

I'm not a huge fan of Star Trek but, the first thing I thought about when I read this Psalm for today was the phrase, "Live Long and Prosper." For all you non-Trekkies like me, "Live Long and Prosper," is the standard greeting or blessing for the Vulcan people. The phrase, which was created by the actor Leonard Nimoy who played Spock, is also accompanied by a somewhat difficult hand gesture. [Do the gesture.] Due to the success of the show, this fictional blessing has taken on a life of its own outside of film and TV, popping up on the International Space Station, at peace rallies across the world, and even in the Oval Office. It's a beautiful phrase in its simplicity and depth and has obviously touched the lives of millions who wish that those they greet would live long and prosper.

If prospering is so good, why then would the psalmist say in verse 8, "Do not fret yourself over the one who prospers, the one who succeeds in evil schemes"? Since when did prospering equate to evil schemes? Well, it's because, of course, there are many competing definitions for what "prospering" really means. Merriam-Webster's two definitions sum up the different understandings of "prospering" nicely: 1. To succeed in an enterprise or activity, especially to achieve economic success; 2. To become strong and flourishing.

If you're looking to prosper in terms of economic success, it's easy to imagine a situation where evil schemes might be employed in order to "get ahead" in a "dog eat dog world." But, if you're looking to prosper in terms of

having a flourishing life, that's a different story. In fact, it just so happens to be our Old Testament story today of Joseph and his brothers.

Joseph is one of the youngest of twelve brothers who were all sons of Jacob (who was son of Isaac, who was son of Abraham, so we're talking fourth generation of God's covenant here). Joseph was gifted with prophetic dreams and he was his father's favorite son, which Jacob made well-known by giving Joseph a "long coat of many colors." Of course his brothers would be jealous but did they really have to try to kill him, then have second thoughts, and then decide to just sell him into slavery in Egypt? They didn't *have* to but they did. Well, long story short, Joseph ends up as the second-in-command in Egypt, and when a famine strikes the region and no one but Egypt has grain, thanks to Joseph's prophetic dreams which told him to store up grain, his brothers come pleading for help but don't even recognize that the brother they once left for dead is now the only one that can save their lives. But Joseph *does* recognize them and after all they did to him, chooses to forgive and provide for them instead of taking revenge and sending them back empty-handed. This is a rags-to-riches story where the villains also get the riches in the end. It's a story where the one who suffered evil schemes was the one who ultimately prospered in grain and in grace.

Joseph's story of faithfulness and forgiveness shows us what God's faithfulness and forgiveness look like because God *also* chooses not to deny the human race, who like the brothers have prospered in evil schemes. Instead, God comes in Jesus Christ to show us just how much God loves us despite our denial of that love from the very beginning. What's more, in

Jesus, God has given us a new standard of what it means to prosper, and that is explained most clearly in this section of Luke which we call the Semon on the Plain.

Last week we learned from Jesus that those who are blessed, who prosper you might say, are poor, are hungry, are sad, are reviled and are *not* those who are rich, or full, or laughing, or praised now. Those who “prosper” at this time have their reward, because sure they have ease-of-living now but do they really know how to rely on God and do they really care about serving rather than being served? This week, we continue in Jesus’ sermon and find some practical advice about what to do in order to prosper in the way Jesus would have us. What does Jesus say? “Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” ... you know, easy stuff.

Not easy. But very powerful. Do things these, Jesus is saying, and you will truly prosper, because you will need to rely on God in a whole new way, and therefore you will *know* God in a whole new way.

We learn best by doing, don’t we? Want to be a good cook? Take a cooking class. Want to run a 10k? Go for a jog. Want to play the piano? Take a lesson. Our spiritual lives are no different. Want to know Jesus more? Read a Gospel. Want to hear God? Take time to pray. Want to love your neighbor as yourself? Give without expecting in return. Whatever we want to learn to

do, we must practice it in order to get better at it, and the more we give, the more we will get.

That is what is behind all the work that St. Paul's is doing with the RenewalWorks program right now. We are prioritizing spiritual growth as a church and we are providing practical ways to help each of us achieve spiritual growth. As Kate mentioned last week, soon we will be launching a detailed set of pathways to help each of us grow, whoever we are, wherever we are on the spiritual continuum. Everyone will receive a booklet and it is our hope and prayer that we will all use it in our own way, and with God's help, to grow in our spiritual lives.

Now, to be clear, this is not about becoming "better" Christians or a "better" church at least in terms of "evil schemes" to "prosper" in Average Sunday Attendance or Annual Giving. This is about a deeper, richer life in God, one in which we take delight in the Lord, waiting patiently for him, not fretting but having an abundance of peace. One in which we really love our enemies, lend without expecting anything in return, and not judging but forgiving others, just as God loves and forgives us.

Whether we're exploring, growing, deepening, or trying to stay centered, all it takes is a little faith and a little courage to try something new in our spiritual lives and to really know what it means to Live Long and Prosper.

Amen.