

Today marks the beginning of week 2 of our Fall Growth Group Series. Again, for those not familiar, Growth Groups are our congregation's small group ministry, currently meeting for our Fall semester. By the way, it isn't too late to sign up for one of our groups or one of the groups hosted by our sister congregation, Christ Lutheran. We are all enjoying the same Sundays, sermons, and series LIVINGHISTORY, a look at selections from Paul's letter to the Philippians. What has been handed out to you is the study guide being used this week by the groups. The cover has what are called sermon notes: Main points from today's message that you can fill in as we go along, intended to help with a better understanding of the text. The inside is filled with questions designed to get some good discussion going about the message. And as we begin, please...

It seems to be a growing phrase in our society these days: stating that something is "the worst." Usually, it is connected with something irritating, mildly disappointing, or just being critical. Let me give you a few examples. "Yeah, that new Pirates of the Caribbean movie? That's the worst." "It always takes Sally at *least* 5 minutes to text me back. She's the worst." Or, "Don't you hate it when the ice melts in your iced tea? That's the worst." Now, while I can completely sympathize with the person who doesn't like watery and warm iced tea, I just can't put it in the class of being "the worst." It doesn't rank up there with what I, or probably you, for that matter, would describe as the worst that life has to offer.

But Paul knew first-hand some of the worst life has to offer. ♦ Writing to Corinthians who had been taken in by the claims of the self-righteous Judaizers, Paul described what he had endured during his labors for the Lord: ***I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.*** <sup>24</sup> ***Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.*** <sup>25</sup> ***Three times I was beaten with***

***rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,*** <sup>26</sup> ***I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.*** <sup>27</sup> ***I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.*** (2 ***Corinthians 11:23-27***) Yeah, Paul endured a lot as he preached in the synagogues and preached along the riversides and in preached in the marketplaces of the Mediterranean world. In fact, as he is writing this letter to the Philippians, he has been in prison awaiting a trial in Caesar's court.

It all began when Paul went up to the temple courts in Jerusalem one day, knowing full well by the Holy Spirit that he would not leave a free man. While there, he was recognized and made the lightning rod of a frenzied mob, causing an uproar throughout the city. He was arrested by Roman troops, chained, and put on trial by no less than three courts. Finally, Paul appealed to Caesar himself and, as a Roman citizen, Paul was granted his request. Along the way to Rome he was nearly executed, shipwrecked, bitten by a deadly snake, later rescued, and finally arrived in Rome. (You can read about it all in the last eight chapters of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles.) Luke describes Paul's situation upon arrival in Rome, ***Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him.*** (Acts 28:16)

Now I don't know about you, but that all sounds like some seriously bad stuff that certainly far outweighs watery and warm iced tea. Short of losing his life, one could argue that Paul's life actually was "the worst." And even though maybe you and I can't sympathize with everything Paul went through, all of us have experienced some of the worst that life has to offer, too. ♦ Way beyond bad movies, incommunicative friends, and watery tea, collectively, we have known hurt and heartache, death and destruction, disappointment and despair. We have been overwhelmed by worry, challenged God's

wisdom, lashed out in frustration. Yes, we need to be honest with ourselves and our God, ♦ the worst of life has often times brought out the worst in us.

Paul, too, knew about the worst bringing out his worst. He wrote to the Romans, *I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. What a wretched man I am! (7:18, 19, 24)* And he described himself to Pastor Timothy *as the worst of sinners. (1 Timothy 1:16)* Considering his former way of life (as he himself was known to put it) – his work righteousness, his hunting down of Christians, his role in the deaths of others – this isn't overstatement by Paul. And though you and I may not be guilty of some of the same sins as Paul, we are guilty of plenty of others. It isn't overstatement to declare that *nothing good* lives in me, *nothing good* lives in you. John reminds us that *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)* Isaiah declares that our sins *have separated [us] from [our] God. (Isaiah 59:2)* And Paul wrote to the Ephesians how we are, along with him, *deserving of [God's] wrath and dead in [our] transgressions and sins. Ephesians 2:1,3.* The worst often brings out our worst, too. And we cry out with Paul, *who will rescue me from this body of death?(Romans 7:24)*

For a number years, now, West Bend Mutual Insurance Company has been promoting something called “The Silver Lining.” The phrase comes from a centuries-old English expression referring to the silver edge - silver being a precious metal – the silver edge of clouds – clouds that can bring rain, storms, damage, and other terrible things, even death. While the phrase is not unique to them, they are pointing out that when disaster strikes, they are there to help people be able to move on from the worry and begin to see the silver lining – the good things that can come out of a bad situation. Their tagline: The worst brings out our best. Take a look. [Video]

Again, we poor miserable sinners cry out with Paul, *who will rescue me from this body of death?* And then he answers the question by simply proclaiming, *Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:24,25)* You see, better than any insurance company, ♦ our worst has brought out God's best – *Jesus Christ our Lord.* Again, Paul wrote, *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. <sup>16</sup> But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. (1 Timothy 1:15,16)*

That's the best silver lining ever! Our worst bringing out God's best. But that's not all. He doesn't walk away from us once the ultimate disaster is past. He continues to bless us with his best. ♦ Just look at Paul. Luke tells us Acts that *For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ. (Acts 28:30,31)*

Which brings us to our text for today from Paul's letter to the Philippians. *Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. <sup>13</sup> As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. <sup>14</sup> Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.*

So, not only has Paul been busy preaching Christ to the people who came to see him and the soldiers who were guarding him, but his fellow believers were *also* compelled to preach Christ more than ever. One would think that the embarrassment of Paul's imprisonment would have had people hiding their faith. You know, sometimes like we do when we think that our faith is good enough for us but think that our friends and neighbors couldn't possibly want to about what we believe.

But here's the thing about that: people are longing to find a silver lining in this life. ♦ Even that worldly insurance commercial recognized it. And ***It is true [Paul wrote] that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry ...out of selfish ambition.*** You can see that kind of attitude with prosperity gospel preachers today. <sup>18</sup> ***But[even then] what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.*** And because of this Paul rejoiced.

You see, as you live Christ's story, you preach Christ's story. As you live your Christian life, you preach through your Christian life. And I know that none of us wants to have to endure the worst that life has to offer. But look at what God does through it in the life of Christ, in the life Paul, and in the lives of you and me. As the worst brings out his best, we get the chance to point to Jesus. ♦ Jesus ***who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from [him]. (2 Corinthians 1:4)*** That means that when your neighbor shares that a loved one has died, your own heartache and God's healing give you everything you need to share how the worst brings out God's best in your life and can do the same for them. That means that when your co-worker shares that life just seems out of whack and they're struggling to find some normalcy, your own stress and God's strength give you everything you need to encourage them with the worst bringing out God's best in your life and can do the same for them. That means that when your good friend is weighed down by a difficult prognosis or a bleak future, your own darkness and God's light combine to give you everything you need to lift up your friend in the full confidence that the worst brings out God's best in your life and can do the same in their life.

That's all the preaching of Christ. That's all living His story. That's all something that you can do no matter who you are, no matter what your life experiences have been, and no matter what skills you think you have or think you don't have. That's why our God can call on all of us to ***Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who***

***asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. (1 Peter 3:15)*** Because as Christ is preached, the gospel is proclaimed, and God's purposes are accomplished. And because of this, we too, ***rejoice.*** Amen.

