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Jessica: Welcome to Lectionary Kickstart. We're sparking your thoughts for Sunday as you plan your sermon or teaching lesson.

I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau, here with Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger. They're both professors of homiletics here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

You can hear all about us in our introductory episode, but trust me, they are pretty good preachers.

All right, let's get started. David, where are we in the church here?

David: We're at the seventh Sunday after Pentecost, a time when we celebrate that the Lord has not abandoned his church, but is empowering it through the Holy Spirit.

Jessica: And Peter, what are the texts?

Peter: The texts are from Ezekiel chapter 2, 2 Corinthians 12, Mark 6, and Psalm 123.

Jessica: As always, I ask each of you to tell me which text you would choose to preach about.

To determine who goes first, since my birthday is this week, I am curious about what you ask for your birthday dessert.

Peter: Happy birthday!

Jessica: Thank you!

Peter: 32, wow, that's a big year.

Jessica: Yeah, whatever.

So what do you usually request for your birthday dessert?

David: I like chocolate cake with white icing.

Peter: I will take a cherry pie any day.

Jessica: That's the same as me, apple or cherry pie my husband always makes for my birthday. You win, you get to go first, Peter.

Peter: All right, what time should we be there?

Jessica: There won't be any left. I could ask him to make two.

Peter: All right, I am thinking about preaching on 2 Corinthians chapter 12.

So maybe to get us started, Jessica, would you read verses 2 through 4 and then verse 7?

Jessica: I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven.

Jessica: What does that mean, Peter?

Peter: One thing we're going to have to think about is there's things in here that we don't know much about.

And third heaven is one that there's questions scholars have about what that exactly means, but basically what we do know it means heaven and heavenly things.

David: A place where God dwells.

Peter: A place where God dwells.

And the third idea is there's not much we know about that.

David: One thing I had heard, but I don't know if that's true or not, was this, so use it at your own risk, right, was this idea that there's like the heavens that we see where the birds are and then beyond that is the second heaven where there's the sun and the planets and then beyond that is what we can't see, which would be the third heaven.

A place where God dwells. But I don't know.

Peter: What's tricky about this, and you've got to look at a little commentary work, but

David: Yeah, that's definite.

Peter: In this text Paul is interacting with people who have been criticizing him and challenging his ministry

and so the interplay between some of the stuff Paul is saying in these verses are kind of like a tit for tat almost for those, the false apostles.

And so some careful study of this would be important for exactly these kinds of questions

because it's not necessarily, Paul's not just giving a treatise to us on heaven and what it's like.

David: No, and the point is actually don't be focusing on these things.

Peter:

Right, so there's a lot going on there, but bottom line is we don't really know much about that.

Jessica: You just hear a verse like that and you're sitting in the pew and you're like

that goes against everything that I've been taught about what heaven is and how you get there.

Peter: There is some weird stuff and if there's some weird stuff and you're going to read it, you might want to preach about it.

Jessica: Thank you. So 2 to 4 and 7 you said.

I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven.

Whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows.

And I know that this man was caught up into paradise.

Whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows.

And he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

Peter: Alright, so I read these verses and I think what kind of world do these verses describe?

It's a world where there's a whole lot more than we can see, than we can touch, than we can feel. And on the one hand, there's this world of the heavens.

And this is where some of the commentary work would be helpful to see exactly what we think about third heaven.

But there's a visit to heaven, this man.

And this man, scholars are pretty clear, is Paul talking about himself.

So there's this world where there is heavens and visions and glory and stuff that you can't even utter.

It's so wonderful.

And yet there's also, in this same world, there are angels of Satan who are coming and tormenting, afflicting, harassing, at least Paul here.

And so there's so much more going on than what meets the eye.

And Paul really puts his heart and his own life into that letter.

Paul's describing his life in these verses in terms of a visit to heaven and a visitor from hell.

David: That's nice.

Peter: I might even call the sermon that, a visit to heaven and a visitor from hell.

And so I kind of want to think about, I think in the sermon, Paul's life in terms of a visit to heaven and a visitor from hell.

So it wouldn't be too hard to spend some time reflecting on that first part with Paul.

I think that's where you'd want to acknowledge what we don't know about the third heaven and these things.

Jessica: And the thorn too.

Peter: And the thorn, you know, there's been a lot of people who have had all sorts of crazy ideas about what the thorn is.

Something that would just puncture could be the idea.

Paul kind of seems to intentionally leave it ambiguous.

And so we shouldn't get lost on what that.

David: And yet the ambiguity is helpful because it enables you to see it in your own life.

Peter: It allows you to reflect on what it makes, allows the hearers to make it personal.

Paul's visitor from hell harassed him, humbled him.

And it was resulted in, or was related at least to weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities.

That was Paul's existence, his Christian existence.

And what that led him to was it led him to prayer.

His visitor from hell, after this visit to heaven, led him to plead to the Lord.

It led him to prayer.

And that would be one thing I want to highlight that when difficulties arise, the place to go with those is to God in prayer.

It's interesting that three times he prayed.

You go to Jesus. Jesus didn't visit heaven, he came from heaven.

That was his natural home.

But he did face a visitor from hell.

Right after his baptism, Satan himself tempted Him.

And then the passion of Christ is pretty clearly, I think, in view there.

And that led Him to prayer too, right? In the garden.

And how many times did he pray in the garden, Jessica?

Jessica: Three.

Peter: Three times.

Three times he pleaded that the Lord would take this cup from Him.

And by God's grace, He didn't take it.

He didn't take the cup away.

But He did raise Jesus from the dead.

God's grace, God's favor, God's love for his Son delivered Him.

But I think there are ways in which we, all of us as Christians, have glimpses of heaven and life.

When everything kind of comes together and things are just the way they should be.

And sometimes we even say that, you know, it's got a little taste of heaven.

Or I see God in this or something.

David: Right. Right. Yeah.

Peter: And then of course we're all very familiar with hell on earth.

And sometimes we use that phrase a little bit too callously.

But sometimes, I'm not sure there's a better way to describe it.

In terms of the suffering and the heartache.

And so we as Christians, you know, through baptism we are given entry into heaven.

A visit to heaven.

And we see that sometimes in our Christian life.

And sometimes then we have these visitors from hell.

And the question is where does that lead us?

And that leads us to prayer.

And that's where the beautiful part of this verse that comes up is in verse 9.

Would you read especially the first half of verse 9, Jessica?

Jessica: But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you.

For my power is made perfect in weakness.

Peter: God says, Jesus says to Paul, my grace is sufficient for you.

My power is made perfect in weakness.

To Jesus, His power is made perfect.

It's revealed, it's made known in the weakness of the cross.

And his suffering and death.

And for us, God promises His grace, His favor, His promises, they are sufficient.

The little glimpses that He gives us of heaven and the eternal life that we have in Christ.

The promise of an eternity of that.

God's grace is what allows us to endure the visitors from hell who don't stop.

And so I want to proclaim in this last rhetorical unit that God's grace, the promise of His resurrection,

the power of His spirit, even the presence of His people around us, that grace of the church is going to be enough.

Jessica: And David, what would you preach on?

David: Well, I wanted to preach on the Corinthians text, but in my head I thought, you know what?

Jessica's going to have something in this gospel reading that she once explained.

So I guess I'll take a look at the gospel reading.

So here's the verse that I think Jessica would say, well, what does that mean?

Because, you know, she's always concerned about parishioners understanding what they hear read.

Jessica: Absolutely. I am very curious to know. See how well you know me.

David: I'm thinking verse five. Jessica, could you read verse five and tell me if that's the one.

Jessica: And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them.

And he marveled because of their unbelief. Right. And in context, this is Jesus.

David: Right. Right. Healing people. Not able to do.

Jessica: Yeah, what the heck?

David: I know. See, I know.

Peter: There you go.

David: And I'm like, I want to do Corinthians because it's so beautiful.

But there's going to be someone who's like, how come, pastor, you're not addressing this question?

Jessica: How selfless of you to preach for the people that are listening instead of for yourself.

David: I know, isn't that awful? I know. I'm so bad. Oh, so looking at this text.

Peter, if you ever had that case where you're like, you look at a text and in the very, I mean, this is all about the beginning.

Right. I mean, we're just thinking you had a full sermon today.

But normally it's like just about, you know, what are what are opening thoughts?

Have you ever had the case where you look at a text and you get like three different opening thoughts and you're really not sure which of them you're going to pursue?

Peter: That's why I went away from the marked text because I saw those and I thought, oh, man, which direction do you go?

David: I know. Right. You've got to narrow it. Right. And so you've got so for me, there's like three three different items, ideas that are circulating in my head.

And I would just kind of start the process by having those in the background and then doing my study and seeing which one is going to flesh out to be the kind of sermon that my people need to hear for Sunday morning.

So good. So for me, with this text, it's a big text. It's got it.

It has like it opens with Jesus being rejected in Nazareth, his hometown, and then it closes with him sending out the apostles to do missions.

So we've got a lot of stuff there. For me, there's kind of a big picture sermon and then there's a really, really focused, tiny picture sermon.

So the verse five one, you know, Jesus could not do many works there because of their unbelief. Right. Or he couldn't do many miracles there.

Jessica: Only this is Jesus who can do anything.

David: Right. Right.

That one to me is kind of the tiny picture. If I was going to address that one, I'd have to leave a whole bunch of the of the text off the table.

Peter: Well, that would be more of kind of what we call a doctrinal or kind of a confessional sermon in the sense that we're confessing something about this text confesses something about Jesus. And you're going to explore that to help your hearers understand who Jesus is.

David: Right. Right.

And so we're not going to cover everything in the text. And usually in that type of a sermon, I'm going to start by saying, you know, I wonder if when you heard this text, if something struck you as odd that Jesus couldn't do miracles.

And, you know, and then I'll just let people know, you know, there's a lot of other stuff in the text. We're really not going to be able to cover it today. But I just really want to lean in on that one verse and answer that question.

Why could Jesus not do many miracles there?

Jessica: And everybody's ears would perk.

David: Well, there you go. So so that would be one approach.

And if I were going to approach it that way, I would probably use the question and answer design. Right. Were you and basically with question answer design, you have a question. Why was Jesus not able to do miracles, do mighty works there? And then you pose answers. And the first two are more answers.

The first answers are going to be wrong answers. And you're going to help people think theologically about them.

You don't you don't say, well, the first wrong answer. You say, well, one possibility is. And you treat these with respect because there are people who might think that way. And you just say, you know, let's think about this. And the more we think about it, we realize, well, it probably isn't that.

So what else could it be? And you slowly lead to the to the final answer.

Peter: That's a helpful way to help people learn to think and practice thinking theologically.

David: I know. And then you kind of model for them. You model how to think theologically. And the real key to this is that you don't you're not shaming.

Peter: Right.

David: With the wrong answers.
Well, some stupid people think everybody's like, you just call me stupid.

Jessica: Thank you, thank you.

David: Yeah. No, you're just you. You approach it, you know, because you want it to be such of the case that somebody who thought that way would come up to you after the sermon and say, oh, thank you, pastor.
I used to think that way. And now thank you for answering it because you don't want them to feel ashamed about it. So...

Jessica: We're afraid to think of theological questions.

David: Right.

Jessica: And then they don't even want to think about theology.

David: Right. Right.
So so I think I think one possible answer that people would have would be that Jesus wasn't able to do mighty works or miracles because he needs our faith to do miracles.
You've got this sense that there's unbelief.
He marvels because of their unbelief. And so maybe, maybe it's that Jesus needs your faith in order to accomplish a miracle.
And so He's got people who don't have faith, so He can't do miracles because He needs their faith.
And and I think we encounter this a lot on TV with miracle workers.
And when their miracle doesn't happen and then it's like, well, you know, you just need to believe more. Right.
Jessica, you're not.

Jessica: Oh, absolutely. I have a I have a friend who's been blind since he was young and he had to deal with that.
You don't have enough faith. And that's why you won't be healed. Or you've done something so bad that you haven't confessed.
Right. Right. Right. And Jesus doesn't need our faith to do miracles.
He's God. Whose faith enabled him to still the storm.

Peter: Right.

David: I mean, you know, he does. He's he's Lord of all creation. He can do miracles without faith.
And so you can comfort people who feel that, you know, I'm not getting a miracle because I don't have enough faith.
He doesn't need your faith to do miracles. Who raised the dead on the last day? And that includes everyone.
So so it's probably not that Jesus needs your faith to do the miracles. After all, he's God.
So if that's not it, well, then what could it be?
I think a second possibility would be that he rewards our faith with miracles, that miracles are really a reward for faith.
And so here you've got a situation where people have unbelief and He's not going to reward them with miracles.
And so this, again, kind of fits into this idea that, you know, believers who have faith are going to have a more blessed life than others, which, you know, the apostle Paul is a perfect example of not being true.

Peter: Right.

David: You know, if the apostle Paul has a thorn in his flesh and Jesus doesn't reward him for his faith by taking it away, is it's not the same for us.

So for me, kind of the place where I would go would be that Jesus doesn't do miracles there because he graciously holds back on the miracles so that these people will not be condemned, judged by the miracles that He performed and that they didn't pay attention to.

So I see it as part of a gracious thing. And it kind of helps us realize that the work of God is something much bigger than miracles.

We think miracles are the thing and that if I just had a miracle, I'd believe. Well, no, you believe by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the word, whether there's a miracle or not.

It's the Spirit working through the word. And what Jesus wants to do is to get you connected to that word. That word's going to do it.

Peter: And that picks up at the end of verse six that he goes about in the villages teaching. He's going and He's going to teach. He's kind of slowly, patiently instructing them.

David: He's going to teach you. I'm going to teach you. And then he does do a few miracles there.

So it's not like facing people with this miracle worker that they can reject and they'll be judged because they've rejected Him.

Jesus is offering them the word through which the Spirit will work to bring about conversion. And then they will enjoy that life with Him.

So it's kind of a that would be if I were going to do kind of a real close study of a hard question, that would be the way I would do the sermon.

What do you think, Peter?

Peter: Yeah, I think that's I think the kind of question you're raising is a question that's pretty common for a lot of people.

And it's it's hard because we imagine God and we imagine Jesus sometimes as just doing really amazing things for us instead of speaking truths to us.

Right. And partially it's because I think we want we want we need sometimes we want more than just words.

We want actions. There's a there's a longing there. And in a way, Jesus is showing us that we're not always going to get exactly what we want, but He will.

It's a little bit related to the second Corinthians. My grace is sufficient.

David: Right.

Peter:

And His grace comes through his words, not always a grace that that heals or that does a miracle. You're helping people think theological.

David: You're helping people think theologically.

Peter: And so if you're going to preach that kind of sermon, it would be really wise to have conversations like we're having right now with people in your congregation.

David: Right.

Peter:

And kind of then you understand kind of what they're thinking is and help you refine the sermon.

David: Yeah. But it's kind of also the big picture that I would hope you'd walk away with would be that Jesus came on a gracious mission.

Yeah. His first his first coming was not in judgment. It was in grace.

God's grace is sufficient for you. And he's going to he's going to act in a way that is gracious to you, because until the return of Christ, God's mission is a gracious mission.

Peter: Yes.

David: And that's the big picture is that Jesus did not come to bring judgment. He came to bring salvation.

He will come in judgment. Right. But until then, it's the year of salvation. That's the year of the Lord's favor.

And that's kind of the big picture. So that would be kind of if I were to preach in a really, really tiny way.

So then the final one that's kind of circulating in my head is the really big picture one, and that is that we have these two narratives.

The first narrative, six one through six, seems like it could stand on its own.

Peter: Right.

David: Right. Jesus is rejected in his hometown and he goes among the villages teaching.

And then we've got this second one where he sends the 12 out and then they go out and and proclaim and cast out demons and anoint the sick and heal them.

And that seems like it could be its own sermon. But we got the two together.

And what I think is interesting about that is if you're thinking about reading the Gospel of Mark.

Right. And you're reading the Gospel of Mark. You see that Jesus gets rejected in his hometown. You're kind of in my mind, it's like, OK, retreat. Retreat.

Peter: You guys go out and do it.

David: I don't know. That's great. That's great. No, but it's like instead of retreating, Jesus advances.

He's like, yeah, you're rejecting me. OK, I'm sending out the 12 now. You think you had problems with me?

Imagine when you get these guys. It's like...

Jessica: Or maybe he's doing every possible thing. It seems merciful.

David: I know. In the face of rejection, Jesus responds by digging in and going full force in terms of the outreach and the ministry and the work of spreading that word and doing the teaching and the healings for others.

Peter: I love the way you just said that. In the face of rejection, he goes out even more graciously.

David: Yeah.

Peter: And so he's rejected by his people. He's rejected by his town. He's rejected by all of Israel. And how does God respond? He responds by sending even more messengers.

Peter: It's such a counterintuitive response to rejection that we always dig in and get angry and tit for tat.

David: We get angry and fight or we flee or we become immobilized. Right. And what Jesus does is He moves forward, but not in anger.

He moves forward in grace and He involves more people in His mission.

And it's kind of like, you know, your church congregations, you know, at time, even in your life at work, you feel like you're being rejected.

You feel like you're being challenged and you want to pull back. You want to fight. You want to just become immobilized.

But no, what God's saying is, you know, let's get more people in here. Let's bring more people to the party.

Peter: So I'm curious, Jessica, you're listening to Dave's ideas here. Which ones resonate? Which ones do you think? That would be really helpful for me.

Jessica: Oh, I think the very big picture one. As Christians, when we're rejected by the world, sometimes the temptation is, well, I'll show you.

You think I'm hard-nosed about this? Well, I'm going to be even more hard-nosed.

You were right when you said going out more graciously. You know, trying even more compassionately to show God's love to people, not trying to do it even more in their face.

David: Any one of them is going to take me to Jesus, so I'm going to be okay. I'm just going to have to wrestle with which one fits my people.

Peter: Which one is most helpful to your congregation?

David: Right. Which is most helpful for them today.

Peter: And you know your congregation, so.

David: Yeah.

Thanks, guys. That's all for today. We have free resources to guide your next step in planning at ConcordiaTheology.org. Check it out.

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Peter: 32, wow that's a big year.

Jessica: Yeah, whatever.