

08.11.24 ~ Pentecost 12
“The Beauty of God’s Strength & Grace”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Exodus 15:1-7a ^{TLB}

¹ Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord:

I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;

He has thrown both horse and rider into the sea.

² The Lord is my strength, my song, and my salvation.

He is my God, and I will praise him. He is my father’s God—I will exalt him.

³ The Lord is a warrior—Yes, Jehovah is his name.

⁴ He has overthrown Pharaoh’s chariots and armies, Drowning them in the sea.

The famous Egyptian captains are dead beneath the waves. ⁵ The water covers them.

They went down into the depths like a stone.

⁶ Your right hand, O Lord, is glorious in power; It dashes the enemy to pieces.

⁷ In the greatness of your majesty You overthrew all those who rose against you . . .

Leader: This is the History of God’s Strength!

All: Thanks be to God!

2 Corinthians 12:5-10 ^{TLB}

⁵ That experience is something worth bragging about, but I am not going to do it.

I am going to boast only about how weak I am and how great God is to use such

weakness for his glory. ⁶ I have plenty to boast about and would be no fool in

doing it, but I don’t want anyone to think more highly of me than he should from

what he can actually see in my life and my message. ⁷ I will say this: because these

experiences I had were so tremendous, God was afraid I might be puffed up by

them; so I was given a physical condition which has been a thorn in my flesh, a

messenger from Satan to hurt and bother me and prick my pride. ⁸ Three different

times I begged God to make me well again. ⁹ Each time he said, “No. But I am

with you; that is all you need. My power shows up best in weak people.” Now

I am glad to boast about how weak I am; I am glad to be a living demonstration

of Christ’s power, instead of showing off my own power and abilities. ¹⁰ Since I

know it is all for Christ’s good, I am quite happy about “the thorn,” and about

insults and hardships, persecutions, and difficulties; for when I am weak, then I

am strong—the less I have, the more I depend on him.

Leader: These are the Apostle Paul’s Words of Testimony.

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Dear Lord, our strength, creator, guide, healer, provider, and reconciler, we thank you for this morning’s study and worship together. We thank you for our many blessings over the week, and how you are steadfast even when we waver. Help us to remember that it is through you that we find grace. Through you and your love, we find relationship and comfort. Through you and your power, we find the strength to face the thorns in our own lives. Thank you for your protection when it storms, and please renew us and refuel us for the coming week. Instruct us as we explore the

Scriptures now. Inspire us Lord as you fill us with your spirit, in Jesus' name.
Amen.

I want to thank our Worship Vision Team, Music staff, and you, the congregation, for trusting me to lead, design, and our team to conduct a beautiful Taizé Prayer service last Sunday. I hope it was meaningful for you; there is no single way to design such an intimate service, so next time will be similar in structure with a few additions. I welcome your feedback and creativity as we continue to PAUSE and explore ways to experience sacred listening and connection through diverse worship styles.

In recent weeks, the topics have moved from working well together, communing with the Holy Spirit, the beauty of preaching and teaching, recognizing leadership dedication, experiencing the sacred rest Christ gives, practicing sacred silence and sung prayers to now finding beauty in the strength and the grace of God. These are fairly heavy, compared to some years, for a summer season of preaching. And yet, doesn't that fit with the world in which we are living right now? It's been a pretty heavy summer of national and international news with war, politics, and natural disasters. Hope is on the horizon, I do believe! So, today's reminder about where we find strength and grace is perfect. Our strength comes directly from God. Any doubt about that? It's ok if there is because you are in the right place! Church is where we can wrestle with our questions or doubts, no matter how long or how intensely we believe in Jesus. Life can be a challenge sometimes.

As we study these passages, let me share a quote to consider from the Regional Executive Minister of Nebraska for American Baptist

Churches USA, Rev. Dr. Greg Mamula. This was from the MMBB newsletter as it caught my eye being relevant now as we ask how we at United Baptist and at churches all over our country stop the decline and move forward to grow and become a community influencer. He says: “Gathering together won’t solve the systemic issues facing our nation, but building community and coming together with trust and not fear makes us able to partner together and achieve great things.” Isn’t that encouraging? I witnessed it again at our Food Giveaway, which was a hospitable act that provided hope to many families and children yesterday. Thanks to our volunteers and their friends, we had three interpreters and neighbors who donated books to give away! Their generosity triggered my creativity, so I scavenged several Bibles from our Lost and Found, an old chalkboard, sidewalk chalk, colorful donated stickers from Sally, recycled 20-year-old file folders, and more children’s books from our library to entertain our guests and their highly active children! I share this to illustrate how important respect and relationship are to anything we do in the name of the Lord. I can manage a building and activities all day, but mission and ministry are what I am called to first, and so are you. It was a joy! Strength to do God’s work six or sometimes seven days a week comes from God, not from myself. You have your own testimonies of strength; share them with others! Those stories help people relate to you and to Christ through you!

Just before our first passage in Exodus, the Lord saved Israel as they crossed the Red Sea. What we read is the beginning of the Song of Moses, and the Song of Miriam, Chapter 15, verses 1-18. Moses and Miriam led the praise for God’s strength and their safety as they

worshiped. They acknowledged God's great power and strength to destroy the Egyptians as they drowned in the waters and to save the Israelites as they crossed over dry land. They were delivered from certain death! This beautiful Biblical poetry is a hymn, praising *Yahweh* for his goodness to Israel. As God's children, can't we use this hymn poem to remember God's strength is with us when we are weak or uncertain? Yes, of course! We often go to the psalms for comfort, but sometimes we need a warrior's words! The Lord, as divine warrior here, shatters their enemy. The Lord's majesty overthrows their adversaries. This may be a time of challenge for you or our country, and if that is what you're pondering lately, that's good. God hears our prayers, so we must be patient and persistent. God is our liberator; Christ's yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

In our second passage, what mattered to Paul was not his newfound power or pride of accomplishment, but God's work through him and the Gospel he preached. God gave him that thorn in his side to remind him of his weakness, humility, and humanity. Some scholars say "thorn" was figurative language for a chronic health condition – perhaps migraines, malaria, or epilepsy. The point for our lesson today is that Paul prayed fervently and frequently asking God more than three times to remove it from him so that he could do more Kingdom work. Have you prayed about your affliction whatever it is? Are you frustrated by it? God used it as a reminder of Paul's humanity and only Jesus' divinity. "My grace is sufficient for thee" the King James version says. His pain reminded the apostle Paul of Jesus' pain on the cross, and his sacrifice for us. This is the Christian paradox: when we are weak in ourselves (when our Food

Mission guests saw me run to get supplies for the children and humbly clean the books while I sat down to rest) they opened up more to me. My weakness and willingness to be helpful, not judgmental, brought the parents and children to me so I could model Jesus' generosity and forgiveness. One teen asked if he could borrow the Bible to read and was overjoyed when I said he could take it home to read as well. Such a small gesture made a significant difference! Folks, that was grace, and nothing else. Paul's leadership could have puffed him up, and made him conceited, but the thorn in his flesh kept him humble. Watching the mothers nurse as they waited for supplies was a humble moment for me; I always leave the Food Mission in gratitude for this church, our team, what I possess and what God provides. There have been times in my life where pride blocked the grace and strength only God could give. I have repented from those times long ago; have you? What is your thorn? Why has God given you one? His power is more than we need; his grace is sufficient for us to be his disciples and evangelists. We do ministry every day just by staying connected to our source, the Holy Spirit, who works through our presence and very being. Do you see it? How can we do other ministries that share this visible Gospel of strength and grace? How can we open our doors to more people who need the love of Jesus? Be praying about these opportunities as they present themselves; may we have the courage to step forward to accept the challenge with God's strength and grace. And let us find beauty in them as well so we may share this beauty with others. Amen. ||

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we humbly thank you today for these sometimes-painful reminders that we live and work not out of our own strength but

out of yours. Let us find both energy and rest in you, as we accept your sufficient grace to be your child. We are weak but you are strong! May your Spirit strengthen and empower us to be your disciples, and to lead others to you until your return. Enrich our lives with understanding and insight so that we can serve you and this community in new ways; and, Lord, lead us in all we do. Jesus, it is in your name we pray, **Amen.**