

There is a lot of action in this part of Paul's letter to the Romans. Ascend into heaven. Descend into the abyss. Word is on your lips and in your heart. Beautiful feet that bring good news.



No standing still for Paul. The good news of God in Christ is something that must be acted upon. One confesses with the mouth a belief that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead.

Paul continues to be concerned with “the law” – the teachings of the Torah as revealed and fulfilled in Christ and how those teachings are to be understood and part of our life now that Jesus has come to earth.

Kyle Fedler, Vice President of Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty at Huntingdon College, says that the “incarnation represents the very purpose of the law, namely, uniting us with Christ”.

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We are an incarnational faith. That is, we believe that God has been made known to us most clearly in the person – the human person- of Jesus. In ways that we do not quite understand, Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. Through our belief that Jesus and God are connected in ways that, for most of us, defy logic, we learn that God loves us and desires to be an integral part of our daily lives. Even so, God has given us free will to choose if and how to be in relationship with God. It is not mandated. Our relationship is a choice. Our Collect this morning reflects this when we pray to be enabled to live according to God's will: a life that has meaning and purpose through our love for God and our love for neighbor. A love that holds up all creation as very good and worthy of love and respect.

Fedler writes that “being a Christian involves the development of a certain kind of character. And the shape of that character is by the story we tell about God's ongoing journey with human beings from the beginning of time until the end of time. To live the Christian life”, Fedler continues, “we must see the world through the lens of the Bible, the book that tells the story”.<sup>2</sup>

Paul is an important means through which we see the world from a Biblical lens. He wrote or is credited with writing most of the New Testament other than the Gospels. For many, Paul's writings have been problematic because they are often seen as presenting a black-and-white, this-way-or-the-highway approach that is often at odds with our contemporary society and our culture. In Paul's context of early first century, struggling to explain the ecstatic experiences he had on the Damascus Road and elsewhere, it is not unusual that he would be emphatic. Given

<sup>1</sup> Kyle Fedler in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, volume 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 330.

<sup>2</sup> Kyle Fedler. *Exploring Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), x.

that Paul spent much of his life after his encounter with the risen Lord and his change from persecuting the Christians to evangelizing Christ, it is not surprising that his frustration with those who had heard the word of Christ crucified but then let ordinary human impulses to compete with one another for prominence of position and other human struggles leak through in his letters to the various churches he had helped to found. Remember also that we have only Paul's letters in response to the various early Christian communities that either he founded or he was aware of. We do not have those communities' letters to Paul asking for guidance.

Keep in mind also that Paul was trained in rhetoric- an art not much practiced these days. A way of analyzing and responding to questions that is not always familiar to us. As we know all too well in this age of instant messaging and email, words on the page do not carry with them the body language and emotion of spoken face-to-face interactions. It is easy to misunderstand or misinterpret an instant message or an email, let alone Paul's writings. What we can be confident of is that Paul had a conversion experience that completely transformed his life. He became a tireless evangelizer for belief in Jesus as Christ.

In his article about this passage from Romans, Fedler suggests that "Christ is the only human being capable of upholding and obeying the deeper meaning of the law. With a few exceptions, all torah commands have to do with one of two primary relationships: human-to-human and human-to-God. The law was given largely to join humans and God.<sup>3</sup> The Torah is a way for us to understand this covenant we have entered into with God so that our relationship is live-giving.

Paul, a pharisee steeped in the law – or as I prefer- the teachings- of the Torah, would have a unique perspective on how those teachings should now be considered in light of the Christ. Paul is able to move- and urges us to move- from a rigid, legalistic view – of the law to a more inclusive, relational view of the teachings. Paul urges us to move from a belief that "if only we live in ways that strictly obey the law" to "live in right relationship with God and each other." Our relationship with God is to be founded upon love. Remember the passage from 1 Corinthians- read at many weddings: If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ... and now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love (I Cor. 13: 1, 13). This is, I think, the "true" Paul. The one who understood that God loves us – despite all our failings, despite our hanging on to things and ways of living that do not reflect God's love for us and the command that we love one another as God has loved us.

At the same time, Paul is not content for us to believe and not act. Lips. Hearts. Feet. He starts this passage from Romans with reminding his readers of what Moses wrote: "the person who does these things will live by them" (Rom. 10:5). Action is required.

Martha Highsmith of Yale University finds an interesting difference between many northern and southern Americans around evangelism. It is a tension, she says, between doing and believing. Generally, northerners tend to "do" – they send missionaries, run soup kitchens and the like.

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<sup>3</sup> Feasting, 330.

Southerners tend to “talk” – they tend to be on street corners or other public places speaking about their faith and desire that all come to know Jesus as Lord.<sup>4</sup> Yes, this is a generality and we can each think of a person who doesn’t fit this model. But, as someone who has lived in both the northern and southern parts of this country, there is some merit, I think, to her observation. If “faith is an embodied reality” “what does it mean in 2014 to confess with our lips and believe in our hearts”?<sup>5</sup>

One example is that of Peter and Jesus and walking on water.

Notice at the beginning that Jesus has sent the disciples ahead of him. Jesus needs time for reflection and prayer. Jesus needs time apart, even from the disciples. We, too, need time for reflection and prayer as our days get busier and busier. Once school starts tomorrow, we will notice changes in the rhythm of our days, even if we do not have children in school.

School buses will be out and about and those red lights will flash causing us to stop to ensure that children can safely be let out or taken onto the bus. Take that moment to slow down your breathing rather than getting frustrated at all the things you have to accomplish today. Take that moment to enjoy the laughter and energy of youngsters either getting on or off the bus. Remember what it was like when school started and you had the chance to catch up with friends you might not have seen for a few weeks or months. Enjoy the time to rest and reflect – and maybe even say a prayer, with your eyes open, of course!

Note in the Gospel reading that by night time the boat in which the disciples were was far from shore and being battered by waves. The wind was against them so much energy was being spent to keep the boat afloat. Perhaps some even feared they would die that night if their strength at battling the winds and the water gave out.

But early in the morning, having spent the night wrestling with the wind and the waves, Jesus comes to them walking on the water. The response: “It is a ghost!” They were terrified. Something totally outside of their experience and fueled by exhaustion, “It is a ghost.”

Jesus speaks and says: “Take heart. It is I; do not be afraid.” Jesus confirms who he is with the words “It is I” echoing God’s response to Moses at the burning bush. What is your name, Moses asks. God answers: I am who I am. Or, in some translations: I am. Jesus is the Son of God, the one sent from God.

Peter, like so many of us, says, “well, if it is you, then command me to come to you on the water.” So Jesus does and all is well so long as Peter keeps his eyes and his trust on Jesus. We all know what happens next. Peter falters- perhaps a bird or something else distracted him and his eyes and his trust turned away from Jesus. And he begins to sink.

Jesus simply stretches out his hand and pulls Peter back up. They get into the boat and the wind ceases. The water calms. And those in the boat worship Jesus acknowledging him as the Son of God.

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<sup>4</sup> Martha Highsmith in *Feasting*, 328.

<sup>5</sup> *Feasting*, 328, 330.

We don't have a boat in a storm-tossed sea with waves and wind battering us. Where is Jesus to pull us out of the mire into which we find ourselves? Belief in Jesus as Son of God is perhaps harder for us because we do not have the experience of Jesus in human form. We cannot **prove from a scientific standpoint** that our faith in Jesus is warranted. None of us have died and come back to tell what is true.

What we can point to is the love we have for one another. We can point to Scripture and its transmission to us from the ages of stories that tell of a people's searching for meaning and their response to encounters with what they call God.

One of the alternative readings for today is the wonderful passage in First Kings when the prophet Elijah is on the run from the wicked queen Jezebel who has promised to kill him if she finds him.

Elijah runs and hides but God finds him and asks what he is doing there. Elijah tells him he is hiding because he is afraid for his life. God says: No, go stand outside and the Lord will pass by. So Elijah crawls out of his cave and stands and God passed by and a great and strong wind rent the mountains and broke it into pieces. But the Lord was not in the wind.

And then there was an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake.

And then there was a fire. But the Lord was not in the fire.

And after the fire was a still, small voice. Or in some translations: the sound of sheer silence.

And God is in the still, small voice. God is in the sheer silence.

Elijah understands that God is with him no matter the circumstances but most especially in the still, small voice and in the sheer silence. God's presence wraps around us and brings us comfort when we reach out our hands and get out of the boat.

Commit to God. Get out of the boat and live.

Listen for the voice of God in the silence and in the joy of laughter and love which are all around us if we will but look for them.

*Amen.*