

Old Testament lesson – Isaiah 66:10-24

New Testament lesson – Luke 10:1-24

We Win

Several months ago, I decided I should preach a series of sermons about prayer. I felt pretty strongly that God wanted us to become a more prayerful congregation. At the same time, Annette decided to do a series on prayer with the Monday morning study group. When we shared this information with each other, we realized we had not really “decided” anything. We had apparently responded to the nudging of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer is a very, very powerful thing. It’s not because we are powerful people. It has nothing to do with how eloquent our prayers are. Prayer is powerful because it involves God. We pray to the Father, in the name of the Son and with the Holy Spirit helping us.

And when you tap into God’s power through prayer, you become dangerous to the devil. That may sound like a drawback, but if you are not a danger to the devil, he is the dangerous one in your life. He will always want to *resume* his powerful position of being an unseen, undetected danger in your life, and he will try to scare you away from praying.

He has millennia of experience, and he will attack our most vulnerable spot. He often chooses family members. Thus, our oldest son found himself at a point of crisis in his life. I asked the council to pray for him without giving details. Without those details, I suppose some thought I was exaggerating the crisis, but I was not.

I don’t know who all prayed for him. We had people all over the place praying for him. It worked. He reached a breaking point in his own will. He had thought he could solve his problems, but he finally reached a breaking point where he realized he just could not do it. God broke him. He broke his pride and his arrogance, his anger and his self-sufficiency.

It has been an amazing transformation to watch. We talk about things I never expected to discuss with him. It wasn’t that I did not think God would come through and bring him back

into the faith; I just did not expect some of the depth, and certainly not this soon after his return.

Several nights ago we were discussing some study material he received at the Crossing. He thought they were emphasizing the humanity of Jesus and ignoring his divinity. Was he really tempted as we are? How much of the divine nature did he give up when he “emptied himself,” as Paul says in Philippians? How much of the future did he know? Obviously he knew some, but by his own admission he does not know all of it. We talked after a couple of text messages that kicked it off. We talked for 17 minutes and 34 seconds. I checked my phone record.

What we have witnessed in our son’s life is a victory of good over evil, a victory won by God. While it’s true that we can not speak of our final victory until we draw our last breath, I think our son is off to a very good start, and he is headed in the right direction. I try to avoid giving him unsolicited advice about what I think he ought to do, or what changes he needs to make. And there are still quite a few. But I am confident that God will show him what changes HE wants my son to make, and when.

Both of our Scripture lessons are about God’s victory. But there are questions about the time of those victories.

In our OT lesson, the first several verses could be understood to apply to the restoration of Israel to their home country. The lectionary reading ended at v. 14. But there is already a hint there of what is to follow: *his indignation is against his enemies*.

This whole passage is the very end of the book of Isaiah. It speaks of the restoration of Israel following the Babylonian exile, but it goes further. This passage also speaks of the ultimate restoration of God’s people and the final defeat of the enemies of God and of God’s people. It does so in rather graphic terms.

God is going to execute his judgement upon the earth with fire and sword, and there will be many slain. To quote the president, it will be like nothing anyone has ever seen. But in this case, it truly will be.

However, there is a flip side to this death and destruction. Messengers will be sent to the farthest points of the world to declare God's glory among all the nations, that is, among all the Gentiles. Tarshish, Put, Lud, Tubal, and Javan were simply a selection of places to depict how widespread would be this declaration of God's glory.

As a result, God is going to bring "all your brethren" from these places to Jerusalem, the holy mountain. They will come by horses, chariots, litters, mules, camels – in other words, by every possible means. We might as well substitute into that list planes, trains, automobiles, buses, and bicycles.

There will a great evangelistic movement that announces God's glory all over the world. It will result in the final harvest of souls for God's kingdom. When they arrive, worship of God will be continuous. It will no longer occur only on sabbath days or at festivals determined by the lunar calendar. Worship will occur "from new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath." Worship will be 24/7/365.

That sounds like the sort of description of heaven you would hear in the Book of Revelation, even the part about the new heavens and new earth.

Isaiah's final word on the subject is a dire warning. Do not rebel against God. If you rebel, you will wind up among the dead bodies eaten by worms that do not die, consumed by an unquenchable fire, something abhorrent to behold. That is not a pretty picture. I suppose one can understand why those who make the lectionary did not include this part.

And yet, I do wonder why. If you were going to describe the post-game scenes of the two cities with teams in the Super Bowl, one would be a great party and the other would show depressed

people, sitting around looking shocked that their team lost. The lectionary writers would not want to describe those scenes because one of them is depressing.

That may be, but we are with God's team. We know ahead of time that we win. We win because God wins. I am always amused by people who describe their team's play as if they were a player. "Oh, yeah, we really had a good game. We really showed the Yankees a thing or two." Really? I didn't know you played in the game.

But in this case, we really are on his team. We all have parts to play, whether great or small. The chances are that our part will be small in the overall scheme of things, but that does not mean it is insignificant.

Perhaps we have some role to play in casting Satan out of heaven. Our NT lesson tells of the second missionary group that Jesus sent out, after he sent out the twelve. That makes these seventy people also apostles. The word *apostle* is taken from the Greek word ἀπόστολος (apostolos), which simply means "one who is sent." That is different from the church *office* of apostle, I suppose, but these 70 were sent by Jesus to preach and heal and proclaim the kingdom of God in the places where he was about to go. They were his advance team, so to speak, and their instructions were virtually identical to the twelve who were sent out in chapter 9.

In the warning to cities such as Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum, we can hear echoes of Isaiah. Jesus compares them unfavorably to cities outside of Israel, warning of their eventual destruction. The implication is that when the gospel is preached in those cities outside of Israel, when God's glory is declared among those Gentiles, they will be more receptive to the good news.

When the seventy returned to Jesus, they expressed their joy at being able to cast out demons from people who were troubled by them. They had no doubt seen Jesus do this, but this was the first time they had actually done it themselves. Just imagine what a thrill it would

have been, to arrive in a town announcing the coming Kingdom of God, as Jesus is about to visit. Then someone comes up with a child or other loved one who is under the influence of an unclean spirit. And then, using the authority given by Jesus, they cast it out and saw the person immediately healed.

This experience was probably repeated over and over again, among all seventy men. However, Jesus told them that was not as important as they thought. What was important was that their names were written in heaven. As Isaiah had said, their names would remain before the LORD God of Israel.

Jesus tells these disciples that he saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Exactly what that means is not completely clear. Does the lightning reference mean it happened quickly, or does it mean there was a display of great power? Did Jesus observe this happening as the disciples were engaged in their ministry, or did he observe this at some time in the past? Or perhaps it was even some event that had not yet taken place in our time line, but it was sometime off in the future, as when John saw it happen in Revelation 12. God is not limited by time as we are, so we can not be sure.

Jesus rejoiced because he was finally able to reveal some of these things to his followers. They were not the great leaders, they were not the learned scholars. They were simple people who had responded to his call to follow him. He told them how blessed they were to see what they had seen, things which many prophets and kings wanted to see, but that were not given to them to see.

What has been shown to *us* in these lessons? This one thing, to be sure: We win. To be more precise, God wins, but we are on his team, so we win. We are the players who are allowed to participate in the victory, but only if we do our part. We are the workers in the harvest, carrying the good news of the gospel, the good news of God's love to others around us.

If you pay attention to me for very long, you will find out that I am very interested in politics. But this victory I am talking about has nothing to do with politics. It has nothing to do with any political party or politician. It doesn't even have anything to do with any country or countries, except possibly Israel.

Why do you suppose that Israel is the focus of so much attention? It's a tiny country that doesn't bother any other country unless someone bothers them. And why does the whole world seem to become involved in marching and organizing and protesting against that tiny nation? Years ago they agreed to a two-nation solution for the so-called Palestinian problem. And why won't any Arab nations accept refugees from Gaza? There are unseen powers at work well beyond what most people can imagine.

Now, God has not revealed anything special to me about his plans for Israel or the future of the world. I would not expect him to. And the information revealed in Scripture is cryptic enough that I don't really trust anyone who says they can interpret it in detail. But I know this much from Scripture, from the prophets and from Jesus: we win. God wins.

That is comforting news, regardless of whatever must occur before the final victory. Regardless of the political and social division in our own country, regardless of racial tension that people try to drum up, regardless of wars and rumors of wars the world over, we can be confident of this fact: our God wins, and so we win. It may turn out that we have been on the wrong side of some political or social issue, or we supported the wrong party – though it's quite possible that no party is the right party in God's eyes – it may turn out we should have done many things differently. But if we are seeking to be obedient and follow Jesus faithfully, we win.

This is not the triumphalist victory of a sports team, where its fans gloat over the opponents' fans. This is not the victory of a political candidate who wins by a couple percentage points and calls it a landslide. This is not the

victory indicated by a study that proves one side right in some controversial issue. This is not the victory of a poll that shows more people believe one thing than another. Those victories are gone in a blink of God's eye.

This victory is forever. It is a victory of great joy, but like the victory of a war, it will come at great cost. Those who rebel against God will be lost. The image of that last verse of Isaiah is a sobering thought in the midst of a joyful win. Nevertheless, in the end, thanks to God and God alone, he wins, and we win with him. Amen.