

“Deceptive Sight”

Reading: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

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If you've ever heard a fairy tale, you surely know that if you're traveling along and come across a frightening old woman who asks for your help, you would be wise to do what you can to help her, or at least treat her with respect. Fairy tales help us remember that what you see is not always accurate, so you never know: the scary old woman lurking at the crossroads might be a witch who will turn you into a monster if you don't treat her kindly, or maybe she's a fairy queen in disguise, and she'll give you a great reward if you listen to her. That's the logic of fairy tales, where nothing is quite what it seems and an apparently insignificant encounter with an apparently insignificant person can change your life. Everyone knows that a warty, slimy frog might turn into a handsome, powerful prince if it's kissed by a princess, but a handsome, powerful prince might turn into a frog if he's so arrogant that he thinks doesn't have to treat other people with respect, and he offends a sorceress. An ordinary-looking forest or a simple cave might conceal a fairy kingdom full of beauty and peril; you might think you're just going out for a walk and you could find yourself on an adventure. An ordinary, everyday boy or girl whom everyone ignores might turn out to be the hero who can save the kingdom when the king's greatest knights have failed.

Our world is certainly full of amazing wonders, but of course there aren't really fairy queens living in the woods and disguised sorceresses lurking at the crossroads. But even so, all those old stories that rely on disguise and surprise and flipping your expectations on their head are right to remind us that what you see is not always the truth of the matter. The surface conceals a lot. People are notorious for looking at the outward appearance; we always have been. Both of our Scripture readings for today remind us of that. They're not quite fairy tales, but they point us to the truth that God regularly works in ways that our eyes are not used to seeing, and in fact the truth often escapes us while we focus on other things.

We began by reading a passage out of 2 Corinthians, and the Apostle Paul says some strange things in it if you think about it. Toward the beginning of the passage he says this: "I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." And that sounds like pretty good news. But then Paul starts talking at length about the hardships he's suffered through. Beatings, imprisonments, riots, hard work, sleepless nights, hunger, poverty, sorrow, and on and on. And from what we know about the life of Paul from his other letters and elsewhere in the New Testament, he's not exaggerating; he really did live through all of that and probably quite a bit more. This does not seem like the favor of God, and the day of salvation does not seem to have reached Paul yet, if that's the kind of thing he's living through for the sake of God.

But what's more, if we pay close attention it becomes clear that we're overhearing half of a conversation between Paul the Corinthian Christians in which there is some question regarding Paul's qualifications as a leader over their congregation, and Paul is using these miseries as evidence of his authority. He's not doing it by guilt-tripping them, though, as some people might do: "Look at all I suffered or your sake, and now you're questioning me?" No, Paul is commending himself in every way; these terrible things he has suffered are commendations in his favor. These are the medals on his chest that he keeps polished and on display.

The other half of the conversation, apparently, is that the Corinthians would rather listen to some more conventionally impressive church leaders. Some of them were probably charlatans, but apparently not all of them were. Some of them were just better looking than Paul and could put on a better show. And that makes it all the more odd for Paul to be using his failures and rejections as his commendations. If you're looking to hire someone for a job, and one candidate has tons of education and ten years of experience without a blemish, and another candidate brags about getting fired from his last three jobs and doesn't mention a thing about having any training, the choice would seem clear. Or if you need to hire a plumber to work on your house, and the first company you call mentions that their last few customers beat them and chased them off, and another time they started a riot, you're probably going to keep looking. But that's basically what Paul is saying here. The other guys might be impressive and good looking and great speakers, but I've been beaten and chased off and thrown in jail.

And it's not like Paul doesn't have any qualifications that he could be bragging about. If we read a bit between the lines and pull in some other passages of Paul's writings, we learn that he is holding up these hardships as his credentials when he could be mentioning many other things. Paul was highly educated, well trained, a member of an elite party within his nation, and he was a Roman citizen, which was rare and would certainly entitle you to bragging rights. But none of that is worth mentioning; he instead focuses on the beatings, imprisonments, scandals, threats to his life. Paul clearly is seeing things quite differently than most people would in his situation.

Because to him, *now* is the time of God's favor; *now* is the day of salvation. The surface is the beatings and imprisonment and threats, but the truth is that Christ has come, Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again. That truth changes the meaning of almost everything that happens in our lives. Your trials, your scars, your fears, your uncertainties, as terrible as they may be, can take on a new meaning because of the truth of Christ. Paul understood that the appearance of his circumstances didn't necessarily have anything to do with the truth, purely because of the work of Christ. Things may appear to be one way in your life according to most people, but because of what Jesus has done, the meaning of those things has changed radically.

Jesus was with His disciples one evening, taking a boat across the lake. It's a familiar story; one of the classic stories about Jesus. Any time Jesus gets near water in one of the gospels, you can bet something is about to happen. A sudden storm blows up, and it's bad enough to threaten to swamp their boat. They're all understandably worried about drowning, all except for Jesus, who is managing to sleep through it all. The disciples wake Him up and ask Him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" I have to wonder if they hoped, on some level, that He could save them, or whether they just wanted Him to panic along with them. Jesus gets up and rebukes the storm, and immediately things calm down. And at this point in Mark's gospel, the disciples haven't seen anything like this. They've seen Jesus cast out demons and heal people, but this is on a completely different level, and they begin to wonder what sort of person this is. They're just beginning to see clearly that they're sitting in a boat with the God of the universe.

The crisis of the moment takes on an entirely different perspective when you're sitting in a boat with God Himself. What sort of person is this, who is obeyed even by the forces of nature? Even a catastrophic storm knows to listen to this Jesus, and then He looks at the people gathered around

Him and challenges them, asking if *they* still have no faith. The threatening storm can become a chance to see the power of God on display, but are your eyes open to witness it?

We have this problem the church calls sin, this problem of not having your eyes open and looking toward God. It's the problem of rebelling against God and being separated from God. One of the biggest problems of sin is that it skews our ability to choose good priorities and discern things of value and worth. The further we stray from God, the harder it can be for us to see the truth. The greater our separation from God, the more difficult it is for us to discern value and meaning in the events of our lives and the people around us. And in those areas in which our world has strayed from God, and those areas are many, our world likewise chooses poorly in its values. And those poor choices have eternal consequences.

And that is the difference that enables Paul to live through the trials he lived through and insist that now is the time of God's favor. Many times we'll face hard times and we'll wonder about that: either God doesn't favor me because I've done something wrong, or God doesn't favor me because of something wrong with God, that He is unpredictable or spiteful or weak. But no, Paul keeps insisting that through the beatings he faced for Jesus' name, he was still living in the time of God's favor. It's not a sign that God had abandoned him or that Paul wasn't good enough to earn soft treatment. On the contrary, for Paul, suffering for the name of Christ while carrying out Christ's mission became a sign that God had counted Paul worthy to participate in the sufferings of Christ, to bear scars for Jesus' kingdom, and to show that he trusted in Jesus enough to carry on through the circumstances. He had the perspective to see the truth: that the circumstances of life, no matter how bad they are, are not an indication that God has failed; they are a chance to grow in our trust in Him.

Likewise, Jesus could be in the boat that was in danger of being swamped, surrounded by a howling storm, and still wonder why the others were afraid. It didn't compute for Him that they would doubt, even in such circumstances, because He knew that God was at work and that He would be faithful. He knew that nature itself was more likely to obey Him than the changeable hearts of the people around Him. To their cries of "don't you care if we drown," He could respond with "why do you doubt?"

Our eyes were made to gaze upon our God in love and worship, but our rebellion has shifted our gaze from the greatness of God to the nearness of our circumstances. Hard times come in our lives, and some of them are indeed hard times, and sometimes terrible things happen, and sometimes we are even attacked by evil, and we don't want to pretend that those things aren't bad. But it doesn't minimize the wrongness of those circumstances to lift our eyes toward God and remember that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again, and therefore even evil circumstances can be redeemed through the blood of Christ. We remember the mighty power and the enduring faithfulness of the God sitting in the boat with us during that storm, and our focus shifts from the fleeting importance of those circumstances to the enduring faithfulness of our God. In the midst of beatings and imprisonments and threats, we carry on with the mission of Jesus, because the mission changes the meaning of the suffering: rather than being a punishment to be endured or an abandonment to be lamented, suffering can become a test that brings strength and a witness to the power of Christ.

One person in the midst of a storm cries out, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” Another person survives attack after attack and proclaims that “now is the time of God’s favor; now is the day of salvation.” The difference is having the eyes to see the truth of the storm, that the storm is not greater than God, that the pain is not too great to be redeemed, that our circumstances will not prevent Jesus from returning and making all things right. You may be in the midst of a storm right now. If not, you’ll surely face one at some point. As bad as the storm is, the truth of the matter is that God is greater, and His faithfulness can give you new meaning, new strength, and new mission even through the worst storm. So which will be your cry? Will you cry out, “Lord, don’t you care if we drown?” Or will you proclaim, even in the storm, that now is the day of salvation?



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