

## **Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year C)**

22 April 2022

Cathedral Church of St Peter, St Petersburg

✠ I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

If you paid really close attention to the readings from Isaiah and Philippians as well as the Psalm, you should be a little confused, because we seem to be getting contradictory messages. Should we pay attention to the past or not?

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old,” says Isaiah. And Paul tells us that he is “forgetting what lies behind.” Yet the Psalm is all about a glorious memory of the past: “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.”

How do we get clear on this? I think we’ll do best if we focus on our epistle—and that will pull the other readings together.

What is Paul doing in his letter to the Philippians? He’s dealing with a church that has become stuck. Or to be more precise, he’s dealing with a church that has a radical, dangerous element in it, a group that is trying to keep people stuck in the old ways. These are people who are insisting that the old, familiar legal requirements, the old, familiar rituals and commandments, the old, familiar marks of identity that told us who is in and who is out, are still in force, still to be followed, still binding on everyone.

And Paul is really at his wit’s end about these folks. This is not the gospel I preached to you, he says. Why are you being pulled back into the old ways? Why do the old, familiar legal requirements, the old, familiar rituals and commandments, the old, familiar marks of identity still hold such an appeal for you, still entice you and tempt you away from the gospel that I shared with you?

And so at the beginning of today’s epistle, Paul, in his frustration and concern for his beloved Philippians, makes a dramatic gesture. He pulls out his résumé and shares it with them.

The old, familiar legal requirements? I met them as well as anyone ever has. “As to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

The old, familiar rituals and commandments? I was a Pharisee – as hard core as they come.

The old, familiar marks of identity that told us who is in and who is out? Top this: I was circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews. If anybody was ever *in*, I was in—I was so in that I also thought I knew better than anyone else who was out, and so in my zeal I persecuted the church.

It is, by the standards of that dangerous, radical element—and the standards of those who are enticed and tempted by it—an unbelievably impressive résumé. Unbeatable, really. Paul knows this. So he sets this unbeatable résumé before them and then, dramatically, tears it up into tiny pieces and calls it crap.

Oh, you don’t see the word “crap” in our translation. They go with a nice genteel word, “rubbish.” But take my word for it: the Greek word means “excrement,” and if I weren’t afraid of getting in trouble, I’d use an even more vigorous translation than “crap.”

So I want you to be clear on just how dramatic this gesture is. Paul puts forward his truly impressive credentials—he gets their attention, reminds them of how high his score is on all the things they care about—and then simply says, “It’s all crap.”

It’s not even that all of that was bad—Paul is perfectly willing to talk about some of those credentials as “gain”—but by comparison with “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord,” those things count for nothing, and indeed less than nothing. They are not really gain, but loss. They are the things that keep people stuck, keep people zealously guarding what’s old and familiar, keep people patrolling the recognized marks of identity. “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old,” God says through Isaiah. And why not? Because “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” If the former things, the old, familiar things, keep you stuck, keep you from perceiving the new thing that is springing forth, those things have to be left behind as just so much crap.

And that new thing that God is doing is of “surpassing value,” Paul tells us. It is not the value of credentials, of past accomplishments and awards, of enviable entries on our spiritual résumé. It is not, he says, “a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ.” That expression “faith in Christ” could also be translated “the faithfulness of Christ.” And maybe that would be even better here. It’s not because of what we’ve done, but because of what he has done, because of his faithfulness to us throughout our own personal histories, in the history of this Cathedral parish, in the history of this diocese, and of course above all because he was faithful unto death, even death on the cross. We look at Christ’s résumé, not our own—or we look at our own only because we can now see that all the good entries are really about him and not about us.

Our credentials, our past triumphs, our impressive spiritual résumé—it’s crap, *if it gets us stuck.*

The old, familiar requirements, the old, familiar rituals and commandments, the old, familiar marks of identity that told us who is in and who is out—it’s crap: *if it gets us stuck.*

The memories of our past sins, our past unfaithfulness—it’s crap: *if it gets us stuck*

But neither the things we think we can be proud of, nor the things that we look back on with shame, have the power to get us stuck, if we can look to the faithfulness of Christ. Then, “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [we can] press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Honestly, I’ve been feeling a little stuck myself. As so often happens, I started this Lent off really well. I was adding some pretty decent entries to my spiritual résumé there at the beginning. But then, for various reasons, I got a little adrift, and I wasn’t doing Lent very well any more. Maybe you’ve experienced that too. And there’s that feeling that, well, I have failed in the work that this Lent has set before me, and now it’s just two weeks til Easter and I’m sort of stuck in this disappointment, and I guess I can just coast toward Easter but I won’t really have gained what I should have gained.

And then these readings come along and remind me that I don't have to be stuck, even with just two weeks to go. I can quit worrying about how much I've gained or how much I've lost, because it was all going to be crap anyway if I got stuck worrying about how skimpy my résumé was—or being pleased about how impressive my résumé was. It is Christ's faithfulness that's at issue, not mine. How you do keep from being stuck—stuck in the glories of the past, stuck in the failures of the past, unable to move from what's old and familiar? Perhaps we don't have—certainly I don't have—a glorious résumé like Paul's that we can tear to shreds in a dramatic gesture. Perhaps we can't be Paul.

But we can be Mary. There she was, at a meal with Jesus. Her brother Lazarus was there, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Her sister Martha was there, bustling around serving everyone, as usual. And Mary, looking back with gratitude at Jesus' faithfulness to her and her family, looking ahead to that still greater faithfulness that would soon take him to a cross and a tomb, threw herself at Jesus' feet and offered the most precious thing she had to offer. And of course she got the usual kind of resistance from someone who was stuck on proper credentials and proper procedure and what's-in-it-for-me, and Jesus showed his usual level of concern with that sort of thing, which is none at all. And Jesus took this gift with him all the way to the Cross.

It's time for the meal with Jesus. Perhaps you come to the table with an impressive résumé; perhaps you are embarrassed by the skimpiness of your résumé. Doesn't matter. Throw yourself at Jesus' feet, and offer the most precious thing you have to offer, yourself, a gift so precious and powerful that it fills the air with the sweet fragrance of pure love. He will take it—he will take you—with him to the Cross, and passing through death in his perfect faithfulness, he will give you a share in his resurrection.

“Not that [we] have already obtained this [resurrection] or have already reached the goal; but [we] press on to make it [our] own, because Christ Jesus has made [us] his own. . . . forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [we] press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus,” to whom, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and glory, world without end. *Amen.*