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Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:31-35
February 28, 2010

When I take groups to Israel, perhaps the most dramatic, emotional moment comes when the bus climbs the steep hill to a crest to the Mt. of Olives, and you come around a certain corner to a place called Mount Scopus and you get your first glimpse of the Holy City of Jerusalem. We imagine ancient pilgrims who came there, not by bus but on foot, with donkeys carrying their things, and they would finally arrive there for the great festivals of the Jewish year, and when they would catch a glimpse of the Temple of God, so we say, they no doubt would fall on their knees and weep for joy. Jesus came in one of those caravans, but when he arrived at the city, he fell on his knees and he wept, but not for joy. He was grieving over the city, the city that was intended for holiness, yet it was broken, it was wayward, people turned away from God.

We think about the tears of God as we should. Be very clear that on this day when God looks down on Chile, that God weeps over what is going on there. We think about places where we try to reach out and serve. We have brothers and sisters in Haiti. We have this great project coming up. We're going to take the school bus and fill it full of goods to be taken down to them. We do that with great joy and excitement, but it is a reflex of our sharing in God's sorrow over the suffering of our brothers and sisters in Haiti. It's something we have to rethink, where we think tears are appropriate.

Last week I was in Liberia, and when you go to Liberia, you see people who are extremely poor. There is this phenomenon that I don't think we can think about enough. I go to places all over this world where people have nothing, where we would pity them for their lack of resources and yet they have exuberance, they have a joy, and they pulsate with faith. We have to think, "What is that about? What does that mean for us?"

Jesus weeps not only over those who suffer in such places in our world, Jesus also weeps over us in our own city, over our own hollow souls. You know Paul in this reading, he is not very kind, he is speaking to very pious religious people, and he says *Your God is your belly. Your mind is on earthly things.* Paul is hard on them. Somebody sent me an e-mail not long ago saying, "James, you're too hard on us in your sermons." And my gut reaction was to say, "I'm sorry. I won't do it again," but then I thought about Paul. He's so hard on us. Jesus is so hard on us. Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, the scriptures are hard on us. We need it. We wander away from God; we drift into some kind of complacency. And when God sees us doing so – this is so wonderful – God does not look down and say, "I shall crush them for it." No, God looks down and sees us in our lostness and God weeps, God weeps.

The Psalm that we read together, surely one of the most beautiful in all of Scripture, *The Lord is my light and my salvation. Though there may be great trouble I will be confident in the Lord.* And the very best line in the Psalm says this: *There is one thing that I have asked for,* and we might pause there because we're the kind of people who ask for 974 things, but the Psalm says *There is one thing I have asked for.* It's like Jesus and the rich young ruler who says *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* And Jesus says *There is one thing that you lack.* Or Jesus is at the home of Mary and Martha, and Martha is busy doing many things, but Jesus says *One thing is needful* and it's embodied in Mary, who is sitting at the feet of Jesus just wanting to listen. The Psalm says

There is one thing that I have asked and that is to behold the beauty of the Lord, to behold the beauty of the Lord – how wonderful.

There's a singer whose name is Jewel. I suppose Jewel is her first name. I do not know if she has a last name – Jewel – and Jewel has become kind of a pop diva now, but in her earlier days she sang some lovely, soulful, folksier kind of music. One of her songs goes like this, "Please be careful with me. I'm sensitive and I'd like to stay that way." I have this theory that if we're told we are bad, then that's the only idea we'll ever have. But maybe if we're surrounded in beauty, some day we will become what we see. I love that, "Please be careful with me. I'm sensitive and I'd like to stay that way." Maybe if we are surrounded in beauty, some day we will become what we see. There is one thing I have asked and that is to behold the beauty of the Lord. How would we behold the beauty of the Lord? We begin in the beauty of the word of the Lord.

We had a lovely session here on Thursday night. Some of you came. Rabbi Murray Ezring from Temple Israel and I stood in Jubilee Hall, and we talked about the book that you and I would call the Old Testament and that he would simply call his Bible, and we talked about the way that we read it the same and the way that we read it differently as Jews and Christians, but the beauty of it is that we all agree. We are grateful that God has not left us alone to our own devices down here, but God has given us God's heart in the scriptures. God has shown us how to live. God has said, *Here is what I want you to do. Not a thicket of rules, but this is the way to light. I who made you in my grace tell you that if you do these things you will be blessed.* The beauty of the word.

I discovered the beauty of the word myself, very personally in a way I should have known before. Two or three weeks ago, I was having the kind of night that probably many of us have had, all of us have had if we've done much living. It was one of those nights when it got to be 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning and I was not able to sleep. I was in considerable sorrow and pain, grief. It's always worse in the dark, isn't it? You're alone, there's no distraction, no one to turn to, and it's just dark. I was having one of those nights and I tossed and turned and tossed and turned and tried to sleep but it just was to no avail. Finally I just gave up and said, "I'll just get up, I'll just get up." I walked downstairs and I paced around for awhile and then I did what I would have told you to do, but I confess, I forget to do too often. I opened my Bible. I'm not big on random opening of the Bible and hearing God's word, but on this night, God spoke to me through a random opening of the Bible. I opened it near the middle, and the middle of the Bible is the book of Psalms, and where I happened to land was those Psalms that are in the 50s. They're beautiful Psalms we don't attend to too much, and I saw a verse there – I had read the Psalms so many times but I've never seen it before. There's a verse there and it says *Oh Lord, in the dark you have counted my tossings.* Oh Lord, in the dark you have counted my tossings. I had been in my bed in misery and what I did not realize is that God was there, 1, 2, 3. When I was a little boy I was taught that when you can't sleep you count sheep, 1, 2 – that never helped – 3, 4, but now I've got something new because of the beauty of the word of the Lord. The next time there's a night like that I'll be aware that God is there. As I toss, God is counting. The beauty of the word, the beauty of the church helps us to see the beauty of the Lord.

I was so proud last week to be the pastor of Myers Park United Methodist Church. I always am. But last week when I went to Liberia it was amazing. I got off the airplane and I was greeted like some foreign dignitary, and they drove me through these roads. Road – that's a loose term for what it is, more pothole than road. Finally we got there and again I was greeted like visiting royalty of some type, and the reason is that I'm the pastor of this church. They took me out of the van and immediately they said "Look." And there was painted on the wall The Myers Park United

Methodist Church Playground. And there were children swinging and children spinning on little carousels, laughing, having a good time. They were on a break between classes in a school that you and I have sponsored and paid scholarships for children to go to. And then they took me down and said "Look at this row of shops here." There's a tailor shop and there's an internet café. There's no internet in this entire village except for what our people went down and set up, and people were lined up to use it. It's a little business. It's providing jobs and turning a profit for the people in that community. The beauty of the church.

We worship God in a beautiful place and sometimes people are critical of this. They say "Oh, the church spends too much on buildings and such." I always beg to differ. To me it is entirely good and lovely and appropriate that the most beautiful buildings in our city are the churches. The banks are taller. Some of the buildings are newer and shinier, but the most beautiful places are the places that are dedicated to the worship of God. Maybe if we are surrounded in beauty, then some day we will become what we see. It is not just the beauty of the word or the beauty of the church. It's the beauty of the people of God.

I know what you did today. You missed it. You were in a hurry trying to get here. You were thinking about things you needed to do. Maybe you were running late, it was hard to find a parking place, you were trying to find a seat, you were moving and what you did not notice is that you were passing, all of this time, virtually divine creatures. God has made all of us to be his children. God has made all of us in a way that we are sensitive. Everyone that we pass, they have dreams, they have wounds, they love, they're doing their best. They are made in the image of God. Society trains us to see people differently. Society says "Keep your guard up. Always be a little bit suspicious. If somebody is different, then they must be weird. If somebody is troubling you we must blame them for what they are doing," but the scriptures say that the beauty of the Lord our God is mirrored in every single face. Be sensitive, be careful with me, I'm sensitive, and I'd like to stay that way. God says "Be careful with one another. Be tender." Stop and look at the other person. In their eyes you will see the reflection of the glory of God. Finally, to behold the beauty of the Lord, we think about the beauty of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I love what Dorothy Day said late in her life. She has been one of the great saints of this past century. She did so much to lift up the poor and the needy and literally to change society in cities like New York and Chicago. She was wonderful. Late in her life, Robert Coles of Harvard came to interview her about her life. He knew she had been a writer, so he said, "Well, go away, get a pen and some paper and jot down some autobiographical thoughts and I'll come back and see you in a month." He came back and said "What did you write?" She said "I tried, but I just couldn't do it." She said, "I got the paper and I wrote a life remembered" and she said, "But all I could think about was how lucky I have been to have had Jesus on my mind for so long." How lucky I have been to have had Jesus on my mind for so long.

Maybe if we're surrounded in beauty, we will become what we see. Maybe if we look to the beauty of Jesus, we will become like him. We will together become the Body of Christ. We will learn how to see the image of God in one another. We will learn about people who break God's heart and we will do all we can to reach out and to help them in his name. When we are tossing in the darkness of the night, we will know we are not alone. We will feel the arms of our beautiful savior around us, and we will be comforted. Behold the beauty of the Lord. Behold the beauty of the Lord.

Amen.