

# Sermons at Christ Church

## The Joy Of The Lord Is Our Strength

Epiphany VI

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

There's a story of two gardens. Each garden had its own unique and peculiar character. Like any beautiful garden, we are invited to walk around, admire and partake of the many fruits and vegetables that grow in each. Each of us can walk in those two gardens-none is immune from the character of each garden. I remember when I was in elementary school I had a little garden by my father's house. I planted all kinds of vegetables in that garden. I loved to tend to that garden. I watered the plants almost every evening, cleared up weeds and shrubs. I think I was a very good gardener and being a gardener was one of my proudest moments as a kid. At harvest time, I will harvest my vegetables, send some to my mother and keep the rest in my father's house. Looking back, I came to realize that the garden flourished only because I tended to it, and when I stopped, that was when it became overgrown with weeds, lost its life and productivity. In many ways that is the lesson of our spirituality. If we understand that spiritual growth is a journey, and that you can only measure your progress with one step at a time. What matters on your journey isn't how far you have traveled but whether you are heading on the right path, whether you are in the right garden, and that you are willing to focus and keep going on.

Epiphany is about the revelation of the two gardens, the two paths-my way and God's way, my garden and God's garden. Remember the song My Way by Frank Sinatra? This song became one of the popular songs of all time. In the song, Frank sings:

And now, the end is near  
And so I face the final curtain  
My friend, I'll say it clear  
I'll state my case, of which I'm certain  
I've lived a life that's full  
I traveled each and every highway  
And more, much more than this, I did it my way

For what is a man, what has he got  
If not himself, then he has naught  
To say the things he truly feels  
And not the words of one who kneels  
The record shows I took the blows  
And did it my way  
Yes, it was my way

I wonder why it has remained such a popular song. I think something about the lyrics tells me that the inherent appeal and exhortation in the song, the notion that I did it My Way. The satisfaction that we derive from the idea that I did it, and I did it the way that I wanted to do it, counting only on my own strength and abilities, thus elevating self-sufficiency, and in the same breath dismissing dependency on God or any one. I did it my way. That to me is the attraction.

As popular as this song may have been, the sober reality is that there's something to be said about human weakness, and our collect this morning points that out. It isn't about the lack of strength, for we can never have enough of it. Human weakness is about the failure to recognize that our help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth and that by our own selves, there's not much we can do. The point is, we can only be fed and nourished, not by the food we cook ourselves for ourselves, but by only the food offered to us God. The moment you embrace this reality, you have made your way out of the garden of self-indulgence to the garden of self-denial. In fact, you are blessed if you can hold on to this revelation.

Listen to Jesus standing amidst a milling crowd pronouncing blessings. Blessed are you. He says. These days we misconstrue being blessed with material wealth. The more you have, the more you are thought to be blessed and so those who are poor among us feel a sense of abandonment by God. But to be blessed is very different-to be blessed is to be overwhelmed with the presence and abundance of God. To be blessed is to be aware of where your provision comes from. To be blessed is to know and accept that someone other than yourself provides for you, and that it doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor-you are blessed because you depend on God. It doesn't matter whether you are hungry or well-fed because your sustenance comes from God. It doesn't matter whether you are weeping or laughing because weeping may endure for a night but joy comes in the morning. It doesn't matter whether you are ostracized or not because you know who it is that delivers you. If only we can recognize that our life happens in spite of our efforts and our task is to put our trust in the God who makes life happens for us.

To be blessed is to feel dependent on God like the tree which stands by the water. To be blessed is one of power made manifest through weakness-it is when I am weak that I am strong because I know where my strength comes from.

The prophet Jeremiah isn't happy. He sees the distress in which Judah found itself, and cannot believe that the leadership has abdicated its responsibility of trusting God, and is intent on trusting in human strength and resourcefulness against the approaching calamity by King Nebuchadnezzar. The prophet is beside himself with rage and thunders curses. The prophet was very much aware that those who trust in the Lord are like trees planted by water. The prophet knew that they possibly could not abandon God and expect to survive. But here they face the Babylonians, having bitten more than they can possibly chew.

Hear Frank Sinatra:

Yes, there were times, I'm sure you knew  
When I bit off more than I could chew  
And through it all, when there was doubt  
I ate it up and spit it out  
I faced it all and I stood tall and did it my way

For the prophet, the question was, how do you dare to trust in a mortal whose very life isn't dependent on him or her? Woe to you who are rich, because you place your dependency on yourself. Woe to you who are full because you place your trust in your own ability. Woe to you who are laughing because of your sense of sufficiency. Woe to you who welcome praise because it affirms for you your sense of accomplishment for doing it your way.

Remember, the metaphor of a tree that sits by the water isn't nourished by itself, nor has this tree any control over the water that feeds it. The tree thrives simply because of where it is situated. And because of where it sits, this tree never lacks. So really, the question is not whether you can sit, but the question is where do we sit? In which garden do we sit? And what do we lack? Are we in the Garden of Eden or the Garden of Gethsemane? Epiphany not only opens our eyes to the nature of these two gardens, but it begs the question, what is it that we are not doing right? Some of us still suffer from what someone has rightly called the Garden of Eden syndrome. The syndrome is that God placed us in the Garden of Eden and invited us to partake of the fruit without labor. However, we have either conveniently forgotten that we are no longer in that garden, and that the divine instruction after the fall was to walk into the Garden of Gethsemane.

Come to think of it, there is an amazing contrast between what took place in the Garden of Eden and in the Garden of Gethsemane. *Not your way, but mine* was the essence of the response of Adam and Eve to God. In the Garden of Gethsemane, however, we hear *Not my way, but yours*. This marks the shift from self-indulgent to self-denial.

It isn't surprising therefore, that Frank's daughter, Tina, would say that her father later came to hate the song because he came to realize that it was self-serving and self-indulgent. And that is exactly the problem with the character of this particular garden, and that character stands in the way of our relationship with God.

To overcome this character flaw, the essential thing for us to do is hear God's word and discover from it how to respond to God, for it is through God's word that we come to understand that the path to blessedness is not about my way, but it is through submission to God's way.

Amen.