

#### Ezekiel 2:1-5

1 The voice said to me: Human one, stand on your feet, and I'll speak to you. 2 As he spoke to me, a wind came to me and stood me on my feet, and I heard someone addressing me. 3 He said to me: Human one, I'm sending you to the Israelites, a traitorous and rebellious people. They and their ancestors have been rebelling against me to this very day. 4 I'm sending you to their hardheaded and hard-hearted descendants, and you will say to them: The LORD God proclaims. 5 Whether they listen or whether they refuse, since they are a household of rebels, they will know that a prophet has been among them.

#### Psalm 123

1 I raise my eyes to you— you who rule heaven. 2 Just as the eyes of servants attend to their masters' hand, just as the eyes of a female servant attends to her mistress' hand— that's how our eyes attend to the LORD our God until he has mercy on us. 3 Have mercy on us, LORD! Have mercy because we've had more than enough shame. 4 We've had more than enough mockery from the self-confident, more than enough shame from the proud.

#### 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

2 I know a man in Christ who was caught up into the third heaven fourteen years ago. I don't know whether it was in the body or out of the body. God knows. 3 - 4 I know that this man was caught up into paradise and that he heard unspeakable words that were things no one is allowed to repeat. I don't know whether it was in the body or apart from the body. God knows. 5 I'll brag about this man, but I won't brag about myself, except to brag about my weaknesses. 6 If I did want to brag, I wouldn't make a fool of myself because I'd tell the truth. I'm holding back from bragging so that no one will give me any more credit than what anyone sees or hears about me. 7 I was given a thorn in my body because of the outstanding revelations I've received so that I wouldn't be conceited. It's a messenger from Satan sent to torment me so that I wouldn't be conceited. 8 I pleaded with the Lord three times for it to leave me alone. 9 He said to me, "My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness." So I'll gladly spend my time bragging about my weaknesses so that Christ's power can rest on me. 10 Therefore, I'm all right with weaknesses, insults, disasters, harassments, and stressful situations for the sake of Christ, because when I'm weak, then I'm strong.

#### Mark 6:1-13

1 Jesus left that place and came to his hometown. His disciples followed him. 2 On the Sabbath, he began to teach in the synagogue. Many who heard him were surprised. "Where did this man get all this? What's this wisdom he's been given? What about the powerful acts accomplished through him? 3 Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't he Mary's son and the brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" They were repulsed by him and fell into sin. 4 Jesus said to them, "Prophets are honored everywhere except in their own hometowns, among their relatives, and in their own households." 5 He was unable to do any miracles there, except that he placed his hands on a few sick people and healed them. 6 He was appalled by their disbelief. Then Jesus traveled through the surrounding villages teaching. 7 He called for the Twelve and sent them out in pairs. He gave them authority over unclean spirits. 8 He instructed them to take nothing for the journey except a walking stick—no bread, no bags, and no money in their belts. 9 He told them to wear sandals but not to put on two shirts. 10 He said, "Whatever house you enter, remain there until you leave that place. 11 If a place doesn't welcome you or listen to you, as you leave, shake the dust off your feet as a witness against them." 12 So they went out and proclaimed that people should change their hearts and lives. 13 They cast out many demons, and they anointed many sick people with olive oil and healed them.

## Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

I have a question today. *What does means mean?* Means. With an s. Not mean as in angry or cruel. Not mean as in an average. We know by now that I don't do math. Means, like when you ask the question, "Do the ends justify the means?" Means are an avenue, a method, a tool for accomplishing a task. The means are the way that something gets done.

For instance, we have an official document in our denomination called "The Use of the Means of Grace," which is a study on the sacraments of baptism and communion. Coincidentally, our Sunday morning discipleship group just completed a multi-week study on this. When we call the sacraments means of grace, we're saying something very precise, namely that through these particular rituals, whether of washing in water or of eating bread and wine, we receive the grace of God in a very unique fashion. They're the conduits through which we experience and receive the grace of God. They're the means.

Michelle and I from time to time dive into a multi-day marathon of the Lord of the Rings extended edition movies. We're in the midst of one of those right now. One of my favorite scenes is when the Council cannot decide how to dispose of the One Ring, when so many powerful men and elves and dwarves fight over the terrible and wonderful power of the ring, Frodo's still, small voice cries out amidst the chaos, "I will take the ring to Mordor!" Frodo, in his willingness to take the ring, to become responsible for the destruction of the evil in their midst, becomes a means, a means of the deliverance of Middle Earth, a means of salvation for an entire realm.

We, too, are means of grace. We carry the grace of God as disciples. We are commissioned to transmit and distribute that grace to the world. We hold that gift, that treasure, in the clay jars of our lives. Even more than the grace of God, we carry within us the Holy Spirit, very God of very God, empowered to work for the redemption of the world. We say all the time that we're God's image or that we're the Body of Christ. This is all language that indicates we are means of not just God's grace, but of God's self. In the words of Patrick Johnson, a theologian who focuses on preaching and the church's mission, "Because God exists for the world, the community has no choice but to also exist for the world." At our best, we exist for the world, and through us Jesus may accomplish God's wonders in the world through the means of our lives. But at our worst...

In today's Gospel we hear one of the most incredible passages in all of Scripture. It's incredible because it's almost unbelievable. We find Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth, at the synagogue, teaching. When the people realized that this was Jesus, the little boy who grew up in their midst, they were, and I'm quoting the Bible here, "repulsed by him, and fell into sin." And that's not even the unbelievable part! At this point, when the people turn their backs on Jesus, the Bible tells us in verse five that Jesus was, and I'm quoting again, "unable to do any miracles there, except that he placed his hands on a few sick people and healed them." The Bible tells us Jesus was **unable** to do any miracles there. Jesus, the Lord of the universe that took on the flesh of humanity, couldn't do something.

Jesus couldn't do something he wanted to do because humanity turned their collective backs on him. That's no small statement! Since God chooses to work through humanity, first in Jesus and then the rest of us, human cooperation is essential to the

fullness of God's kingdom in the world. Let me say that a bit differently. When we pray for God's kingdom to come, that means we're required to work alongside Christ to make that reign of grace more real in our world.

Another way to say that is this: As the means of the Gospel, God invites us to become coworkers in the spread of the good news and the inbreaking of God's kingdom. The ELCA tagline says it well: God's Work. Our Hands. Our hands are the means of God's work in the world. But, if we behave like the people of Nazareth, if we turn our backs on Jesus and refuse to be means of God's grace, then we just might hear again those words: *Jesus was unable to do any miracles here.*

Now, we do hear that Jesus managed to heal a few people within that crowded synagogue. Jesus accomplished some sort of good out of the mess. Of course this makes some sense to us, because time and again it seems that God works some good despite the clutter of sin in our lives. God works despite us. But the passage is clear that the unfaithfulness of the people stood against a fuller experience of God's kingdom. The stubbornness of people blocked the transformative grace of God from shaping their community. And I think we'd admit that as well. Though God worked some good in the midst of our messes, we may also admit that our refusal to accept the work of Jesus even when he's right in front of us likely obscured the grace of God working more fully in our lives. If we refuse to become means of grace, from whence might the fullness of God's grace come to the world?

We never do this, right? Or do we? Each of us, it seems, react against God's surprising presence with rejection. At least for me, this happens more often than I'd like to admit. For us in the white church, we've been far too complacent with racism and white privilege in our culture. We've known that it wasn't right, but since we weren't

overtly racist ourselves or actively acting racist, whatever that means, we let stuff slide. We didn't stop the racially insensitive jokes or hurtful stereotypes spoken by family and friends. We didn't speak out against prejudice in the work place. We didn't confront the use of the "N" word at the store. We saw Jesus working in all people and places, offering grace for reconciliation and integrity for all people, seeking to lift up the people oppressed and downtrodden within our country, and yet we turned our backs on him and them. We, along with all too many white churches and white Christians across the country, repulsed Jesus and turned to the sins of silence.

But here's the thing. In the words of one of my friends this week, "It's not enough just to not be racist. We must become actively anti-racist." In other words, it's not enough for us to stand on the sidelines, but instead we must become means of grace, actively carrying the justice and mercy of God in the world. What does this look like?

First off, we must speak loud and clear that the burning of black churches and death threats against black female pastors, all after the terror attacks in Charleston, can't simply be a coincidence. This is more racism and active violence against the black community at work in our world. And that is sin. If we stand alongside and silently deny the leadership of Jesus, can we really expect God to work miracles of reconciliation, equality, and peace in our nation?

In the Gospel, Jesus refuses to give up on grace. Instead, he sets out and calls the disciples to a mission, to carry the grace refused in Galilee to others who might receive it. He sends them with the bare minimum. No bread, no bags, no money, just the clothes on their back, a walking stick, and the power of God's grace to cast out evil in this world. And dear goodness, is that enough!

Our obstinacy may temporarily slow the advancement of God's kingdom, but with or without us, Jesus will reconcile the world to himself. The question for us is whether we'll choose to be a part of that community working for reconciliation. Will we speak out for justice when given the chance? Will we become the active anti racists, the means of God's transformative grace that reminds us there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, rich or poor, black or white in Christ Jesus! Either we're one in Christ, or we're repulsed by the unifying work of Jesus in our midst. Remember that, in Nazareth, Jesus moved on from his home, his family and friends, because they refused to be a means of God's grace to the world. Rather than embrace the radical transformation of God in Jesus, they scoffed at him, turned on him, and instead chose the sinfulness of selfishness.

The Gospel we hear today is this: God is bringing grace into our world and God intends to use us to make that grace alive. God wants to work through us to make grace real for the world in which we live. That's a huge, incomprehensible gift! God wants us to become coworkers in the Gospel. As the images of God in the world, God wants us to reflect the grace of heaven to all creation. In the words of C.S. Lewis, God seeks to make us little Christs.

There's a second part of this good news, and there's a difficulty within it. If we refuse that identity, that doesn't mean God's mission is hopeless. God will still find other means of grace. Yet, if we refuse to be God's means, then we've put ourselves outside of God's mission. If we're not willing to become the avenues of God, subject to God's will and work in the world, if we refuse to let God work through us, then God will use other people, other communities. God will send other disciples, just as Jesus does in today's Gospel reading, to ensure that the good news of grace reaches the very ends

of the earth. And that's the wonderfully difficult part of the Gospel for us. With or without us, God will bring the kingdom of God.

Hearing this, some might tend toward complacency. If God's kingdom will come regardless of us, then why should we change to follow Jesus? Change is hard. Change is uncomfortable. Perhaps we'd rather, like those in the Nazarene synagogue, scoff at Jesus' call to transformation.

Yet, this ought not lead us to apathy, but to conviction, and to action. If we stand by, we choose to let the Kingdom of God come without us, and delay the coming of God's kingdom in our midst. But if we embrace our identities as the means of God's grace and God's self in the world, if we actively participate in the coming of God's kingdom, then we might see wonders! Wonders of racism torn asunder and all people lifted up. Wonders of church buildings rebuilt because the flames of hatred could not extinguish the flame of the Holy Spirit.

As we receive the means of grace today in bread and wine, let us become the body of Christ in the world, the means of God's grace and God's presence to all people. Let's decry the sins of racism that seek the destruction of our black sisters and brothers. Let's become conduits for the kingdom that show another way, one not toward docile peace but the difficult work of reconciliation. Because our God exists for the world, let us too exist for the world, live for the world, die for the world, and rise for the world that we might see the world transformed by the presence of Christ Jesus.

Amen.