

***Sermon for Proper 18, Year B***  
***by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson***  
***Holy Nativity, Plano***  
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Our readings start off today with the hope that is ours as the people of God. This passage comes after a chapter describing the destruction that will come upon the enemies of God. But here we see the promises to those who will be exiled from the Holy Land. In spite of everything, God will deliver his faithful people. “Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.”

And when God comes to save, he will not leave well enough alone. It’s not just that God will get you off the hook. The blind shall see, the deaf shall hear, the lame shall leap, the dumb shall sing. He’ll recreate you and make you whole. He’ll put things the way they were meant to be. Where there was desert, there will be an abundance of water, streams and springs. The desert will be turned into a lush garden for God’s people.

Even if you are suffering, whether that be physical or mental or spiritual suffering, God has not forsaken you. There is hope in him. And it is not false hope. These are the very things that Jesus did when he came among us. The Gospel reading today is only one of many. Here he heals a man who is deaf and dumb. The man immediately is able to hear and speak clearly. Elsewhere, he heals the blind and the lame and the lepers and all manner of illness.

And of course we know that Jesus did not come merely to heal physical ailments. These healings are real, but they are also “signs”, works of power that get our attention and point us to the deeper healing that he offers to all of us. Isaiah was not the last person to speak of water springing from the parched land of the desert. Jesus also mentions springs of living water. And if you follow him, you know that your own heart and life were a desert before he gave you his life.

The fact is that we are all parched and “thirsty ground”, “burning sand”. There is nothing worthwhile in Garrin Dickinson that is not due to God’s work in my life. Without Jesus, I would be a selfish, thoughtless, twisted wreck of a man. Without Jesus, so would you. And maybe some of you are. But whatever there is of value in me and my life is due to the streams of water flowing through the

desert. And if you want the living water of God in your life, all you have to do is ask for it ... and try to live accordingly.

St. James tells us that “every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” God is not capricious. He doesn’t change his will from one minute to the next, like we do. He doesn’t send temptation our way to trip us up. He blesses us with perfect gifts. And there’s nothing we did or can do to earn his favor. “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth”. He just decided that he was going to bring us to the truth, and thereby bring us into life.

And the gifts keep coming. The light of truth continues to shine in the darkness of our hearts. The streams of water still flow through the darkness of our lives. Whether we recognize him or not, God continues to pursue us with his light and love, offering us abundant life in Jesus. The Father of lights does not change his light to darkness. He does not ever change his course. There is no shadow that can keep the light from reaching you.

But there is still you, yourself: the darkness and the desert. And there is the question of how you are going to respond to this abundant life that God is pouring out upon you. There is a difference between something that is free and something that is cheap. There is a difference between a gift and something you pick up at a garage sale. If you buy something at a garage sale, it’s cheap. And you get what you pay for. But you can throw it away again tomorrow, if you want to. A gift, on the other hand, you can’t throw away. A gift is free, but it is not cheap. And there is still an appropriate and expected response to it.

Now consider that the gifts of God are never-ending. Every second of every hour of every day of every year of your life you receive the good and perfect gifts of God. Since his gifts are limitless, our thanks must also be limitless. Our entire lives must become one big thank-you note to God. And St. James tells us how to write it. He lays it out for us to follow, and that is one more gift for which we must thank God.

First of all, St. James says, “let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, [and] slow to wrath”. Don’t shut your mind and your heart to God. Be eager to learn the truth. Don’t continue to share your ignorance with anyone who will listen. Bridle your tongue, or all kinds of ignorance and evil will spew out to defile everything around you. This is not merely a matter of how much you talk. It’s a matter of being able to choose what you let out of your mouth and what you

don't. It's a matter of using your tongue to build others up, rather than using it as a weapon to tear things down. And those little annoyances and hurts that you deal with every day: don't blow them up into a rage. What are we that we think we're allowed to get angry on our own account? Aren't we still writing that thank-you? So get on with it. The "wrath of man does not work the righteousness of God." Be slow to anger, because most of our anger is about not getting what we want, and that's not righteous.

Secondly, there are some things in our lives that are simply and obviously wrong. Things that are dirty or bad or even just unhelpful. These are the things that we know we shouldn't do, but we do them anyway. They are the ways in which we just shove God out of our lives and say, "Hey, I like myself as a desert. Leave me alone!" You know what they are for you. Stop them! Rather than pushing God and his blessings away, hold still and take what God has to give you. He's already given you the word of truth. If you nurture that and let it grow in you, then it will save your life.

Finally, St. James tells us to be "doers of the word, and not hearers only". Listening to the truth, even agreeing with the truth, doesn't get you anywhere. The only way to live the truth is to act upon it. We all know that actions speak louder than words. And if we act upon the truth that we have in Jesus, it will change us.

One of the actions that James mentions specifically is "to visit orphans and widows in their affliction". Orphans and widows are those who are afflicted through no fault of their own, and to visit them is not simply to go see them but to accept their difficulties as your own, to maintain relationship with them, to take care of them and their needs, because they have no father or husband to be responsible for those needs.

The last action that James specifies is "to keep oneself unstained from the world." The "world" here is the whole system of forces that are in rebellion against God. It's the desert that stretches out beyond you, all around. Obviously, if you're entire life is going to be a thank-you note to God, you can't have anything to do with the rebellion against him. We live in that world. It's all around us, and we can't escape interacting with it. It even has its tendrils and hooks into us. So it follows that we cannot have a religion that is pure and undefiled. We can only begin the arduous task of guarding ourselves from further stain and allowing the surgery necessary for the desert in us to bloom.

But God knows our limitations. He knows that we start the game without a full hand. He knows that we start out parched and in the desert. He knows that we need his help. And he gives it. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights. And we will never be finished thanking him with our whole lives.