

Text: II Corinthians 4:13 – 5:5
Title: The Weight of Glory
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Stephen Asma, a philosophy professor at Columbia, “pompously” (his word) lectured a class of undergraduates about the incoherence of religious faith and the coherence of scientific rationalism. But, the next day a shy student approached him and stuttered through a heartbreaking story that changed the professor’s thinking.

The student’s brother had been brutally stabbed to death and mutilated by an attacker who was never caught. The family was shattered. His mother was hospitalized with a breakdown. The student was convinced that she would still be institutionalized if not for her faith. She expected to see her slain son again. She believed that they would be reunited in heaven ~ where his body would be made whole again. These beliefs bolstered her spirit, and along with the practices of her church pulled her back from the brink of a debilitating sorrow and gave her the strength to continue raising her two other children ~ the student and his sister.

The professor writes:

To the typical atheist, all this looks irrational, and therefore unacceptable. Beliefs must be aligned with evidence, not mere yearning. Without rational standards we will slouch toward chaos and end up in pre-Enlightenment darkness....

... But I want to argue religion’s irrationality does not render it unacceptable, valueless or cowardly. Its irrationality may even be the source of its power.... Religion irritates the rational brain because it trades in magical thinking and offers no proof, but it nourishes the emotional brain because it calms fears, answers to yearnings, and strengthens feelings of loyalty.

Did you get that?

He doesn’t believe in faith but believes that faith can offer some good.

He doesn’t trust God but thinks that trust in God can be beneficial.

He doesn’t hold out hope for heaven but acknowledges that the hope of heaven is helpful.

And, maybe that’s good enough.

Many of us can bear witness to the ways in which belief, a community of faith, and the deep human longing for God are helpful. Whether true or not, is immaterial. The life of faith is a rich resource, has the potential for making us more loving, and gives a certain coherent worldview. I’ve often thought even if it wasn’t true I’d still want to follow the way of Jesus Christ. But....

But, what if it is also true?

What if there really is some other possibility or power?

What if we do in fact bear the weight of glory?

We pick up our text where we left off last week. Paul is making the case that in our bodies we carry great treasure. We carry the light of God, the Spirit of God, and the knowledge of God in Christ. It is not simply that we are created in the image of God, but we are vessels for the glory of God ~ God emptied in Christ even unto death. And,

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us.

Given that remarkable claim Paul goes on to wrestle with the frailty of human life. Paul knows that these vessels wear out, break down, and can be the source of great suffering. That theme runs throughout this letter.

In the first chapter Paul references troubles that pushed him beyond the edges of endurance so that he despaired of life itself. Toward the end of the letter he recounts beatings, shipwrecks, stonings, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, imprisonment, being lost at sea, being cold and naked, and being exposed to death “again and again.” And, all of that is listed before the last chapter where he writes that he was given, “a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” (His words....)

There is great scholarly speculation about the nature of Paul’s thorn. I have no idea. The apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* describe him as “Bald-headed, bowlegged, strongly built, a man small in size, with meeting eyebrows and a rather large nose.” (Think: Danny Devito.) And in chapter 10 of II Corinthians Paul writes that people say that his letters are weighty but in person he’s not very impressive and his speaking “amounts to nothing.” (Again, his words.)

Paul’s point is that our bodies are subject to decay and dis-ease and death. They groan for healing. But that’s barely newsworthy.....

Many of you have been bedside as those you dearly love withered away in a cloud of chemo and cancer. You have watched your parents lose strength and clarity and whatever seemed essential to their best selves. You know that death with dignity is often a misnomer. Or, you know that your own vigor and vitality seems to be slipping away.

We do everything we can. We run, ride, swim, stretch, do yoga, walk, eat twigs, berries and all things green and growing, refrain from doughnuts and Mountain Dew, hydrate, medicate, meditate, moisturize. and yet eventually and ultimately, we will all rust out, wear out, and wheeze our last.

A Hope mom was trying to explain death to her inquisitive child. When a grandparent died she said that it was sort of like a hand in a glove. When the hand is in the glove it is animated and alive. When the hand is removed from the glove it is limp and lifeless. To which the child scrunched up her face and said, “So grandma is now flat with no fingernails?”

Paul’s language is that outwardly we are wasting away but inwardly we are being renewed day by day. Paul’s claim is that even as our bodies are subject to death and decay there is a spiritual reality at work within in us that far outweighs this physical reality.

Our translation sort of mucks up the beauty of the passage.
A better translation might read this way:

...this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure...

The Hebrew word for glory is *kabod*, which can also mean “heavy, weighty.” Paul would have known that. So, he doubles down here. This is heavy glory.

Glory with weight.

Glory with power.

Glory with oomph.

Glory with pull.

Scott Hoezee put it this way:

It is heavy enough to create its own gravity well—as the planets orbit the sun because the sun’s weight and mass bend space around it, so also once the weight of glory gets into your core being, everything else in your life orbits around it. Everything gets focused on that glory and that glory’s own heft nuances, qualifies, helps you to see even the harder things in your life in a new light.

Dear friends that is to say the treasure within us enables us to see the struggles of this world as temporary and transitory.

That is not to dismiss, belittle, or gloss over the suffering of these bodies, but it is to believe that even as God defeats death in Jesus Christ human frailty poses no hurdle to God’s power. It is to believe that the sufferings of this present age fade in the light and weight of God’s eternal glory. It is to believe that depravity and decay don’t have the last word, but God has the last word. These earthly tents will fold but they are not the end of the story.

Now, granted, that sounds like pie-in-sky-in-the-sweet-by-and-by. And that may feel like magical thinking with no grounding in reality. It may even be privileged-pious-claptrap, smack of irrationality, and be full of holes, but there is for me

some measure of hope,
some article of faith,
some courage to love....

While writing this sermon I went to see a ninety-four-year-old woman. Her body is feeble but her spirit is intact. Her outer nature is wasting away but her inner nature is renewed by the confident hope of heaven. She laughs and smiles and looks forward to being reunited with loved ones and “going to meet” her Savior. That’s probably as good as it gets. It gives her joy and peace to face the living of these days. Would that we were all so fortunate....

While writing this sermon a friend called. He’s a recovering alcoholic. He’d spent the better part of the day at an AA meeting and then working through one of the 12 steps with a young guy grasping after sobriety. My friend knows deep in his bones that he needs some power greater than and from outside of himself to bring healing. He knows that his sobriety and the resulting

health of everything that he loves is not a function of rationality but an expression of God's grace. He is inwardly being renewed day by day. Would that we were all so fortunate....

You get the idea. Paul is not setting up a dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual. Paul is not denying, denigrating or discarding creation. Rather, he is reminding us that reality is all of one piece. He is not claiming that the eternal is all that matters, or that this world is simply a launching pad to heaven, but he is drawing our eyes toward a spiritual reality that is also in play.

God dwells within this world.

God is not just fixing a heavenly home, God is at work renewing our spirits.

God is not just concerned about the eternal but invested in the internal.

God has set his Spirit in our bodies as a down payment on what's to come.

That's great news. In a world of thugs and slave-owners, in a world of abuse and unspeakable horror, amid the daily catalogue of man's inhumanity to man, when we know despair and illness that would lead to suicide, there is also the weight of glory. The One who raised Jesus from the dead will raise us.

I can't offer a rational explanation, but I'm tethered to that hope.

I don't have proof, but faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen.

Again, Scott Hoezee,

When our tents tear and sag and ultimately really are laid flat by a stormy gust of wind, there is yet another word to be spoken. We do not lose heart. Not at the bedside of the Hospice patient, not at the funeral, not at the solemn lump-in-your-throat graveside of ashes to ashes, dust to dust. We do not lose heart. Our troubles may not seem light or momentary but in the face of all eternity, they are. They will give way to something glorious. That is the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.