

Sermon for 6 Easter, Year C
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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Our readings today begin with a healing. The man who was born crippled and has never walked listens to Paul. And Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, tells him to stand up. And he does. Healing has always been a part of God's witness to the world. It was integral to Jesus' ministry among us, and it is integral to our ministry in the world.

Of course, this physical healing done by God through Paul is sacramental. It is an outward sign of something that is much bigger even than physical health. It is as Paul is preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ that this happens. And the gospel is that God was in Jesus reconciling all things to himself. We can be restored to the relationship God meant us to have with him in creation. When the gentiles get confused and think that Paul and Barnabas are Hermes and Zeus, Paul points them back to the God who *created* them and everything that is. Paul is offering them not just wonders but *signs*. The fact that God created everything is significant, because it allows us to tell the story of that creation. If there is a creator, then the cosmos didn't just happen. It's not arbitrary. Creation implies purpose. The creator must have had a plan. And healing of any kind is a restoration of that plan. Physical healing is a sign. It signifies such restoration.

What Paul offers the people of Lystra is, in fact, a story that makes sense of human experience. We know that there is evil in the world. And if we know that there is evil, then we must have some sense of what good looks like. But we also know that we cannot achieve it. The Christian story explains this by saying that the God who created the world created it perfectly, that we have twisted it up by rebelling against him, but that he has made a way for us to return to his purposes in creation.

This is also the point of our passage from St. John's Revelation. It comes at the very end of the book. There are a few more verses to wrap up the letter, but this is the end of the visions. And it turns out that we find, here at the end of the Bible, a return to what we had at the beginning of the Bible. Not exactly the same. It's the happy ending, rather than the perfect beginning. But it is obviously a restoration. Here is a city where originally there was a garden. And the city has no temple, because the presence of God fills the city. There is never any need to shut the gates against attack. But it will be filled with life and light and glory.

But as John looks at the perfect community, the city of God's presence, he sees that it is also the Garden of Eden. The water of life flows from the throne of God down through the middle of the city street. And there on either side of the

river is a grove of trees just like the tree of life. This is an amazing moment! Remember that Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden of Eden, precisely so that they would not eat the fruit of the tree of life. But at the end of the story we finally realize that the home we thought we had lost forever has been preserved for us. Here it is. And in our absence it has grown and prospered. The river flowing from the throne is the river flowing out of Eden to water the garden.

We have come full circle. Not only do we have the eternal life from the fruit of the tree of life, its leaves bring healing to the entire world. Where creation was cursed because of the Fall, here there shall be no curse on anything. Where before we were banished from God's presence and couldn't stand to see God's face, here all God's servants shall see his face. This is the highest blessing that can be bestowed on a human being. And it brings us back to the blessed state of God's original creation, where Adam walked in the garden with the Lord.

That is the purpose of God and the plan of God for us. He has planned that outcome from eternity and is patiently bringing it about over thousands of years of human rebellion. As children of Adam, we could never have achieved it. But the message of the apostles, the message that has been entrusted to us, is that Jesus has made it possible for us to become children of God. And God the loving Father has prepared this inheritance for us.

It is in this context that we are to understand Jesus' words in the upper room. "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." The life in the presence of God promised in Revelation actually begins now. Although we will have to wait for the perfection of it, the relationship with God begins immediately. He doesn't leave us a list of rules to keep and then judge us on the basis of our success or failure. He offers to be with us as we live a pattern of life rather than death. He offers us his own life, a life of love that causes us to obey.

And because of that life that God shares with us, we can have peace. Not a peace that is the absence of conflict. Jesus makes it very clear that we will be in conflict with the world by being at peace with him. But living our lives in his presence and in obedience to his will is what we were made for. We can rest in being who and what we really are.

Jesus says, "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. The fear that Jesus doesn't want us to have is not the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom. The word for fear in this text is always used negatively. This fear is the opposite of courage. It's the fear that drives you to hoard your money when you ought to invest it wisely. It's the fear that causes you to remain silent when you ought to be a witness for Jesus. It's the fear that makes it easy to believe gossip and lies about others, because it assumes that ultimately nothing is trustworthy. It's the fear that is the opposite of loving Jesus and keeping his word.

But you've just been told. Ultimate reality is that God is completely trustworthy. More than that, he has a plan to restore all of creation, to make all things new, to improve on his already perfect work, to bring us back to the Garden of Eden as it should have been, and to bring us back to it as *we* should have been. And he offers us the opportunity to walk in his presence, even in this world of death, even though it is our own fault that the world is like that. He promises to finish the story even better than he began it. And he promises that we can be a part of it.

We don't have to have any fear that is not awe at such a loving God. All we need is to love him in return. "Oh God, who hast prepared for those who love thee such good things as pass man's understanding: Pour into our hearts such love toward thee, that we, loving thee in all things and above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord".