don't know what your questions might be but I do know that that power of God's immeasurable greatness is still at work in the world, that he is up to something in your lives and in the life of his church. So be attentive to the big things or even the innocuous things; not trying to fit God into the plans or the schemes you have, but to see yourselves as a part of something God is doing out of the power of his immeasurable greatness. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.