

**Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea,  
Gibson Island, Maryland, 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, October 14, 2018.**

The theme of our collect and lessons today might be called “Good Cop/Bad Cop.”

If we read the three long passages – Amos, Hebrews and Mark – we are humbled.

From Amos (**Amos 5:6-7, 10-15**): “Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins.” Ouch.

From Hebrews (**Hebrews 4:12-16**): “The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Double ouch.

And from Mark (**Mark 10:17-31**): “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” Triple ouch.

If this is all we hear, we are more than humbled. We are frightened. Frightened because we can identify with the three audiences. We know we have fallen short of what God expects of us and of what we expect of ourselves. If our fate depends on our faithfulness, we should be worried.

And if these sentiments, these warnings, if you will, were all we heard at church, we would stop coming. We don’t like to be beat-up, even when we’re responsible. We beat ourselves up enough as it is. Why give someone else a chance to do it?

Well, thankfully, these sentiments are not all that we hear. Yes, we are reminded uncomfortably of behavior that leads nowhere, but we are also assured that God has accepted this reality as the price of freedom, and offered His help, in the person of Jesus.

In the Hebrews passage, after being reminded of “the Word of God ... piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow,” we receive this invitation: “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

This invitation, coming at the end of one of three Bad Cop passages, is consistent with today's Psalm, one of the Good Cop passages. Verse 17 or **Psalm 90**: "May the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us; prosper the work of our hands; prosper our handiwork."

Emphasis on the best of God and the best of ourselves. Yes, we fall short much of the time, but we do a lot of good. This congregation does tons of good. And God knows that. But God also is aware that we know that we don't do as much as we would like for all sorts of reasons. Yes, we fall short. But when we stumble, and look for a helping hand, we find that hand.

But – and this is at the heart of our Faith – there is a next step that is wholly ours. The next step in recovery is to reach out to the helping hand. "Here, let me help you" doesn't mean much if we don't accept the helping hand. Thus, the words of Hebrews: "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness." God reaches down; we reach up.

"The throne of grace." What a wonderful phrase. What a wonderful reality if we "approach" it. Remember the words of our Collect this morning: "Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us." God's assurance is that the Saving Grace of Christ is always available. It "precedes and follows."

Welcome to the Good Cop. Thank you Psalm 90 and today's Collect and verse 16 of the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews.

Notice also the phrase in the Hebrews passage that follows "approach the throne of grace." How should we approach? Is there a really good way and a not-so-good way of approaching? Yes, there is. We should approach the throne of grace "with boldness."

We've tried both methods. We have said to God, "You know what, I really need you to do most of the work here. I'm not sure I can even reach up a little bit." And, on other occasions, we have said, "Thank you, Lord, a helping hand is all I needed. Here is my hand."

Just as you and I know the difference, so God knows the difference. He knows when He needs to lift us off the ground. And He will do so. He probably has done

so many times without us realizing it. But God also knows when we can do more, and He will challenge us to make that effort. He is looking for boldness on our part.

Look at verse 17 of this morning's psalm: "May the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us; prosper the work of our hands; prosper our handiwork." "Our hands." Our approach. Our response to God's grace.

I've never thought much about the noun "handiwork." But it's a pretty interesting word. And what makes it interesting is the second syllable, the letter "i." Without the "i," we have handwork. "Handwork" is something done by hand – a piece of pottery or worksheet in a classroom – but there's no indication in the word about the worker's identity. Maybe it's the teacher or maybe the student. We're not sure. In "handiwork," however, we know whose work it is. It is the work of the "i."

In the Hebrews passage that speaks of God's grace, there are two "i"s. There is a small "i" – that would be you and i – and there is a capital "I" – that would be the Lord. Big I grants us grace. Little i responds. And we hope little "i" responds with boldness. That's the best case scenario. And that's the one we're after, the one we long for, the one we need.

God's handiwork is impressive beyond measure. Look at the sky on a clear night. But our handiwork is important too. Important to us and the ones we love and the strangers who need our help and to the God who wants the best for us. A big part of God's handiwork is God coming into the world as a human being and teaching us and eventually dying on a cross for us and rising from the dead for us and returning to us as Holy Spirit. Our handiwork is to acknowledge God's handiwork. And the first step, the most important step, in that acknowledgment is to accept God's helping hand by offering our grateful hand.

The "throne of grace." God's hand meeting our hand. It's a feeling like no other. In the Budweiser commercial, the king celebrates with these words: "Dilly, dilly." You and I have a shorter and more reverent version of "this is the way things are meant to be." And that would be "Amen."