

God's Greater Story – Lives Transformed for God's Service

12th Sun. after Pent. – 8/23/20 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Romans 11:33-12:8 Pastor Keith Besel

v.1 – **“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”**

Introduction

✘ The poet, Elizabeth Barret Browning, once wrote:

Earth's crammed with heaven
and every common bush afire with God
but only he who sees takes off his shoes.

(Elizabeth Barrett Browning. "Aurora Leigh", The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (London: University Press, 1920), 499.)

→ Earth is crammed with heaven. God comes down from heaven and touches the earth; filling it with His glory. But only those who “see” take off their shoes in worship.

✘ Our Scripture Readings this morning invite us folks to be among those who see. They invite us to see the earth crammed with heaven; to see how God in Christ has come down from heaven and touched this earth to fill it with His glory.

→ Consider our Old Testament Reading. We have a vision from Isaiah, writing to a future people who are suffering in exile away from Jerusalem. And he reveals for them a world crammed full of heaven. “Look,” he cries, “to the Rock from which you were hewn” (Is. 51:1). There he reveals the wonder of God. One family, Abraham and Sarah, touched by God's grace as the source of God's blessing for all nations in the world. As He multiplies descendants for Abraham we see God extending His blessing from one family to all of earth's generations. Isaiah promises that Jerusalem; the city that is devastated, will experience rebirth and blossom like the Garden of Eden. Songs of sorrow will become shouts of joy as God establishes, not the warped justice and salvation set up by men, but puts in place His perfect justice; His gracious salvation to go forth as an enduring “light to (all) the peoples” (51:4-5).

→ Then in our Gospel Reading we find Caesarea Philippi crammed full of heaven as Jesus has drawn His disciples far north, above the Sea of Galilee, where the land breaks forth into hills and waterfalls and fresh flowing mountain springs. This was the ancient place where the Canaanites worshipped Baal; where the Greeks worshipped Pan; where the Romans worshipped Caesar. Yet, here we see Peter confess to the truth that heaven is touching earth in the physical presence of God Himself, seen in Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mat. 16:15). To identify Jesus as “the Christ” is to declare that He is the promised “Messiah” from the Old Testament; to tie all of Scripture together into one unchanging truth for all time. Peter is not worshipping just one of many gods like Baal or Pan or Caesar. No, he worships Yahweh, the Creator of all things; the One who promised to bring salvation to the ends of the earth; the One who has now come to live and walk among His people. Peter confesses Jesus, a Jew, a Nazarene, to be the Savior of all peoples, for all times.

✘ What Isaiah prophesies in the Old Testament Reading; what Peter confesses in the Gospel friends, is what the apostle Paul celebrates as he writes to the Christians in Rome in our Epistle Reading today. Paul has seen it with his own two eyes; earth crammed with heaven. And in these few verses he shares with us a life-transforming vision; the next part of *God's Greater Story* as Paul tells it to us in our current sermon series.

I. Paul reveals God's greater plan for His people.

- ✘ So let's first consider Paul's vision before we then see how it transforms our lives for service in God's world.
- ✘ At the beginning of our text Paul is in awe at God's story of salvation as He has fulfilled it in this world. Beginning with verse 33 Paul writes, "O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!" Paul shows us here a picture of the end of the story; the outcome of God's judgments and ways.
 - ➔ All peoples in the church are restored to be the New Israel of God. It's the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in our Old Testament Reading. Isaiah prophesied of a time of "joy and gladness"; of "thanksgiving and song" (Is. 51:3). He promised in Isaiah 51:11 that when "the ransomed of the LORD will return and come to Zion...everlasting joy shall be upon their heads" and "sorrow and sighing shall flee away". This is what Paul is seeing as God works through his Gospel proclamation. Restoration takes place and God gathers all nations, Jews and Gentiles, into the Christian Church.
 - ➔ It turns Paul's sorrow into singing; his sighing into praise. It's as if Paul has seen the light of a beautiful sunset; a glorious ending to a long and difficult day. And he offers praise and thanksgiving and glory to God.
- ✘ But as Paul turns his eyes to the church in Rome he sees what those unbelievers in the world cannot see. The Roman Christians; they were not a glorious sight by the world's standards. Not many of them were rich. Not many of them were powerful. They gathered together in small house churches. They were a far cry from the glories of Rome, much less the glories of heaven. Yet, as Paul looks at these people, he sees earth crammed with heaven and he wants them to join him in celebrating this wonder of God.
 - ➔ In chapter 12:1 Paul writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship". Notice how Paul uses the language of sacrifice; bringing to mind the sacrificial worship of God's people and the glory of the temple in Jerusalem.
 - ➔ But Paul transforms the image and says that God's people themselves are now the sacrifices; outside the temple; outside Jerusalem; hidden inside the small house churches as they gather in the heart of the large empire of Rome. Yes, these are God's people, transformed into sacrifices. Not sacrifices that will be killed or will die to appease some false god, but living sacrifices; made holy and acceptable to God – by God!
 - ➔ Paul knew and taught that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross put an end to all temple sacrifices. His death was the perfect sacrifice. He was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Only by Jesus' sacrifice were God's people freed from the law of offering sacrifices for sins. His sacrifice freed them to become sacrifices; living sacrifices of praise as they poured out their lives in service to the entire world.
- ✘ You know how it is after you look at a bright light for a while and then close your eyes – you see a residual "glow" of that light in your mind? Well, as Paul looks at the believers in Rome, he sees a residual "glow", if you will, of God's glory shining in and among them.
 - ➔ They are the body of Christ at work in the world. Paul is beginning to see the gifts of the Spirit poured out upon the people – prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, contribution, leadership, and mercy. You see, God not only forgives all sins, but He also bestows His gifts upon His newly transformed people; giving them a purpose and a place in *God's Greater Story*. Yes, God has a greater plan for each and every person in His story of salvation.
- ✘ This vision stirs Paul's heart with wonder. It opens his mouth with praise. Earth is crammed with heaven as God gathers and transforms His people for spiritual worship and service in the world.

II. God transforms our lives for glorious service.

- ✘ “Earth’s crammed with heaven,” Elizabeth Barret Browning said. “But only he who sees takes off his shoes”. And that’s the trouble with God’s people. Too often they, we, don’t see the vision of God working in our lives; in the world.
 - ➔ Paul was concerned that the Roman Christians would take pride in their new, Godly status and sanctified way of life. So he warns them in chapter 12:3, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone not to think of himself more highly than he ought”.
 - ➔ Yet today God’s people often have the opposite problem. Ask a fellow Christian how God works among His people, and see what they say. Often we point to God’s work among others rather than confessing God’s work in our own lives. Too often we focus only upon our time in public worship and neglect God’s call for us to confess His work in our daily acts of service.
- ✘ For example, it’s common for people to point to the pastor of the congregation. “He’s God’s servant,” they say, “the one the Holy Spirit has called through God’s people to serve in our midst”. And they’re right. But God’s work is not limited only to the pastor. With a bit more thought, a few other members; old faithful members might be listed as well; maybe even those who have gone before us. And before you know it we’ve drifted from the present to the past and how God worked (past tense) among His people.
 - ➔ It’s true, God has worked mightily through His people in the past. Great figures of faith come to mind like Martin Luther; like the rich music of Bach; and the inspiring hymnody of Gerhardt. It’s good to see and celebrate God’s gifts to the church as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and equips members for service.
- ✘ But Paul’s purpose in today’s text is to turn us from the past to the present; to increase what we see from God’s glory working only among a small group of people to a more Scriptural view where God’s work here on earth is inclusive of all His people – including you...and me!
- ✘ Yes, you heard it! Paul invites you...today...to trust in God’s promises, and to experience His greater plan for you!
 - ➔ God brought about your salvation in Jesus, the Christ when He offered the perfect sacrifice to take away your sin. That forgiveness is the power to open your eyes to see and celebrate God’s power at work in you today; inside all of your life! Yes, He works in your life, not for selfish things. He works to transform your heart so that you joyfully sacrifice self and seek instead to worship God in serving others.
 - ➔ In the latter verses of our text Paul helps us identify the gifts with which God equips us for this service – actions such as teaching, service, leadership, mercy. It’s not a complete list, but only suggestive. Paul wants you to see how God works uniquely in your life. So he invites you and me to be transformed by the renewal of our mind. He encourages us to test and discern, not the world’s, but God’s good and gracious will in our life (12:2).
 - ➔ It may be that you devote your life to tending the earth in order to bring forth food for the table. Or it may be that God has gifted you in technology or business or science or in providing an essential service to the public. All of this is you being a steward of the talents God has given you to worship Him in serving this world in which we live. Perhaps God has gifted you to teach the faith to your children, not in formal classes with desks and lectures and quizzes but informally, in the car as you drive your child to soccer practice and talk about challenges to his/her faith; or as your children visit their grandparents and share their growing faith with each other. Yes, parenting and grandparenting is a gift from God. Not all people are called to such service, but God, in Christ, has called you and equipped you for His work.

- ✘ Martin Luther taught us to see the marvelous expanse of the mercies of God, working through us in our unique vocations. To live in God's mercy is to enter the world and discover God transforming us and filling this earth, through us, with Christian service.

Conclusion

- ✘ There's a monument in Three Mills Green, London that pictures two hands, joined together, in self-sacrificial service. We've placed a picture of it at the beginning of our bulletin (or Home worship materials) today.
 - ➔ Over a hundred years ago, Thomas Pickett was working in a well. He was overcome by the carbonic acid (the "foul air") that would often gather deep in wells. His co-worker, Godfrey Nicholson responded, reaching out his hand to help. He was followed by Frederick Eliot and then Robert Underhill; each worker, in succession, offering a saving hand for rescue. But in the end each worker died. To remember these men and their self-sacrifice, a workers' memorial was erected. Two hands, joined together, in self-sacrificial service.
 - ➔ This memorial recalls for us still today how these ordinary people offered their lives in acts of self-sacrificial love. Their daily vocation became a place for service; service to others and service to God. This recalls the way that God works in the world; through the lives of His people in their daily activities and vocations. God's hand reaches into our world and transforms His people for service so that they offer their gifts; even their lives as a sacrifice of praise.
- ✘ What this monument does in East London, Paul does with his words here today. He calls us to see the glory of God, hidden in the lives of His people. Our world would have us conform to its ways; seeking glory and power by gaining things for ourselves. To our world, even religion can become one more tool that we use to make ourselves better; claiming the power of God to gain glory on earth.
 - ➔ But God's ways are different. Paul asks you to see God's greater plan for you; humble; hidden; sacrificial; selfless. You have been joined to the body of Christ; made part of His people by the forgiveness of your sins, so that now, in view of God's mercies, you are called no longer to be conformed to this world but to be transformed for service; to live by giving rather than gaining; by service rather than selfishness.
- ✘ In this way, the Church is the after-image; the reflective glow of the glory of Christ. You and I are a part of Christ, filling this world with His love and grace. Yes, we in our lives, dear Christians, are monuments of Christ's self-sacrificial love; your life joined to the ministry of Christ as "a living sacrifice, holy, and acceptable to God". Amen.