

How We Love a Mystery

Isaiah 40:12-14
Romans 11:29-36

Have you ever received a blessing you did not deserve? Rather than plow straight into a personal example (and I have a few) I would like to ask each person listening to these words to pause and think: when have you gotten an unearned financial windfall, a promotion, forgiveness, hope? When have you received a blessing you did not deserve? Did you ask yourself why?

In I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, by Maya Angelou, we find that at the age of eight years the girl who would become the celebrated poet and author stopped speaking to everybody except her brother. For five years. She feared her voice had killed a man, her mother's boyfriend, "Mr. Freeman". He had forced himself upon her. She had testified against him at trial. Four days later he was found dead—probably killed by her uncles, her mother's brothers. She stopped talking because she feared her words had too much power. Her words had power, all right. Thank God she found her voice again, despite a teen pregnancy and a lifetime of experiencing racism. She could eventually write, in her Collected Autobiographies, "Not a day passes but that I wonder what I did to deserve it: to deserve my suffering and to deserve the voice God gave me to use. I wonder that so many seem to want to hear me and I wonder that words I do not recall forming in my mind somehow come out in shaped paragraphs. Like all gifts, it is both a blessing and a curse, encouraging and fearsome."

Two thousand years earlier the Apostle Paul would write, “The gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.” The word irrevocable literally means unable to be unsaid. From the Latin root *voce*, from which English derives *voice*, it tells us that once God has spoken, the gifts and the call of God cannot be unsaid. They will exist forever. According to Paul these gifts and calls are irresistible. Further, he refers to a specific theological reality with his “gifts and call”: to the grace of God which saves those who are in Christ. This is both an encouraging and a fearsome gift.

Paul places his claim about irrevocable gifts and calls in the context of human disobedience. “Just as you once were disobedient to God but now have received mercy...” and, “so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they may also receive mercy.” The “they” here are Paul’s fellow Jews. In the sweep of his argument across the whole of Romans he has wrestled with the fate of those who once were the Chosen People, but according to the revelation he claims to have received from the Holy Spirit, no longer are. We no longer worry much about this—or do we? Ten or twelve years ago the Presbytery of Mackinac examined a young woman for ordination to the ministry of Word and sacrament. An elderly pastor (must have been at least 65!) asked her, “According to your understanding of Scripture, are the Jews saved?” Hisses and low boos sounded out around the sanctuary. The moderator said, “You don’t have to answer that.”

The candidate for ordination was obviously surprised by the whole thing, the question, the catcalls and the moderator effectively shutting off the question. I recall

feeling disappointed—for people have asked me this very question, or a related one, across the 35 years of my ministry. (The related question is, “Are agnostics or atheists saved?”) I thought it made an excellent query for an ordination examination, just the sort of thing the candidate was likely to face in the church. The answer almost certainly appears in our passage. “For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.”

I knew at that Presbytery meeting, as I know now, that the hisses and boos came from those who occupy a part of the Presbyterian family that does not think in terms of being saved. Indeed, in these verse Paul writes explicitly not of salvation, but of mercy. His focus lies squarely on the grace of God. The “gifts and call” phrase almost certainly refers not to eternal life but to the gift of forgiveness and the call to witness to Christ incumbent on all who know the mercy of God. *But the implication that this passage refers also to salvation is inescapable.* Every twist and turn in it leads to this conclusion. God's mercy leads to God's forgiving disobedient humanity—both Jew and Gentile. God's forgiveness comes to us as the greatest gift of all. For reasons beyond human comprehension, but which spring from God's steadfast love for us, we escape the judgment we deserve. The surprising, mysterious nature of the whole thing inspires Paul's heartfelt words about an “unsearchable”, “inscrutable” God. Quoting Job Paul asks, “Who has given (God) a gift that requires repayment?” Answer: nobody. No, it's all grace. Forgiveness, salvation, all of it.

Maya Angelou made plain the mystery is not our suffering, but the richness of

our gift and call. And so, in the spirit of poetry I offer you an image. Think of well-chewed bubble gum. It has lost its taste. You can stretch it out to a surprising length. Once spat out, it often gets stepped upon. In our times many of feel like that wad of well-chewed gum. We've lost our taste for life. We feel stretched beyond limit. It seems like we've been spat out and trodden upon. Whether teachers—at all levels; seniors living in sudden isolation; parents getting different news each day about when and if the schools will open—and then close; leaders having to make impossible decisions: these and many others of us have about had enough.

In an article published in Friday's Tribune Star a school board member for a suburban district in South Carolina was quoted as saying, "We have two impossible choices: either we have to decide to run the risk of infection by opening up our buildings, or we have to decide to run the risk of not opening and possibly contributing to higher numbers of physical and substance abuse, suicide risk for our teens, and more. ***And we have to decide.***" As I read these words I could relate to her thoughts and feelings. In a smaller way, our leadership team here, the elders, task forces and staff (including me) ***have had to decide.*** And we have had to decide after long since starting to have felt like well chewed bubble gum.

And so, to you teachers I say, "The gifts and call of God are irrevocable...O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" God has given you the voice and the talents to do whatever job God has given you. As our substitute preacher last week

correctly stated, this is not the same as claiming God will never give you more than you can handle. It is rather the claim that God's mysterious purposes will continue to work themselves out through you. And it will happen in the community of the Body of Christ. We, your brothers and sisters, are with you in Spirit.

To you seniors I say, "The gifts and call of God are irrevocable...O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" God has given you the voice and the talents to do whatever job God has given you. As our substitute preacher last week correctly stated, this is not the same as claiming God will never give you more than you can handle. It is rather the claim that God's mysterious purposes will continue to work themselves out through you. And it will happen in the community of the Body of Christ. We, your brothers and sisters, are with you in Spirit.

To you leaders I say, "The gifts and call of God are irrevocable...O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" God has given you the voice and the talents to do whatever job God has given you. As our substitute preacher last week correctly stated, this is not the same as claiming God will never give you more than you can handle. It is rather the claim that God's mysterious purposes will continue to work themselves out through you. And it will happen in the community of the Body of Christ. We, your brothers and sisters, are with you in Spirit.

Our substitute preacher two weeks ago, Alan Harder, gave us solid background on the book of Isaiah. He referenced the three parts of it. He even used the informal title for Second Isaiah, to which our 40th chapter today belongs: “The Book of Consolation.” Isaiah 40 begins with the familiar words, “‘Comfort, comfort my people,’ says the Lord.” Our verses ask three rhetorical questions. Who measured creation? Who counseled the Lord? Whom did God consult on matters of justice and wisdom? The three questions have the same answer: the Spirit of God. No other being has the power, the knowledge to direct God's self. Isaiah's message is clear: God has this. God runs this. God understands all with perfect clarity. Trust, therefore, in God.

Paul understands this teaching. After speaking frankly about our disobedience, he repeats a claim he has made repeatedly in Romans: though we do not deserve it, in mercy God forgives and calls us. Paul freely admits he cannot explain this except by grace. It *is* inscrutable. It *is* mysterious. Yet it *is* how it *is*.

Trust in God. Each person in Christ has received irrevocable forgiveness. Each person in Christ has an irrevocable call. If God has gifted and called you to teach, teach with peace in your heart. If God has called you to lead, lead with peace in your heart. God's got this. At times, it will definitely feel like more than we can handle. We may feel like well chewed bubble gum, but God is still working the plan through us. God remains in charge. This is both encouraging and fearsome. But it is how it is. So let us join the Apostle Paul in praising God's inscrutable decision to make it happen, through us, even in times like these.