

You Have Found Favor
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Exodus 33:12-23

¹² Moses said to the Lord, ‘See, you have said to me, “Bring up this people”; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, “I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.”’ ¹³ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.’ ¹⁴ He said, ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’ ¹⁵ And he said to him, ‘If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.’

¹⁷ The Lord said to Moses, ‘I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.’ ¹⁸ Moses said, ‘Show me your glory, I pray.’ ¹⁹ And he said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, “The Lord”; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰ But’, he said, ‘you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.’ ²¹ And the Lord continued, ‘See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³ then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.’

1Thessalonians 1:1-10

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

² We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹ For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

There are weeks when I wonder what the people who developed the Revised Common Lectionary were thinking, those folks from across denominations who got together to determine which texts would be associated with which days so that all parts of the Bible get read from, not just the preacher’s favorite gospel and prophet. When I read today’s texts, I thought this might be one of those off-weeks, when the texts are more loosely connected than they are other weeks. I shouldn’t have doubted. Since it’s been awhile since the readings came from Exodus, and even longer since the passages immediately preceding

today's reading were read, I'll give you the necessary background.

Moses seems downright petulant and showing frustration for reasons which will become understandable. Before we catch up with him today, Moses had gone up the mountain and received the commandments on two stone tablets and was then urged by the Lord to return to the people ASAP for they had been very naughty. Before Moses left, the Lord said to him, "Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them." Now Moses thought this seemed counter-productive after all the effort the Lord had gone to to bring them out of Egypt and he said as much - maybe he imagined they were complaining about the amounts of bread and water again. To Moses' relief, the Lord agreed to let them be. But, upon his descent, Moses found that his brother, Aaron, whom he left in charge, had not only *not* stopped the people from making a golden idol of a calf, but had actually formed it for them. After all his efforts to keep these people in God's good graces, they go and outright reject the very same God for a gold cow. In a fit, Moses threw down the tablets, breaking them, and then destroyed the calf and made the people drink the powder of it. And Moses saw the people were running wild. And God promised to clear the way for the people to the Promised Land and there was to end their relationship.

And here's when "a-ha" knocks on the door. The people of Thessalonica, before they received from Paul the word of God about the salvation that comes through Christ, were worshipping idols. Historians cannot pinpoint exactly which idols but they suspect at least one was the emperor. Pretty clever, Revised Common Lectionary folk. Pretty clever. Both communities were worshipping idols in the times preceding what we read today. Both readings refer to the relationship that follows. Both have to do with finding favor with God.

What does it look like to find favor? Theologian and Reverend Nathan Eddy says, "God here is active, empowering, encouraging, and persistent in the lives of those who have turned to God."¹ The Israelites turned away from the golden calf and the Thessalonians turned away from the idols of their choice, both turning *to* God. In response, God is active. If we were to continue reading Exodus, we would learn of the Lord continuing to meet with Moses, instructing him on the leadership of the Israelites. In the lives of the Thessalonians, God is so active that "the word of the Lord has sounded forth from [them] not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where [their] faith in God [had] become known."

God is empowering. The Israelites, through God's help and God's help alone, reclaim the Promised Land. As for the Thessalonians, God has come to them "not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." God is persistent. How many times did God go about proving

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 183.

God's self to the Israelites as they wandered in the desert, to the Israelites and the Gentiles through the actions of Christ, to us through the wonders in our own lives? God does not reach out in relationship only once but over and over to make *our* importance in the relationship known to us.

God is encouraging. Through the suffering of the Israelites, God did not leave them alone. Through the persecution of the Thessalonians, we read that they "received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit." God was sending a word and the Spirit among them in their times of trial. Wednesday at Bible Study we talked about how, as much as we dislike suffering and as much as we often wish we could avoid it, we have found that we grow the most through suffering, just as a tree must be allowed to bend with the winds to grow a strong trunk and strong roots. It is our conviction as Christians that our growth in these times is nurtured by God's Spirit. Paul understood this to be what was happening with the suffering of the Thessalonians. Rev. Eddy states, "Paul is clear that the Spirit builds all, even (perhaps especially) those who know suffering and persecution, joyfully. That the Spirit works through suffering indicates that the church may have 'targets' and indexes [sic] of success that are different from those of other institutions."²

I believe it to be true that the church values suffering, particularly the outcomes of suffering, in a way that other organizations, such as corporations, do not, but there appears to be a trend where businesses might be wising up to the faithful way of thinking. Earlier this year in April, *Harvard Business Review* dedicated an entire issue to failure and to the oft-overlooked value of failure. My husband, in his infinite wisdom, passed along the issue, thinking I might find it an interesting read at the very least. Little did he know I would finally get around to reading it this past week, a mere six months later, and find it of great significance. The foundation of most of the articles centered around the ideas that mistakes are not inherently bad and we get better when we look upon our failures as experiences to learn from, rather than hide from. Except in pharmaceuticals and technology where breaking points need to be found, the articles weren't advising seeking out failures; they were simply advocating embracing them when they happen.

If I am honest with myself, far more often than not, and staggeringly so, I try to avoid mistakes and failures. I think most people do; our lives - personally, socially, professionally, ethically - are built around the avoidance of mistakes. Between the lectionary readings and *Harvard Business Review*, it seems there is much we miss out on living this way. How freeing it would be to honor the value of failures instead of believing failures lessen our value and bring dishonor upon us. When we experience less than success, what would happen if we stepped back and away from ourselves to watch for the Spirit moving in our lives, in those times? We might better understand then how the Thessalonians were

² *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 185.

said to, in spite of persecution, receive the word with joy. Rev. Eddy suggests that we might recognize the real possibility of joyful service in the midst of suffering - “not after everything has been ‘put right.’”³

Finding favor with God, as the Bible repeatedly affirms, is not about escaping suffering but about God’s loving presence coming to us most fully in those times. Finding favor with God is not about succeeding instead of failing. When we embrace our mistakes, our troubles, our suffering instead of following our inclinations to grit our teeth until they pass, the open arms of our embrace can receive God, can allow God to work without our resistance. “The Lord said to Moses, ‘I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.’” Moses did not find favor because God liked what Moses asked. Moses found favor because he asked what God liked. Moses asked that God remain in relationship with the people of Israel. God leading them to the Promised Land meant nothing if God was not still their God and they God’s people.

In your suffering, what do you ask for? Do you ask God to take your suffering? Or do you ask God to help you grow through the suffering which is an inevitable part of living? The Thessalonians weren’t perfect, and certainly neither were the people of Israel, but they found favor with God because they turned to God. Unavoidable suffering is terrible. It’s terrible to watch in others and it can feel unbearable in ourselves. As I’ve said before, God does not send us suffering and God does not wish for us to suffer. The truth is we all will suffer, and all in our own very unique ways. If, in your own suffering you ask God to take it from you, God is not invited and you turn a bit away from God. If you only ask God to help you grow through the suffering, you welcome God and turn to God. So may it be with you and with me.

Let us pray: God, our God, we are your people. We pray that our arms and hearts and minds be open to receive you. Amen.

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 185.