

July 4, 2021 @ Trinity Bixby
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[Mark 6:1-6a](#) & [II Corinthians 12:2-10](#)

The Apostle Paul sure likes to engage in hyperbole, doesn't he? In his letters to the church at Corinth especially, Paul simultaneously puffs himself up – and then deflates himself utterly. If you get the impression that Paul might have once liked to boast of himself quite a bit – I don't think you're too far wrong. Yet this notorious windbag of braggadocio has found a new way to turn his hot air into Spirit-directed speech. Paul's prior path of persecution – and puffery – is now sliding into self-confusion and mystery. He writes, "I was caught up to paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be expressed in words, things no human is allowed to tell. That experience is worth boasting about – but I'm not going to do it. I will boast only about my weakness." That's a pretty major claim, to have special revelation, an unveiling of the things to come – and also to claim that he couldn't share it. In one breath, in one blocky Greek sentence, Paul simultaneously offers hope – and then nopes it right away.

Hope, that there's a paradise, a garden, a lovely life yet to be. Nope, Paul's not going to say anything further.

I don't know about you, but reading this passage makes me feel a bit like the dog who swears the human threw a tennis ball – it must have gone so far away, so I should chase after it! But... why is it still in the human's hand?! What astonishment is this – the ball must have gone all the way around the earth¹ and the human must have caught it already! What a throw!

Fortunately, Paul doesn't stop there. He goes on to metaphorically offer a nugget of spiritual truth – better tasting than any tennis ball, I'd say. Namely, that Jesus' grace is all we need. It is not in strength, but in weakness, that we find Christ acting most directly.

¹ Dogs, after all, know the earth is round. Give them long enough, and they'll send a howl all the way around it!

This is a hard lesson for us to hear. Advertisements bombard us daily with messages of inadequacy – that if we eat this food, drink this drink, style our hair just so, or walk into the coolest place, we can make up for our weaknesses. Of course, we know that these ads want to sell us things – want us to feel bad about ourselves so that we’ll give their product a try. But it still feels bad. And as someone who has bought an “as seen on TV” product, I can attest, even if the sea monkeys swim as promised, they’re not going ultimately change how you feel. Your hopes will just be crushed by the nopes of the world.

Paul, though, isn’t a snake-oil salesperson. No matter how prosperity gospel preachers like to tell you that if you just have faith, you can pray yourself wealthy – Paul’s message is directly opposite. To paraphrase, “I’ve had these powerful experiences, but what really matters is that none of them matter. Instead, I am here before you, weakened by stakes driven through my being, reminding me that I owe everything to my Lord.”

Because Jesus’ grace is all you need. No amount of late-night online shopping binges or catalogs of Christian products will bring any lasting peace, any ongoing faith. But, leaning on Jesus when you are feeling at your worst? Praying in times of difficulty, when you feel the stabbing pain of life, or when just one more thing goes wrong? That’s when the Spirit fills you. Sometimes, God offers healing, just as Paul regained his sight. But sometimes, the thorns remain with you, just as they did for Paul.

I think of it like this – some people need help remaining humble. Others need help speaking up. Wherever our “nopes” are in life, God provides the “hopes” to fill them. God doesn’t play games, throwing invisible tennis balls and laughing at our discomfort. Instead, when we approach God with an empty bowl, God shows us how to fill it up, laughing with joy when we help each other.

Yet, we have a tendency to mess this up, too. Look at what happened to Jesus when he came back to his hometown after preaching and teaching in the surrounding area! His deeds and words had proceeded him, and people were prepared at first to be amazed. But then, they *noped* at him hard. “Who is this man?”

Isn't he Maria's boy – the carpenter?" Their preconceptions of Jesus ended up leaving them repulsed by who he really was. They rejected his hope, despite knowing all the good he had done.

And Mark tells us that Jesus was appalled by their disbelief – but didn't let that stop him from healing a few sick people. Even in the midst of people who thought they knew everything Jesus was – and could be – Jesus still helped those who needed him most. He took weakness, and turned it to strength.

This, then, is our challenge – to turn over our nopes to Jesus, and find the healing hopes that God has placed within us. For God has given us freedom to choose – to pursue our nopes and remain empty of purpose, or to turn our nopes to hopes in the Spirit's guidance.

And the same Spirit that turns our personal nopes to hopes is also active through all of us collectively. For us in these United States, today is a secular day of celebration, remembering the hopes of a country born in a spirit of freedom. But we have had to recognize, time and time again, that listening to the Spirit means changing our ways – the freedom that we are given is meant to help us improve, to turn our nopes into God's hopes for the future. We have listened to the Spirit's voice, urging us to treat everyone as our sibling – and yet, we have fought against our siblings in the pursuit of freedom.

Perhaps we will always have thorns in our nation, reminders that, like Paul, we should brag on our weaknesses, and not on our strength. But the Spirit calls us to remove those thorns together – to give these nopes to God and acknowledge God's hopes for us in return. We cannot stop God from working, from healing and repairing the damage we cause each other – so let us instead work with God, engaging in the healing process with humility and faith. As the fireworks today remind us of the end of war – after all, we are literally turning weapons into instruments of beauty and peace – let us honor the hopes we have achieved, and think deeply about the nopes we still have to heal.