

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen (Ephesians 3:20, 21)

Paul writes that in his letter to the Ephesians.

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

Paul is saying is that God requires us to be active participants in God's power that can do more than we can imagine. We are called to be more than hopeful bystanders of the work of God.

This morning we heard two stories about the miraculous power of God. We heard stories about the amazing power of God that is able to take the dead and bring it back to life.

The scripture about the Valley of Dry Bones holds a special place in my heart. I preached on this passage for the very first sermon I ever gave. It was 1984 and I was a student at the University of Kansas. While I was extremely enthusiastic during that sermon, it is my fervent prayer that my message today is a little more coherent than it was 40 years ago.

In passage about the Dry Bones, the prophet Ezekiel has a vision about the people of Israel. In the vision, Israel is seen as valley full of dry bones. God announces through Ezekiel that Israel will be restored to her land and be blessed. But this seemed impossible because the people were essentially dead as a nation. They had been deprived of their land, their king, and their temple. They had been divided and dispersed for a long time. Unification and restoration seemed impossible.

But Ezekiel's vision showed that God's power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

The second story is about Jesus bringing his friend, Lazarus, back to life. This miracle is the seventh and final sign in the Gospel of John which Jesus performs to show us he is truly the Son of God. Jesus tells his friends that Lazarus' "illness does not lead to death: rather it is for Gods glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

Jesus shows true emotions of sadness and grief when he learns of his friend's death. He is shaken by the interactions he has with Lazarus' sisters, Martha and Mary, when they both rebuke him by suggesting their brother would be alive if Jesus had come to visit earlier. Jesus gives them hope and tells the sisters that he is the resurrection and the life – that those who believe in him will live.

When Jesus commands the stone to be removed from the front of the tomb, Martha protests that it's going to stink because of the dead body inside. Jesus reminds her, "I told you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God." Don't worry about the messy part of this, Jesus tells us, just believe and work with me.

The tomb is opened and Jesus says to his friend, "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus appears and everyone is amazed.

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

Two miraculous stories showing us the infinite power of God to restore, revive, and resurrect.

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

I want us all to pay close attention to this passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It could well say "Glory to God whose power can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine." But that's not what Paul wrote. Instead, the passage reads, "Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine."

In the story of Lazarus, both Martha and Mary complain to Jesus. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." They both say the exact same thing. But in the story, the message they send to Jesus before he comes to Bethany does not ask him to come to see their sick brother. The message is simply "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Perhaps it is implied that the sisters want Jesus to come as soon as possible. But that is not what their message states.

Yes, Jesus through the power of God can do all things. Clearly Mary and Martha believe this because they think Lazarus would not have died if Jesus had come sooner and saved him – healed him from the illness.

And we believe that God's power can do infinitely more than we can ask or even imagine.

But we are called – we are required - to be active participants in God’s power.

Frankly, Mary and Martha’s behavior is somewhat passive-aggressive. They complain that Jesus wasn’t there to save their brother, but they never directly asked him to come.

Likewise, how can we expect God to help us – to “fix” our problems – to heal us – if we do not actively work toward helping ourselves and fixing our own problems?

I have shared this phrase before: “Prayer without action is simply wishful thinking.”

Depending on Jesus – or God – to help us without using the tools they have given us is an insult.

There’s the story of a person trapped in a flood – stranded on their roof. A rowboat comes by to rescue them but is refused. “God will save me,” the person says. The waters rise higher and a motorboat comes to rescue the person but is refused. “God will save me.” The flood waters rise and are lapping at the person’s feet. A helicopter comes to save them but is refused. “God will save me.”

The person is washed away by the raging waters and dies. In heaven, the person asks why God didn’t save them. “I sent two boats and a helicopter! What more did you want?” God replies.

We are called to be active participants in God’s amazing power in this world. We are called to take part in our healing and the healing of the world.

Would the story of Lazarus have played out differently if Mary and Martha had directly asked Jesus to come quickly and help their sick brother? That’s not for us to say, but it is an example for us to be honest with God about what we want and what we need.

God’s power works in us and through us and we are called to accept it and make things happen.

If we are suffering addiction, we pray to God for healing and also use the tools around us to help us – recovery programs are available to us.

If we are physically or mentally sick or ill, we pray to God for healing and also see doctors and specialists who have been given the knowledge and skill to help us.

If we are in need of financial assistance, we pray to God for help and then seek out professionals or government agencies who can help us work through our money problems.

There are homeless and unsheltered people all around us – we pray to God to help them and then we roll up our sleeves and we volunteer with organizations – or maybe even start a new one – to help those in need.

There are hungry people all around us – we pray to God to help them and then we donate food, or cook meals, or join organizations who feed those in need.

There are people in power who are attempting to turn back the clock and deny the progress that has been made in equality for all God's children – we pray to God that people will not be oppressed and then we speak out and march and protest and work towards equality and respect for every human being.

Jesus says to his friend, "Lazarus, come out!"

Jesus says to us, "Come out!" Work with me. Do not hide behind your faith and take a passive role in the world. "Come out!" Work! Get things done! Jesus says, "Help me help you. Bring me your problems and we will work on them together."

Glory to God whose power, working in us – working through us – working from us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever.  
Amen