

Pentecost 20, Proper 23
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

October 11, 2015
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View from the Heights

As a young man, growing up in the Andes Mountains, I quickly learned the strategic advantage of altitude. The higher you are up on the mountain the clearer the view, and not just of the vistas, but the lay of the land. It's a whole lot easier to choose a smart path through the canyons and valleys when you can see them from up above. Now, with computer satellite imagery of the whole earth at our fingertips on Google Earth, I have the advantage of almost unlimited height, and I can usually wire around the effects of the only thing in the mountains that is bigger than a mountain—the clouds.

Perspective gives us the raw material for wisdom. The greater the perspective we have the greater the chances of making wise decisions. The smaller the perspective, the fewer choices you have to choose from. Today's readings all seem to deal with perspective.

Amos deals with it directly. The Jewish people had long thought of themselves as a people under covenant with God, but now it seemed that God had broken the covenant. God had promised to keep a son of David on the throne, but the Jewish people had been taken into captivity. They were struggling to achieve some sort of perspective. How do they make sense of their situation? From what heights do they need to survey the spiritual landscape? The message of the prophets was rather unanimous in one respect: The exile is the result of Israel not being faithful to HER side of the covenant. She has let pride slip in and begin steering the ship, and it has elbowed Yahweh out.

The Psalm says, "Teach us to number our days," that is, "Teach us to step back and gain perspective on life. Help us to put our living in the context of greater living that we might live wisely."

The Epistle lesson addresses it as well. The context for this lesson is a persecuted Church. If your people are getting hauled into court and then throne to the lions, you'd better be sure people wanted to know this Jesus was worth dying for. So who is this Jesus? Jesus is the Word of God. The life, ministry, teaching and passion of Jesus cut to the marrow, separating truth from fiction, and giving us perspective on our living. And not just simply in a cold, calculating way, Jesus is also High Priest, who, through experience as a human being, can empathize with our weaknesses, because he has been there. Therefore, we approach the throne of grace with confidence, knowing that we come founded on the truth of who we are in Christ. This Jesus IS worth dying for, for no other foundation is worth living for.

The Gospel lesson today angles into it, too. Jesus is setting out on a journey. Jesus is always setting out on journeys. Jesus doesn't travel alone, he takes his disciples with him. When Jesus is on a journey, all who call him Good Teacher are invited along. It is, in the end, the journey from small-minded ego-driven living, through the Cross to Easter, to the greater perspective of the

Love of God. This man runs up to him and asks him the big question: "What must I do?" Jesus challenges his use of the word, "good." It's not that Jesus is bad, he certainly isn't. Jesus IS good, but Jesus' goodness does not absolve the man of the need for his own.

"Obey the commandments," says Jesus. As soon as he claims to have fulfilled all the commandments you get what is going on. This man conceives of Heaven as something he can achieve, something he can earn if he just applies his will and his rather prodigious resources. "What must I do," he asks. What you must do, young man, is take your ego off the throne. But this is never done directly. The ego expresses itself through a hundred other pathways. In this case, it is his money, and Jesus knows it—and names it. "Give away your possessions to those who could use them more than you, and come, follow me on my journey to the Cross and beyond." One of the saddest verses in the Bible follows. The man went away sad, for he just couldn't do it. He was still a prisoner to the rule of his ego.

How hard it is for a man who considers himself rich before God, with resources and abilities with which to achieve heaven, to actually enter it! Heaven is not achieved, and it is not bought. It is merely received. Peter, then, exclaims that they have left all to follow Jesus, Jesus' reply has a little surprise in it. "Anyone who has left anything for my sake will receive it back 100 fold—with persecutions, and many who are first shall be last, and the last first." This comes clear when we put it in a larger perspective, that of the Passion of Jesus. All our ego-driven attempts at winning God's favor or even avoiding God's anger must die on the Cross. It feels like persecution, but it is only the death of the rule of our ego. When we die to the rule of our egos honest and life-giving relationship with God can emerge. Those who thought they achieve it, who put themselves first, will find themselves last, and the last, who knew they couldn't do it, but had only to receive it, found themselves at the head of the line.

So what about now? The thing about perspective is that it grows. I've been exploring the Gila Wilderness and Gila National Forest over the last three years. My propensity to go higher has served me well. I was out on Middle Mesa just north of the Black River Canyon in September. On a clear day you can see all the way to White Water Baldy, over 35 miles away. You could see the whole basin of the three forks of the Gila River laid out before you. It was really spectacular. Now I've been to Snow Lake, and I've been to the Negrito River Drainage. Now it all began to come together for me. It's all very large-scale, but I'm getting a picture in my head of the big picture.

In life, perspective grows. You immerse yourself, and sooner or later the pieces start to fall into place. A larger picture begins to come clear. We do it all the time in other areas of life, but the Spiritual is the area of your life that has the largest perspective possible. Here, more than any other, perspective is needed. Here, more than any other, exploration is needed until the picture begins to come clear. Remembering always that on this side of the grave it will never be completely clear!

As it grows the smaller ideas we held to begin to appear limited. It's because they ARE limited. They work only when certain things are not seen, and certain ideas are not understood. Growing

does not mean discarding these smaller ideas, but rather being willing to put them in a larger context. The walk down Middle Mesa is a long one, a mile or more, but compared to walking all the way to the Cliff Dwellings, it's a short piece. Focusing all my energy on getting to the end of Middle Mesa may be a misguided idea! When old ideas no longer work grieve the loss of innocence, but by no means cling to them! Step back, put them in a larger perspective, and they will take their rightful place.

Finally, it does help to have a picture of the end. My explorations of the Gila have been greatly enhanced by some tools. One is the National Forest map you can get at the Forest offices on the 32nd bypass. The other is Google Earth! It gives me a map in my head. The map is not the territory and we should never confuse them, but it does give you a working idea.

We call our working idea we have for the spiritual life, "heaven." Early on we have small ideas of heaven. They are generally populated largely by floating clouds and little angels and a big man with a long white beard, and our favorite desert for dinner every night! Later we begin to think of heaven in other terms. We think of the joys of earth without the pains, of being able to fly, or walk again, or swim underwater without having to come up for a breath.

Then the vision fades and begins to tie itself more closely to earth. Heaven is where the God of love is king. This is sometimes something we experience here on earth, in this life, in limited form. It's like a little shadow of heaven shows up in our lives and gives us a glimpse of something larger. We discover that heaven is meant to give perspective to our living on earth. When we dethrone the ego and live in love, when we strive to make the world a place where people can know the love of God, when we struggle to see in one another the image of a God of love, then we live in heaven now.