

January 12, 2020 Treasure: Hidden But Real 2 Corinthians 4:1-15

Back in 2015 we made our first trip to Israel. By far the most common question I would get asked was, "What was the most surprising thing that you learned that affects how you read the Bible?" My answer as a person raised in Northern Ontario has consistently been, the definition of wilderness. Even though I knew in some corner of my brain that Israel is for the most part, a barren land, when I read that Jesus went into the wilderness to pray, I pictured a landscape like Northern Ontario. Big trees, rocks, rivers and lakes. Israel has mountains so they have an abundance of rock. They have nothing that compares to our forests, wood is scarce. They have one river...the Jordan. They have one fresh water lake, the Sea of Galilee, which is typical of small northern lakes in Ontario. It is typical of the middle East countries. It has an abundance of desert.

I mention that again because when I read in 2 Corinthians about treasures hidden in Jars of clay I think of the site where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. When we were there, there was little green space to be seen in any direction. Dry wadis were the main feature. That and sand. Our tour guide told us that he used to say, "It does not rain here." A tour he was leading got caught in a shower that lasted 15 minutes one time. As a result his line became "It rains here once every ten years or so."

In the desert, the landscape has been sculpted by wind and flash floods during the occasional rain storm, creating an eerie desert landscape. In the exposed rock faces one can see caves...small caves. A goat got into one such cave and found a food source. When the shepherd rescued his goat, he discovered a huge cache of clay jars, containing what we have come to call the Dead Sea Scrolls. Their importance to us as Christians is simply this. What the goat was eating were papyrus scrolls of, among things, ancient copies of Biblical documents...the oldest copies we now possess. And what those ancient New Testament manuscripts revealed was the outstanding accuracy of the Biblical record that has fed the faithful for the balance of 2000 years.

The portion I read to you from the 4th chapter of Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthian Church is one of the most encouraging portions of Scripture that I have discovered in a long time. I chose those words carefully. **ONE OF THE MOST ENCOURAGING PORTIONS OF SCRIPTURE THAT I HAVE DISCOVERED IN A LONG TIME!** For faithful Christians, even Ministers of Word and Sacrament, there are times when we read the Bible and just do not see much to get excited about. And then there are moments of revelation. In such moments it is like every word had been written just for us, given just for us, in moments like the ones we are experiencing and challenged by at the time. I want to underline two things give us precious moments with our Lord when we read Scripture. One is the current state of our own spiritual journey. The fact is our faith

journey can become routine. And routine tends to cause us to take things for granted. If you are reading the Bible and the thought occurs, “well I have always known that,” it is fertile ground for missing things that are like jewels. The current state of our spirit is important. It is my experience that being in need when reading the Word is better than “feeling fine,” or “having no problems.”

I am certain that when I get excited about a verse or a portion of Scripture I have just read, that God’s Holy Spirit is the key factor. He is always ripe to teach. The problem is, I am not always ripe to learn. I say again, need, being in difficulty of some kind, has always made me ripe ground for the work God wants to do in me. So I stumbled on this passage. I stumbled on it when I needed it.

Here is how it begins: “Therefore, since through God’s mercy, we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.” That is an important insight! I have never doubted that the ministry I have been privileged to exercise over the last half century, was at the calling of God. That is how I got into the faith from non-belief. And that is how I got, not only into ministry, but into each stage of this ministry. As most of you are aware, over the last 5 years, I have more than once had to admit, I continually face the reality of my mortality. I get asked by colleagues and friends when I am going to really retire. A friend who I have not seen or even spoken to for forty years called me over the holidays. He expressed concern that I was still carrying the

burdens of ministry. He asked me why, I do this. THROUGH GOD'S MERCY WE HAVE THIS MINISTRY, AND THEREFORE WE DO NOT LOSE HEART. Here is the jewel, it is through God's mercy, (saved through faith in Jesus), I was called to this. I do not lose heart, not because I am strong, and not because I am good, but because GOD IS MERCIFUL. If there is power in ministry...the power to change lives, the power to change things, the power to help, the POWER IS NOT MINE. IT IS THE POWER OF GOD'S MERCY.

Paul is talking about his ministry to the Corinthians. I am talking about my ministry here, among you. If I do anything good, if I touch a life and make a difference, it is not me, but Christ in me, God in me, the Holy Spirit working through me, and sometimes, in spite of me.

And this is where the Dead Sea Scroll discovery comes into the picture. The scrolls were found in Clay Jars. Paul talks of himself in those kind of words. He says, "We have this treasure (the good news concerning Jesus) in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." Many of those scrolls and even more fragments of scrolls were found in and around clay jars that had been broken. The goat was not the only creature that found papyrus tasty food. What Paul is talking about is the reality that it is, by the mercy of God in our brokenness that we become tools fit for the work of the Lord our God. Facing our limitations, and yes our weaknesses, we become clay that can be molded and shaped to

the work of our Master who is Jesus. In a particularly embarrassing moment during my radiation therapy I said, "This disease (cancer) robs you of your dignity. And when you think you have been broken, it teaches you, you still can be further broken, and it reduces you further." Don't pity me! As my sister in the faith likes to remind me, "He is still working on me." Which means apparently, there is still work to do, and by God's mercy I am still fit to serve others in His name.

This body of mine is like a clay jar. It is increasingly fragile. There are definitely some cracks that will eventually cause whole pieces to be broken away. And yet, I still contain the words that Jesus saves. I can still testify to the fact of God's presence. I can still pray and live to see a prayer answered. Moments of grace not only in my life but in the lives of those with whom I am privileged to serve, and continue in the journey. There are moments when any semblance of giftedness or power seems invisible...like the manuscript deep within the jar, unseen in the light of day...and yet it came to light. It was found. It has been studied revealing the accuracy of the testimony of those who believed in Jesus over the centuries.

Paul was under fire. He realized he still had time to serve, but that it was also very possible this journey to Rome which ultimately lay before him could claim his life. He shares in that moment of awareness, the victory that faith in Jesus gives to every single person who believes. "We are hard pressed on

every side but not crushed.” Were he crushed, he could not continue to serve God’s purposes. “(We are) perplexed but not in despair.” He does not pretend he knows everything or understands everything, but he is not lost. “Persecuted, but not abandoned.” There is no question there are forces that would bring him harm if they could, but he rests in the presence of God in the midst of these circumstances. “(We are) struck down but not destroyed.” God is with him. The Spirit of Christ is in him. And therefore, he has promises to keep and miles to go before he sleeps. Faith and hope! Praise God, it is true. It is real.

Let us pray;

Lord in the midst of the journey of faith we discover the limitations of our bodies. And yet we continue to see that YOU can still make use of us, and use of our testimony. We thank you for this insight. We thank you for the mercy that is in YOUR grace toward us, as the Scripture makes clear. Use us we pray for the outworking of your will. In Jesus name. Amen