

**Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, September 16, 2018.**

Our lessons this morning give us a jolt because we see ourselves in them.

Take the Isaiah passage (**Isaiah 50:4-9a**). He is doing the Lord's work. "The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word." The result of his efforts, however, is not thanksgiving, but anger. "I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting."

What gives here? Well, two things seem clear. First, Isaiah has done something to anger people, and they in turn are making his life miserable. And second, he is determined to keep going, for he is confident that God is with him. "It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?"

We have had this feeling, haven't we? We have been in this position. First, out of conviction, we have stood up for something or someone, only to have others scold us for doing so. And second, we look for some kind of assurance that we are doing the right thing.

Isaiah sees himself as a teacher, whose job it is "to sustain the weary with a word." We know this feeling too. As a teacher, as a parent, as a good friend, as a responsible citizen, we understand that sustaining the weary is in part what is expected of us.

For example, in most classrooms there is someone who gets teased. And this teasing can make the one being teased weary. Which leads to, "I don't want to go to school today."

In addition to the parent comforting the child, the teacher goes to bat for the child, by talking sternly to the teasers, and by assuring the one being teased that the teacher has his or her back.

This is what this morning's psalm (**Psalms 116:1-8**) talks about: "The Lord watches over the innocent; I was brought very low, and he helped me." The teachers we remember fondly are those who stood up for us. Isaiah sees God in this advocacy role.

The author of the Letter of James (**James 3:1-12**) might be the brother of Jesus. We're not sure of the relationship, but let's assume that this is so. What an interesting perspective, growing up with the Lord as your brother. I wonder if Mom and Dad played favorites.

But I digress. Back to the very interesting passage from the Letter of James.

The essential message is "be true to yourself." Don't say one thing and do another. Don't bless one minute and curse the next. Don't claim to be the Son of God and then back away from that claim. James says in effect, "My brother claimed to be the Messiah. But it wasn't bluster. It wasn't make-believe. He said he was the Bread of Life, and I'm telling you, as his earthly brother and disciple, he was and is the Bread of Life. I saw him live and I saw him die and I saw him rise from the dead. I ought to know."

There were lots of people, however, who did not believe that Jesus rose from the dead. And there were lots of people who thought that those who did believe that he rose from the dead were as crazy as Jesus was.

In his own ministry, James tried to bolster the spirits of the believers. And not only to bolster their spirits, but to remind the believers that their testimony needed to be in line with their behavior. "Can a fig tree yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh." Speak the truth and be the truth. Otherwise, no one will believe you.

Elsewhere in this passage, we are reminded that, in the case of an unbelieving community, a single believer can be as a rudder to a ship. "Look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs." James' reminder is simply to know the will of God, and then be the rudder that works to implement that will.

Now, James, the author, didn't invent the notion of consistency between word and deed. He learned this relationship from watching Jesus. In today's passage from Mark's gospel (**Mark 8:27-38**), we see Jesus pressing Peter for an answer: "I don't care what others are saying, Peter. I want to know where you are. Who do you say that I am?"

When Peter responds “You are the Messiah,” Jesus tells the disciples “not to tell anyone about him.” Jesus does this because others aren’t ready to hear the Truth. But Jesus makes a distinction between the population in general and the disciples in particular. The disciples need to hear the Truth right now. And the Truth is that he, Jesus, will suffer and be killed, but after three days rise again.

Jesus goes on: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” The message is clear: your commitment as my disciples must be firm. Don’t say “Yes, I will follow,” and then disappear. What you say needs to be what you do. Consistency between word and deed.

This is a version of what Jesus learned from Isaiah: “The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near.”

“I have set my face like flint.” This is what God expects of you and me. Determination. Determination, that, when manifest, produces a spark. The teachers that we respect most, especially in the years after we have had those teachers, are those who set their faces like flint. And aren’t we most pleased with ourselves when we manage to set our faces like flint? To stand up for what we believe. To have the back of those who are teased. To keep our word to the Lord. To practice what we preach.

It’s not always easy. But that’s exactly why we offer a prayer like our Collect this morning: “O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts.” “In all things.” Consistency.

Think about the letters of recommendation that we receive when recruiting for positions. Here are some lines that always catch our favorable attention:

“You always know where she stands.”

“His word is his bond.”

“What you hear is what you get.”

We hope, of course, that when people say these things about us, we will follow through. The reality is that sometimes we don’t. Sometimes we don’t set our

faces like flint. Sometimes we fall short. The disciples wavered. Jesus came close to wavering himself. You and I waver. It's who we are.

And it's why we include in our services something called confession. And it's also why we include in our services something called absolution. If we listen carefully, what we hear God saying is, "Okay, you've cleared the deck. You've acknowledged your shortcomings. You've made your peace. Now it's my turn: "Go in my peace."

This exchange is what our Jewish brothers and sisters are doing at this time of year: clearing the deck and moving on. This exchange is also what you and I regularly commend to one another. "The Peace of the Lord be always with you." "And also with you." We do this sharing, not out of habit, but out of a sincere belief that this Peace is where true joy is to be found.

Can you imagine ourselves without it? I can't. Indeed, I think it is why we are here. From Psalm 116: "Gracious is the Lord and righteous; our God is full of compassion."

Amen.

## Set Your Face Like Flint

... I set my face like flint, confident that I'll never regret this.

[Isaiah 50:7](#) (MSG)

Setting your face like flint means being determined. You can only be as passionate as you are determined. When you are determined, you refuse to give up: you set your face like flint. People who have dreams overcome obstacles, because they desire to see their dreams fulfilled. They do what is required in order to attain the achievement of their dream.

God has given us the fruit of self-control, but we must make the choice to use it. The less people exercise their will to make right choices, the weaker their will to do so becomes. Setting your face like flint and being determined is the decision to do whatever you need to do in order to have what you say you want to have.

We must be diligent. Doing what is right one or two times or even a few times seldom brings the desired victory. Being consistently diligent, doing what you know you need to do over weeks, months, and years, is the key.

You need a determined attitude. Engage your will and be committed to do whatever it takes for as long as it takes. You won't quit; you won't stop; you set your face like flint; and you are determined.

Real [winners](#) don't put time limits on their commitments. They are committed with no conditions, and when they begin, they have made up their minds to finish.

The Bible says the diligent man will rule and he will be rich ([Proverbs 10:4](#) and [Proverbs 12:24](#)).

You cannot be diligent without being determined, just like you cannot be determined without being passionate. Determination is a mindset and diligence is the effort that goes with it. There are those who decide to do something, without backing their decision with determination. They may persevere for a while, but when the first sign of trouble appears, they quit. You see, it is much easier to imagine doing the right things, than it is to actually to do them. The doing makes the difference and that requires your diligence.

By setting our face like flint, we exercise our faith – our confidence in God. God will never fail us if we do our part. God tells us what to do in order to have a good life and He gives us the grace to do it. However, we must realize that no one else can make the decision for us and that we must make it.

We must be willing to grow up spiritually, and that will take determination to see the process of maturing through to the end. God tells us in Hebrews 12 that when we are taught and corrected by God we should keep a good attitude and not give up. God has a plan for you, but He also must prepare you for the plan, and you can only follow His lead by keeping your eyes on Him.

*Will you choose to be decided, determined and diligent? To set your face like flint? Now, that's the choice-driven life!*