

The Rev. Joel C. Daniels, PhD
Rector, The Nevil Memorial Church of St. George
Ardmore, Pennsylvania
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 20, 2020

Year A

Isaiah 49:1-7
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42
Psalm 40:1-12

The Nourishment of the Gospel

Not many people know this, but shortly after Jesus ascended back to the Father, after his death and resurrection, he was standing around and talking to some of the angels. They hadn't followed Jesus's goings-on on earth and were eager to hear what happened. Jesus said, "It went really well, actually. I was born to Mary and Joseph; a lot of people—not everyone, but lots of people—recognized me as coming from the Father: wise men and shepherds, a whole crew of fishermen and tax collectors. After a period of time, they killed me, but the Father raised me from the dead, and now I'm here." The angels said, "But how is it supposed to work now? Everything you wanted done isn't done." Jesus said, "Oh, it's fine! I left behind those fishermen and tent-makers and tax collectors to take care of it." The angels shifted nervously, then one said, "Do you have a Plan B?"

There is no Plan B. The ministry of the gospel has been left to the clay-footed descendants of the apostles. This, on the one hand, is extremely worrisome: any student of Church history knows that the Church has no power in itself to help itself, as the old confession read. Sometimes it seems like the Church is kind of like America in the apocryphal quote by Winston Churchill, that we can always be counted on to do the right thing once we've tried everything else. Typically, when you have an important job to do, you try to hire the best person to do it. You read through the resume, talk to references, question people carefully about their plans. But look how Jesus calls his disciples, his Plan A: the first three disciples, as recorded here in the first chapter of John, were disciples of John the Baptist, who after a short invitation, become the proto-disciples. No interviews; no resumes; no credentials.

On the other hand, however, the scriptural story shows us that God will accomplish what he wants accomplished, even if it seems impossible. Look at Isaiah, in today's reading. The person speaking is who we call the Servant of God. His job is to save Israel while they are in exile, and he is not meeting with success. The servant says, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." He has tried and tried, and nothing is working. He believes that he is doing what he was called to do, but maybe it was too much; maybe it is just beyond his capacities.

God's reply is not just, "You can do it!" which would be a sign of encouragement itself. God's reply is that, actually, the thing that he is giving the servant to do is hardly all that he is going to accomplish. You think it's nothing and vanity, but that's not true. He says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob. ... I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Perhaps the servant was looking for a Plan B, a lesser goal that could be accomplished. But his God wouldn't hear of it. He was Plan A, more than he even knew.

The text says, "God says to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, 'Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who

is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.” To the one who all around him can only see defeat and frustration, he says that the situation is going to be reversed. The future is bright for the light to the nations.

So it is with us as well. We may feel sometimes like whatever we are being called to do, through discernment and prayer, is simply too much. We may feel like insurmountable obstacles face us in various ways. We may feel defeat.

But what we see in the scriptures—in the calling of the disciples, in Paul’s writings, in the ministry of the servant in Isaiah—is that God brings all things to fulfillment if they are his will. In other words, we should read the Scripture as providing the nourishment for a Christian life, lived as best we can. It is a hearty refreshment that should give us enough energy and fortitude to face down anything we encounter.

You may have heard the quote adapted from G.K. Chesterton: “Fairy tales do not tell children that dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children that dragons can be killed.” (He actually refers to St. George in this context, our patron saint.) Scripture shows us that even if it seems like everything has come to vanity and nothingness, we should be encouraged because we never know how God will use us to bring about good. Scripture shows us that even if the dragons of the world line our path, breathing fire and intimidation, we are shielded by the love of God in Christ, and all things are possible through him. There are no omnipotent dragons, however large they seem. There is only one omnipotent God.

Someone we see with that confidence is St. Paul. In the reading from his first epistle to the Corinthians, he refers to himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God,” and he shows every indication that, because he knows that God has willed it, he is sure of the eventual success of the Christian gospel to the Gentiles. He encourages the same confidence in the Corinthians, in this section of the first chapter: he knows that they will not lack any spiritual gift that they need; he knows that Christ will strengthen them all the way to the end.

They will be strengthened to the end not because they are especially good people, not because they deserve it or have earned it themselves. They will be strengthened because God has strengthened them and will strengthen them out of his love of them. I think this is something behind his customary Pauline greeting that we heard: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (adapted in Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians). They are the recipients of God’s grace, and one of the things God’s grace means is that even if they have no power in themselves to help themselves, the Lord will provide for them. Grace is that unearned gift of the assurance of victory, even if it is in ways that we cannot conceive of, or is not accomplished on the timeline we would like: the servant song was written some 400 years before the birth of Jesus, but in the fullness of time, sure enough, kings and princes would bow before him.

Because we have that grace, because we have been promised it, we can also have peace: Grace to you *and peace* from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The servant in Isaiah was despairing at the beginning of today’s reading; everything was coming to nothing, while they were in exile. But Paul, with his absolute faith in God’s grace, had peace in his heart. There is no plan B, because there doesn’t have to be. God will provide. And so he has peace.

We can have peace in our hearts, because we have been assured of the grace of God. The gospel here encourages us not to give up in whatever situation we find ourselves. It gives us fortification for the race set before us, nourishment for whatever is to come. When we read the gospel, it should be like eating our Wheaties, filling us with strength. Hang on and hold on: you have grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.