

Mark 6:1–13

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 3 July 2012

We have the texts for Pentecost 6, and we'll dig in. The texts for this Sunday set up a sharp contrast between faith and unbelief, and indicate how Jesus intends to deal with rejection.

Psalm 123 and 2 Corinthians 12:2–10 show what happens when faith takes over. Both are beautiful examples of just how faith works. Psalm 123 speaks of a servant looking to the hand of its master. If you take the servant out of the equation, with our normal democratic expectations about that relationship, and think of a lover looking to the hand of the beloved, you'll get a much better picture. We have some great people in our congregation who have been married over sixty years. She has just come down with Parkinson's. She has the mask already, though she still smiles pretty broadly. But her husband, whom she calls Bobby, watches her every move. He is attentive to her in the most wonderful way, always watching out for her. That's a picture of faith. Faith looks to the other in confidence and joy and hope and expectation, and in doing so it has the kind of attentiveness the psalm identifies.

2 Corinthians 12 is a favorite passage, of course. Paul describes the shape of his life in Christ. He speaks a little obliquely, of somebody else who was caught up to the third heaven, but from the context it was clearly him. He exults in this, and in what has been given to him in faith. At the same time he speaks of the thorn. He has had a thorn in his flesh, and he has prayed three times that it be removed. And the answer has come: no. "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." That, of course, is faith. Faith knows the power of the gospel. It also knows its own weakness. And as it knows its own weakness, it can speak of both sides: of being preserved in faith by the power of the gospel, and of being exposed to the forces that undermine faith in daily life. So we have the psalm and the second lesson working together.

But if we look at Ezekiel 2:1–5 and the Gospel side by side, we see how God deals with rebels. He's going after Israel once more. He hasn't given up yet, and apparently never will. "The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable," as Paul says in Romans. But now he is dealing with Israel's rejection, and in dealing with it he does not take no for an answer. Instead he sends a

preacher, and this one is a prophet, none other than Ezekiel himself: “Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me.” He is going once more, sending his Word once more, calling Israel back.

And then we have this great Gospel. My goodness. We’ve had the story of the stilling of the storm, and we’ve had Jesus going into the room of the little girl and raising her from the dead: Jesus at his very best, doing what Jesus does, graciously giving himself away. But now we get the underside of it. He is rejected. He goes to the most challenging, the riskiest of all places. He goes home. And of course, as soon as he gets there, everybody knows him. Everybody remembers the stories of when he was a kid. Everybody knows his family, and everybody knows the difficulties, and so everybody has a comment. What he meets is just flat-out unbelief. That’s quite an interesting encounter. “He was in the world, and the world did not know him.” That could be the summary of Jesus’ whole ministry.

And yet, even as the world knows him not, he doesn’t take no for an answer. Meeting rejection in Nazareth, he goes and finds himself twelve disciples to flood Israel with his preaching, so that the gospel can get out over and above, under, around, and through the very rejection. So again we see him dealing with the power of unbelief.

Preaching the Gospel Text

Given these themes, we’ll sort through the texts, beginning as usual with the supporting texts. In my training, my tradition, where I come from, you always preach on the gospel, unless there’s some compelling reason to change. So I’ve got a predilection. I learned this from none other than old Bill Lazareth, and I’ve treasured it all my life. The supporting texts give you instructions on how to preach the Gospel text. That’s the old Lutheran theory, and I’ve followed it all my life, and I’m too old and decrepit and Alzheimer’s-ridden to change now. So we’ll go through the supporting texts, and then come to this wonderful Gospel where Jesus meets unbelief flat in the face.

Psalm 123: Eyes on the Master’s Hand

If we take Psalm 123 and 2 Corinthians 12 together, we can start off with an old statement of Luther’s. “This is what makes our theology certain,” he writes in the Galatians commentary: “it takes us outside ourselves” and brings us to rest in Christ Jesus. It takes us outside ourselves, and that, of course, is what we see in both of these texts.

In Psalm 123 a servant, first a generic servant and then a female servant, looks to the hand of the master. You've seen this where people are accustomed to working together over the long term: a farmer and his son working together, or a farmer and his hired man, or a woman working in an office. People become so accustomed to one another that they know each other's routines and moves inside out and backwards. And they watch. They look. You can see it in other relationships in life as well, where the relationship is one of superior and inferior. The superior draws the eye of the inferior. The inferior pays very close attention to every move, because every move signals the way things are going.

And so we look to God's hand in the same way. I always think of my dog, who looks to my hand. We go for a walk every morning, and when we come home we play hide-and-seek with the dog. After years and years of this the dog knows there are no other places for us to hide, but wonders, What is it this time? And watches our hands, of course. So we, in faith, look to Christ Jesus. We look to his hand. We watch. We are taken beyond our own self-consciousness, taken up into his effort, into his work.

2 Corinthians 12: Power Made Perfect in Weakness

There is no better pairing for this psalm than 2 Corinthians 12. Here is the apostle Paul, in these verses, looking without question to Christ's hands.

Idolatry promises deliverance from trouble. You can always tell, because those who preach idolatry say, "Your problems are going to be solved if you give your life to me." So you give your life, and you wind up not only having lost your life but without the deliverance from your problems, exploited and used. You wind up on your back, sore and taken advantage of. That's the way idolatry works. It makes promises it can't keep. The promise of God uses the preposition "in." Psalm 46: God is "a very present help in trouble," in the trouble. This is the difference. Idolatry promises cheap deliverance, delivered without commitment. Faith speaks of a deliverance that takes place within, so that the reality of the suffering, the reality of the pain, the reality of contradiction, the reality of being set upon by other forces remains, and yet faith holds in it. So there are always these two realities in the life of faith: the reality of being beset, and the reality of being preserved in the midst of conflict, "a very present help in trouble."

That is what's happening in this wonderful passage. The apostle Paul speaks of a marvelous kind of transport in which he has been caught up to the third heaven. It sounds like some

magical mystery tour, the kind of thing we know from mystical literature, of being taken up into heaven itself. We don't want to despise that, just as we don't want to take it to the bank. Some people apparently have these experiences. But the interesting thing about the apostle Paul is that he isn't hustling off to the bank with it either. He's very modest about it. "I know a person in Christ," as though he were talking about somebody else, though of course you know it's him, "who was caught up to the third heaven," and heard things that are not to be told, and so on and so on. He speaks of himself in the third person and is a little embarrassed about it, a little hesitant, because when faith takes us outside ourselves, as soon as we start talking about ourselves you can smell it. The crap detector goes off. There's something screwy about hearing the story of Jesus and then standing up and making yourself the subject of the sentence. That just doesn't work. And the apostle Paul knows better. So he's backing around. I suppose he has an ego like the rest of us, and I suppose he'd like to take credit for this, but he knows better. His crap detector has gone off. So he will speak of God's power being made perfect in weakness. That's the answer he got from the Lord.

You've been around this thorn passage. Nobody knows what the thorn was. It might have been his eyes; there is some suggestion in Galatians that his eyes were troubling him. Some people think there was some other kind of chronic illness involved. Who knows? Paul never identifies it. It's our idle curiosity that wants to know and describe what it was. But he does the right thing: having this thorn, he applies to the Lord Jesus. He says, "I'd like to have this removed." He doesn't say, "What do you think?" He prays, and he prays earnestly that it might be removed.

These thorns are sometimes matters of illness. Sometimes they're matters of relationship: deadly relationships we can't extricate ourselves from, that we're just caught in. And some relationships go away but never go away: divorces, for example, or problems with children. You think you're done with a problem, and it rears up and bites you in the backside all over again. That's the nature of it.

So he had this thorn, and what we know about it beyond question is this: it wasn't removable. It wasn't something that could be taken out. There are situations like this, where the only way to solve the problem is to destroy it, and you can't do that without murder or something akin to it. So you're blighted, caught. You live in the relationship; you're caught in it. Like the thorn Paul complains of, it's inherent, part and parcel of everyday life. You can't live with it and you can't live without it; you're just caught in the middle. So whether it was a physical

illness or a relational difficulty, Paul was up to here with a problem. He prayed earnestly and didn't get the answer he was hoping for. He prayed again and still didn't get it. So he prayed the third time, and then finally he got the answer, whether in the form of a voice or of an implication; it's a little hard to know. But he finally got the message. "Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'"

That is about as precise a description of the nature of faith as you are ever going to find. Faith comes as the power of God into our weakness. It doesn't always solve or remove the problem; sometimes it even complicates the problem. Nevertheless there is a sense of being empowered, of being carried, sustained, blessed, of being given resources in the midst of the weakness that enable us to persevere and continue.

"So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses." What a paradox. When we boast, when we brag, it's always our self-transcendence and our achievement and our great heaven-storming abilities that we want to celebrate. But now, in faith, the apostle Paul has been turned out of himself, turned away from himself. "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." There you go. That's true faith. I don't know why this happens. I don't know what will happen. What I know is who is strong enough and who will sustain me: Christ will carry me.

And so he returns to his thorn, to the very circumstances of life that drove him to prayer. And when he returns to them, he returns not with an unanswered prayer but with the confidence that God's grace will sustain him in the exposure. There are the two characteristics: exposure, and strength in the face of the exposure. Faith holds in the face of disaster. "Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ." Well, how about that?

My old beloved teacher Roy Harrisville always used to say that the apostle Paul wanted his ministry to be cruciform, that is, to bear the signs of the cross. And here he is: weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities. You know him well enough from reading these letters all your life to know that this is a pretty good shorthand for all the troubles he endured. "For whenever I am weak," that is, when I am at the end of my resources, when there is no place else to turn, when I have exhausted every illusion, when I've turned everywhere and haven't found anything else, "then I am strong," because finally I've been brought to rest in

Christ. So in Psalm 123 and 2 Corinthians 12 we have two beautiful pictures of how faith works. It turns us to the other, so that our lives are taken up in him.

Ezekiel 2: A Nation of Rebels

With that we should look at the last of the supporting texts, Ezekiel 2. It's actually the first of them, but I've made it last because it provides an ideal transition into the Gospel for this Sunday. Ezekiel 2:1–5 picks up a theme that will be amplified in the Gospel according to Saint Mark.

The old Adam, the old sinner in us, always likes to treat faith and unbelief as though they were alternatives. So when you come to a Gospel like the one we're going to pick up, where Jesus can't do any miracles because of their unbelief, the old Adam immediately explains: "Yes, faith contributes the power necessary to ignite the grace Jesus gives," and so on. There's the alternative, faith or unbelief. What the old Adam doesn't recognize is that this is, in fact, unbelief. It treats Jesus as an alternative, treats the good Lord as an option, a slightly better but relatively equal option, and so turns God into a liar. And it enthrones the self. I become the power. I'm the one who makes the choices here. I'm the one who decides what's good and what's bad, the one who knows good from evil, and therefore I'm going to live forever. You recognize that line of hooey. No self-respecting bull would leave that behind with any kind of pride. It's just nonsense, just foolishness.

So the problem is this: the default position of the human heart is unbelief. From the time of the fall, from the time of Adam's first bite of that apple, with delectable, statuesque Eve handing it to him, minus an apron, unbelief has taken us over. And it has taken us over in such a way that we don't have alternatives. Faith is not an alternative. Unbelief is not an alternative. It is a choice that has already been made. It has been made for us, and that is our plight. We're stuck.

So when we look at the history of God's dealing with Israel, what we get is a history of rejection from start to finish. You remember the stories as well as I do. After the creation we've got the fall, and after the fall we've got further examples of the fall. Lamech's song in Genesis 4: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice: if Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold." The whole thing is multiplying, multiplying, multiplying. God chooses Abraham and Sarah to create a new nation, a nation that will believe. But that nation, like all the other peoples of the earth, stands under the indictment of both the pre-flood and the post-

flood narrative: “every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually,” “evil from youth.” How’s that? That’s bondage. That’s the default position of the human heart.

Out of this unbelief God has created a new people, but this new people remains vulnerable to it. So the history of Israel is an ongoing history of rejection, and of God’s refusal to take rejection as the final word. He is doing everything he can to redeem the creation, and in choosing Israel he wonders if he has made a big mistake. So in this text from Ezekiel he calls them a nation of rebels. I love it. They are the rebels, and as rebels, of course, they’re not thinking about faith; they’re thinking about how to take advantage. You can read some of these prophetic discourses and wonder whether the Anti-Defamation League wouldn’t have been called in to shut the prophets up, because when they start denouncing Israel, they go for the whole business. Israel’s rejection is carried out through the whole history: exile, one exile and then another, division into two nations, one falls and then the other falls. The whole blamed business is a history of disaster. This isn’t some anti-Semitic Lutheran talking; this is the story of the Old Testament.

And when we get that, we also get God’s determination to call them back. What does he do? He goes to this nation of rebels. “He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn.” How’s that? “I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’ Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.”

So how does God deal with unbelief? With this Word. He goes again. He sends a preacher once more, to take God’s Word on his tongue and stand there and say to anyone and everyone who will hear: “God is for you. He has called you. He has chosen you. You belong to him.” You can’t say that in quite the same sense of Israel, but you can say it in the sense of the New Testament. You understand what I’m saying: the Word is the means of dealing with unbelief.

Mark 6: Jesus Goes Home

That sets us up for this Gospel, Mark 6:1–13. It’s a wonderful thing that they’ve taken these two pericopes together. I always wonder about it when they combine pericopes, because you can barely preach one, and then you’ve got two. There’s so much in each of them that it’s hard to keep up. My old father-in-law, Olaf, always used to say, “Anybody can write a sermon. You

can write a sermon in ten minutes that goes for two hours. It takes you forever to write a sermon you can preach in ten minutes,” because there is so blamed much. But this is a good thing, because in effect what we see in the second half of the story is Jesus’ response to the unbelief he meets in the first half.

He goes to the worst place possible: his old hometown. If you want to find out what kind of a sinner you were, go to your hometown. They remember, and they invest their memories at compound interest, to be realized the minute you show up. So they’ve got stories to tell. When Jesus comes home, they start reminiscing. “Where did he get all this stuff, anyway? He went away to school and got so hotsy-totsy. Look at him out there healing the sick and raising the dead. What’s going on with him?” You can hear it at the barbershop or the pool hall, or just as well at the beauty shop. These people have known Jesus since he was a kid, and they’re not impressed, just as no hometown is impressed with its own. You serve in small towns. I’ve lived in small towns all my life by preference. I had to endure Saint Paul for too long, but I found small towns within Saint Paul that made it livable. If you live in a small town, you know the risks.

My old graduate director, my *Doktorvater*, Gustaf Wingren, used to say that the real miracle of the Gospels is not that Jesus heals the sick, raises the dead, gives legs to the lame, and so forth. The real miracle is that after he’s done, he tells them to go home, and they do. That is the hardest place to go.

So Jesus goes there, and you know what he gets for it. In AA they call this taking your inventory. Taking somebody’s inventory is a form of contempt in which you claim to know them so well that you know what they are really thinking: “I know what your mouth says, but I know your real intentions. I can read it on you.” That’s your hometown. That’s a small town. So when Jesus comes to preach and teach in Nazareth, they make a joke of him.

It’s the implicit sin that’s the dangerous one here. The judgments aren’t so bad in and of themselves; they’re a nuisance. But the real sin is that they assume superiority. They assume power over him. They assume he’s disposable, and of course they dispose of him. You can hear the toilet flushing in each of these comments. He’s done; he’s gone. They don’t want anything to do with him.

He Could Do No Deed of Power There

And so our text says that as a result, “he could do no deed of power there.” Now this is risky business, and you may have been unhappy and apprehensive about it. If you’ve got any shred of free will on you, if you think free will is good for anything except more sin, the idea is going to be that if they had really applied themselves, if they had really believed, they could have given him the assistance necessary to do a miracle there.

But the text handles this in a very nice way. It says he could do no deed of power there, and then it offers no explanation. I think that indicates that we shouldn’t offer any explanations either. You can just hear preachers all over the Midwest getting cranked up with this: “If you people really believed, you’d have miracles happening among you.” Nonsense. It’s just nonsense. Jesus doesn’t explain anything. “He was amazed at their unbelief.” He is struck by the power of the unbelief that grips them. He loves these people. They are his home people, the people he grew up with, his family, the people he has loved. He wants better for them. He has a gift to bring them. And when he sees their unbelief, he is disappointed and overwhelmed. But he does not withdraw into psychological superiority and start playing contempt: “I know what you really think. I know your motives. You made the wrong choice, you buggers, and now here you go.” Instead, he marvels at their unbelief.

Jesus’ Answer: Twelve Preachers

And then, in the second part of the text, he calls the twelve to himself. What is he doing? You can say this and that about the calling of the twelve. But when you put these two texts side by side, the sending of the twelve is Jesus’ answer to the unbelief of his people in Nazareth. He is going to send out a preacher; he is sending out twelve preachers. And we get a wonderful story of how he prepares them for their mission.

“And he was amazed at their unbelief,” verse 6. And then, in 6b: “Then he went about among the villages teaching.” That is, having run into this unbelief, he himself kept preaching and teaching; he only went elsewhere. And then what? The very next sentence: “He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.”

What is Jesus doing? He has met flat-out unbelief. He has been rejected by the people he loves the most, the people of his own family, his own neighborhood, his own village. So what does he do? He goes to preach elsewhere. And when he goes to preach elsewhere, he calls to himself

twelve people who will help him do exactly the same thing beyond his reach. He is multiplying preaching, because the Word he preaches is the living Word. It is the Word that actually healed the woman with the flow of blood: “It wasn’t my clothes, lady. Your faith has made you well.” It is the Word preached that called that beautiful little girl. Golly, she looks so much like my granddaughter. I’ve had a terrible time with this text. I love it so, but I can’t bear the thought of her hearing anything but these great words: “*Talitha cum*. Little girl, I say to you, get up.” There’s the Word; there’s the power.

His power is not in theological explanations and abstractions. His power is in the Word. So what does he do when he meets unbelief? He doesn’t explain: “God created us with a free will, and we misused it. Now you’ve got a choice, you dumbheads, and you’d better make the right one, because you made the wrong one a long time ago.” That’s not the story at all. We have no alternative but unbelief. That’s us. That’s who we are: rejection. Rejection comes naturally to us in this state of things. We don’t arise joyfully in anticipation, looking for the best alternative available. We have taken the worst alternative conceivable, and we’re stuck there.

So what does Jesus do? When he meets unbelief in his hometown, he goes to other villages. “I bet I can find some there,” he says. And when he has gone to other villages, he finds twelve and sends them out. And listen to how he equips them. He gives them authority over the unclean spirits. He gives them the authority of his Word. He equips them with the Word so that they can preach it, and so that when they preach it the unclean spirits relent, and they can heal and free and bless and bestow and bring in a new creation, in which unbelief is the last thing and faith arises and clings and holds fast and says, “I want more of that, fast.” That’s just great.

Stripped Down to the Word

And now listen: “He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff.” You need that if you’re going to be out on the roads at night. “No bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.” He is stripping them down so that he can send them out in the Word alone.

Oh, gosh, I remember. You’re in danger now: when I start reminiscing, you’re in real trouble. But I’ve always remembered George Forell, a great old professor who died a year ago. I loved him. He was so fabulous. He looked like a prophet himself, bald with a great big beard, and he taught at Iowa. He was just incredible. He used to say, “Everybody else in town has got

something to sell. Everybody else has something with which to threaten, something to manipulate, something to entice, something to give them a little power. Everybody else has something going for them. All the preacher has got is the Word.” That’s our vocation. That’s so great. All we’ve got is this Word.

He strips us down and sends us out with this Word, so that we can speak to those who are lost in unbelief: not to challenge them, as if the old Adam were going to create the new one. What a bogus appeal that is. When the old Adam starts trying to make the new one, all you get is more unbelief, only this time it’s dressed up as true faith. It’s in drag. It’s nothing but the old Adam pretending. So he doesn’t send us out with an appeal. He sends us out with his Word, so that when we see someone under possession we don’t stand there discussing academically the possibility of possession and why there is more of it in Africa than in America, and all that malarkey. Instead we stand there and say, “You are delivered. Christ Jesus has sent me here to say that you have been delivered from this power. Leave him alone.” There you go.

He doesn’t send you to tell a sinner, “Well, you couldn’t help it. I know the conditions. You’ve lived in bad sociology all these years, and I’m afraid the only alternative is to continue.” No, no, no. You go in there to heal the sick, even to raise the dead. You are sent with a Word that creates and makes all things new. So he calls the twelve, equips them with his authority, and brings you into the succession of this Word, so that you can speak it too. There you go. You are his answer to unbelief. You are his preacher. He has sent you, so that you can stand in the power of his Word. And listen to this: “They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.” There you go. This is the result.

Jesus’ answer to unbelief is not a theoretical explanation. His answer to his own rejection is to flood the earth with the Word: go to all nations. Luther used to compare the gospel to what he called in German a *Platzregen*, a violent downburst of rain within a larger storm. You know how it is in a big thunderstorm: it’s raining all over, and sometimes, if you’re at the lake or someplace where you can see it, you can watch a band of rain moving through the storm. That’s the gospel. It moves, it deposits, and it’s gone.

So Jesus came to Nazareth, and they wouldn’t hear his Word. What did he do? He went elsewhere. And he told his disciples, If you come and bear witness and they won’t hear you, what do you do? You don’t stand there explaining the nature of their unbelief, and you don’t stand there telling them you hope they’ll accept the appeal you made. You shake the dust off your feet and go elsewhere. That’s it. Preach the Word. If faith is engendered, you’ll know. If

it's not, well, there's somebody else. And maybe you'll get a chance to come back to the one who wouldn't hear it the first time. That's part of the fun: those who don't hear it the first time often turn out to hear it the second or third time, when the good Lord sends another preacher to bring the Word home.

So we've got texts that will give us a good ride, and if you stick with the power of the Word, they will carry you a long way. God's peace to you. All the best for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost. I hope you have a good Fourth of July coming up, and we'll see you in a week.

SOURCE

CROSS Talk, a weekly Gospel text study for preachers led by Dr. James A. Nestingen, St. Paul Lutheran Seminary. Recorded 3 July 2012 (about 44 minutes).

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GajEtMXIBhE>

Edited from the recording for reading.