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“God at Work”

A sermon by David Verner

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Isa. 9:1–4; 1 Cor. 1:1–8; Matt. 4: 12–17

Paul has never struck me as modest or self-effacing by temperament. As a young man, he was a government agent who made a name for himself tracking down Jesus-followers for the authorities. He was smart, cocksure and ambitious. He was on the rise with the powers that be!

His conversion seemed to tame him a little, but it’s not hard to spot that big ego, still alive and well in his writings. It *is* often camouflaged somewhat. Here are a couple examples from later in this same letter: In the first one, Paul disputes the idea that speaking in tongues is a sign of spiritual superiority, although he himself is a tongues-speaker. He notes this in the course of his argument. But he doesn’t just say, “Remember, I speak in tongues, too.” He says: “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than anybody!” A few chapters later, he’s talking about the resurrection and how he is one of the privileged few to whom the resurrected Lord appeared.

This is what makes him an *apostle* along with Peter and John and the others, and not just an evangelist or a traveling prophet. So it’s an important point. He gives a list of the risen Lord’s appearances--the last one was to Paul himself. But he doesn’t just say, “And finally the Lord appeared to me.” He says, “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me. For I am the *least* of the apostles, because I persecuted the church.” Paul can’t seem to resist talking in superlatives about himself even when he’s trying to be humble!

So I began to wonder how the unreconstructed Paul would have reacted to the situation in Corinth. How would he have reacted to the news of these factions cropping up in this flagship church of his? So I imagined such a letter:

Dear Corinthians,

Grace and Peace. What's this I hear about these new factions popping up among you? An Apollos faction? Come on! A Peter faction? Really? Maybe somebody should start a Christ faction! Ha. Ha. Thank God there are still some of you who have stuck with me! Have the rest of you lost your minds? Do you remember who brought you the gospel in the first place? Have you forgotten that you owe your very existence as a church to me? It's true that Peter is an apostle, but he's not your founding father—and he has not given you anything like the attention and care and leadership that I have. And you're fooling yourselves, if you think he's ever going to. Besides, when the chips are down, he can be wishy-washy and a little bit muddle-headed. Take a look at my letter to the Galatians and you'll see what I mean. And Apollos! I hear he's a good preacher, though I've never laid eyes on the fellow. But he's not even an apostle—he's just a traveling evangelist. Not that we don't value evangelists, but you're going to trade in your founder, your apostle—the apostle to the whole world outside Judaism—for this minor leaguer? [Yes, I know Paul wouldn't have said “minor leaguer.” But you get the idea.] And by the way, it doesn't matter all that much who baptized you. You don't need an apostle for that. You people just don't know how lucky you are to have me! So stop all this nonsense and listen to me. *I'm* your leader. *I'm* your guide. You want to know Christ? You want to be in his inner circle? Stick with *me!* *I'm* your man!

Faithfully yours,
The Apostle Paul

But this is not at all the kind of response that Paul makes to the Corinthians. He does not focus on his place or his status with these people, despite the enormous investment of labor and heart and soul that he has made in them. He is truly focused on Christ as the guide and pattern of the new life. The splintering of the

church into factions discards this pattern. And Paul himself would have abandoned the pattern, if he had reacted from his ego.

So what accounts for the lack of egotism in Paul's response to the Corinthians here? Paul gives us a hint in the last verse of today's lectionary passage. This verse announces a theme that will occupy Paul for several chapters to come. (I cheated and read ahead!) It reads: "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Paul has learned something about how God exercises power, about how God works. He's learned that God seems to prefer working from the bottom up! To go about redeeming the creation from obscure places and with people who have no clout and no standing with the power brokers of this world. So Paul has concluded that working for God does not involve amassing power and status. Because to work for God requires working the way God works. And God's way of exercising power seems to involve giving power away.

How did Paul reach this conclusion? He tells us repeatedly: through Christ crucified! God's great and decisive act to set things right took place in the seemingly abject and total defeat of the crucifixion. And so all assumptions about how God works, and about what is ultimately powerful, get turned upside down.

Maybe, Paul was the first to put it together this way. (There's no way for us to know that for sure.) But the *experience* of God acting in this way was in the atmosphere of the earliest Christian communities. Take this morning's text from Matthew: "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light!" This text quotes Isaiah 9, that beautiful passage about the wonderful counselor, the prince of peace. We don't know for sure what the original occasion of this passage was. A pretty good guess is that it was composed for the coronation of King Hezekiah of Judah, when Judah was under heavy threat from Assyria. In the history of the kings, Hezekiah is one of a very few who get credit for being mostly good. During his rule the Assyrians laid siege to Jerusalem and it looked like Jerusalem and indeed all of Judah were done for. But for some reason the Assyrian army withdrew, and Judah stayed more or less independent for another hundred years or so. So Hezekiah turned out to be, on the whole, a good and successful king, although he wasn't the Messiah.

Matthew quotes this coronation hymn and applies it to Jesus. Think about that. The hymn was originally written for a king, for a man at the hub of political power in his domain, a mover and shaker. Now these earliest Christians are applying the very same hymn to a Galilean peasant who was crucified by the Romans. And though they trust that this man on the margins is actually God's son raised from the dead, the powers that be are going on, pretty much undisturbed, with business as usual. And those who follow the crucified Galilean are gathered in small communities of mostly no-name people scattered around the Roman Empire. But these no-name people have seen a great light and they believe! And the outward appearance of things does not seem to shake their confidence.

I imagine this is what Paul saw and what he felt. And he knew from personal experience the difference between this way of seeing and being and the way of seeing and being that normally dominates the halls of power. And you know? I really think Paul was onto something. It's the small events among ordinary people that most often bring light to the darkness. These events typically have nothing to do accumulating power. Usually they don't make the news.

I have one example for you. It comes from James and Melissa Elliot Griffith in their book *Encountering the Sacred in Psychotherapy*, a ground-breaking work for pastoral counselors and psychotherapists in general. They tell the story of a woman they call "Jane." Jane was a participant in a research project that James Griffith was conducting. He was investigating the religious and spiritual experience of people and the impact of this experience on their lives.

Jane was a member of a conservative Baptist congregation. When he asked her about her experience of God, she told him that she used to approach God as a rescuer, and that this approach had brought her disappointment after disappointment over the years.

But her sense of God had changed, and now she experienced God as "abundance—abundance of love, abundance of presence, abundance of beauty," she said.

James asked her what brought about this dramatic shift. She told this story in reply: “Well, I had what I guess most people would call a mystical event. It was with my... next door neighbor, who was dying of AIDS.”

Jane went on to explain that at the time her life didn't seem to be “working out,” and hopelessness was crowding in. She didn't know her neighbor very well, but she had begun to wonder about making friends with him. She was making some drapes. She knew that he was “a professional seamstress.” So she decided to ask him if she could borrow his cutting tables to cut out the panels. But he invited her over to work on the drapes together, and she went. She was thinking that at least it would be a distraction from the turmoil in her mind.

The project took all evening. Her neighbor began to tell her his story, as they worked.

She says,

“As he sewed I noticed how beautifully, how gracefully, he moved. Really, the entire evening was like being in a work of art, something holy.... Around midnight, he was showing me how to use a particular machine.... I was standing behind him, looking over his shoulder.... This sensation, this warm feeling came over me. I looked at my friend and he appeared to be glowing! I said to myself, ‘Wow, this is amazing! Finally God has come to me... in this gay, AIDS-stricken man. Sewing!’”

The friendship that began that night continued to deepen. The turmoil in Jane's life didn't suddenly disappear. But her sense of God had changed. She kept close to her friend as he grew sicker and finally died. There was no rescue, but there was the ongoing experience of what Jane calls “abundance.”

One of my son Sam's favorite childhood movies was “Hook.” It's still one of my favorites of his favorites. In case you don't remember or don't know the story: It's about Peter Pan all grown up, married, with two children. He's a middle-aged corporate lawyer with a cell phone glued to his ear. Peter and his family have come from America back to England to see Wendy, his wife Moira's grandmother.

But the first night back, Captain Hook kidnaps Peter's children and spirits them off to Neverland.

Peter has forgotten how to fly, but with Tinker Bell's help, he follows his children back to Neverland. He goes to the lost boys to ask for their help in getting his children back. But they can't believe this middle aged, overweight, forlorn-looking grown-up could possibly be their Peter Pan. Then, one of the youngest boys goes up to Peter, puts his fingers on Peter's sad face, and lifts it into a smile. For a moment he peers intently into Peter's eyes, and then he exclaims, "Oh! *There* you are, Peter!"

Whenever I hear a story like Jane's, I think to myself, "Oh! *There* you are, God! Oh! *There* you are, still present with us, still at work!"

Benediction

"Days pass and the years vanish and we walk sightless among miracles.
Lord, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing.
Let there be moments when your Presence, like lightning,
 illuminates the darkness in which we walk..."*
So that we say, "Oh! *There* you are God! *There* you are, still at work!"

*from Rachel Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings*, p.72