

Proper 5C, June 5, 2016

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Galatians 1:11-24

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Francis Collins, the physician, geneticist, and director of the National Institute of Health, was a content atheist. He said that as a graduate student in physical chemistry in the 1970s, "I was an atheist finding no reason to postulate the existence of any truths outside of mathematics, physics, and chemistry." Sitting beside the bed of a dying patient, she looked him in the eyes and said, "Doctor, what do you believe?" This simple question launched his search in Doctor Collins' life.

This is not emotional. Last week I told the story of Nicole Cliffe who was reading an article of Dallas Willard and was overcome with tears and over time she left her atheism and found faith. In Francis Collins' life his encounter with the risen Christ was not emotional. It was troubling. It was an intellectual search. He was challenged. He decided to respond to this woman's question about what he believed through rational inquiry. He studied the religions of the world. Eventually he read *Mere Christianity* by C.S Lewis. He says while hiking in the mountains one day he came to faith and Christ. There was no light shining from heaven. Nothing knocked him off his horse. No voice provoked him. Simply a question that began a quest in his life that resulted in faith. Jesus entered the story of Francis Collins and reoriented his life.

Today we are in our New Testament reading we hear Paul defending his faith. He is defending his faith against the Judaizers who have come to challenge the gospel that he proclaims. Again and again throughout Paul's letters he often summarizes his gospel. For instance, in Galatians 1:3 he says, "Grace and peace to you from God, our father, and the Lord, Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from this present evil age according to the will of the God, our father, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen." For Paul, the centrality of the gospel is Jesus Christ. His life, death, resurrection, and ascension. His spirit leads us and guides each of us. For the Judaizers, the gospel meant that one had to become a ritual Jew first. They wanted the Gentiles in Galatia to become circumcised before they could experience table fellowship with the Jews. They created a division within Paul's church in Galatia creating ethnic and ritual barriers to Christ.

In today's reading Paul is defending the gospel that he proclaims. He's defending the gospel with his story. He's simply telling his story and as he tells

his story and in some ways we can see the gospel that Paul is preaching. I'm going to rehearse Paul's story. The time when Jesus enters Paul's life just as he entered Nicole Cliffe's life just as he entered Francis Collins' life. Now we know his story. Most of us know his story. Paul was a faithful heresy. He lived out his sense of call with dedication, purpose, clarity. There is no indication that Paul was in any sense of crisis or looking for another way. He was on missions as a heresy, serving the God who he believed he was being faithful to. In the midst of his motion, in the midst of his travel, on the road to Damascus, his life is interrupted.

Now, unlike Nicole's story which was an emotional story, unlike Francis Collins' story which was an intellectual story, Paul's story is a physical story of being knocked to the ground. The light of God coming upon him from the heavens and his whole life being reoriented by Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ enters his life and commissions him, teaches him, trains him, sends him out. This is part of the reading that we hear today as he is sent out to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles. In his story we see Jesus at work. Paul was trained in Torah. He had zeal for fulfilling Torah. In fact, his zeal was such that he persecuted the church. Not because he was a particularly angry or violent person but because he was preserving Torah. He was protecting Torah. Jesus enters his life and reorients this whole story so that now, Paul, the very man who stood against the church, not only embraces the gospel of Jesus Christ, but he does something unexpected. He takes the gospel beyond the Jews to the Gentiles. In Paul's own life, Jesus opens up a new way. A new way that Paul could not have anticipated and none of the Jews could have anticipated.

Jesus enters Paul's life and he tells a new story. In Galatians 3:24, Paul says, "The law was our guardian until Christ came in order that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come we are no longer under our guardian. In Christ, Jesus, you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you were baptized in the Christ and put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither slave nor free. There is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." This gospel that Paul proclaims has opened up as he begins to follow Christ. Opens up in ways that he could not have anticipated. This gospel is not simply an idea. This gospel is taking shape in Paul's life. That's why his life becomes a defense of the gospel. This gospel takes shape in his travels and his struggles and his questions, his successes, and even his failures.

Jesus Christ enters Paul's life. In fact, as Paul reflects upon his life and even as we see it in the reading today, Paul realizes that Jesus has actually been in his life since the womb, that Jesus has commissioned him and called him from the womb. Now as he reflects back over his life all those years as a heresy, Jesus Christ was still in his life even in that time. The mystery is how could Jesus allow Paul to persecute the church and to be unfaithful, to stand against the very gospel that Jesus would have Paul proclaim at one point? This is a mystery that I'm not going to try to solve other than the fact that Jesus acts in his timing and in his proper timing he opens Paul's eyes to the fullness of truth and he leads Paul in to the fullness of his truth and it's only then that Paul realizes that Jesus has been at work in his life from his very birth.

There's something else that we find in Paul's story. Even as Jesus Christ has entered Paul's story, as we listen to Paul's story we realize Paul has entered into the story of Jesus Christ. There are many ways that we could talk about it today. We might think of the good shepherd. The story of the good shepherd who leaves the 99 to search for the one lost sheep. Isn't that the very shape of Paul's ministry? The man who goes after the lost sheep, the Gentiles, who are lost to God. He goes out to find the lost sheep trapped to bring them home to the father. There is another way that Paul enters into the story of Jesus Christ. We might pause a moment and think about the life of Christ.

Jesus Christ is fulfilling the will of his father. He says in John, "I have come down from Heaven not to do my own will but the will of Him who sent me. This is the will of Him who sent me that I should use nothing that he has given me but raise it up at the last day for this is the will of my father that everyone who looks on the sun and believes in him should have eternal life. I will raise him up the last day." Jesus comes to fulfill the will of the father and he fulfills it in two distinct ways. He fulfills the whole story of Israel even as he fulfills the will of the father moment by moment so that in John 6 he will also say that he does nothing that he doesn't see the father doing first. He is living in complete dependence on his father.

Hans Urs von Balthasar when talking about Jesus fulfilling the story writes that, "Salvation history which is summed up and given its ultimate meaning in Christ when he fulfills it and integrates it with his own human life does not consist primarily in isolated verbal prophecies and individual legal precepts." This would be our tendency to list all the prophecies of Isaiah or all the prophecies of Jeremiah and then say how Jesus fulfills each of those. Which, he does, in fact. Balthasar is saying, "That's not simply what Jesus does. It consists

in the whole living. To our eyes, the chaotic series of events from Abraham to John the baptist, that history with all its judgements, its rejections, redemptions, and elections, and its learning at long last the lesson of prayer is interplayed between the divine and human freedom as such is the promise."

Jesus his whole life fulfills the life of Israel. He fulfills the life of his people. It's his very life that fulfills the story of Israel. Paul, himself, has entered into this story. Paul, himself, is fulfilling this story in Christ. Paul, himself, is entering into the same struggles of Christ. We know about the struggles of Christ through Hebrews and the psalms if you remember in the book of Hebrews says Jesus faced fears and temptations. We know in the gospels Jesus yells out, "Why have you forsaken me, father?" Jesus enters into the complete human struggle of doubt, pain, suffering, temptation, loss, but also friendship, love, hope, and faith. He fulfills all of it. He does this moment by moment of trusting in the father. Life is a gift. Each moment is a gift from the father. It makes for fulfilling this life as a gift from the father he's entering into the very lives of all of humanity. The struggles of all of humanity.

When I say that Paul is entering into the story of Jesus, he is entering into a story that is lived moment by moment. Personal relationship with the father. Life as a gift. Each moment as a gift. Paul enters into the very faithfulness of Jesus. Even as Paul, himself, struggles with doubt, fear, pain, anguish. As we follow Paul's life he enters fully into the suffering of Christ. Even into the way of the cross. Even into the way of the life completely poured out so that he himself will lay down his life. He says he himself will make up the sufferings of Christ.

This is partly why Paul is defending the centrality of Christ against circumcision or other rituals because Christ is at the center of everything. He's at the center of the gospel. It's not the rituals. It's not the circumcision. It's not the ethnic cleansing. It's a part of being a Jew. It's being baptized into Christ and living into the very story and the very life of Christ. If that centrality is moved aside it changes the whole interlogic of hope and scripture because Christ and Ephesians raises up one new man. Both Jew and Gentile. We all become the children of Abraham. That's literally what we're told in Hebrews 11 and 12. In fact, Hebrews 11 and 12 suggests that we have all entered into this story. Hebrews 11 recounts all of the story of faith for the people of God across the ages. Then he says, "Their story is incomplete without our story. That our story is fulfilling that story." We, ourselves, in Christ are entering into the very story of Christ.

As we meditate upon Paul's defense of the gospel and Paul's suggestion that Christ has entered his life and he has entered the very life of Christ we are reflecting upon our own call in Christ. We ourselves have entered the life of Christ and he has entered our life. As we look at Paul's life, this dramatic encounter with a voice from Heaven, being knocked off a horse, most of us have not experienced that. Some people have. Some people have quite dramatic encounters with Christ in their conversion. I have a friend who was into transcendental meditation and he was in the midst of some ecstatic state and the heavens opened up and Jesus as standing there and says, "You need to convert and follow me." Which he promptly did and he left that way of life and became a Christian.

Some people do have those kind of dramatic stories. Some people have stories like Nicole Cliffe. Emotional stories when suddenly in the moment of a crisis they are overcome with their need for God and they cry out to God. Some stories might be more like the story of Francis Collins. Just a quest that begins because of a question. Some inquiry that eventually leads to faith. Then for many of us it might be part of the rhythm of life. Growing up in the church. There's not a distinctive moment when suddenly this becomes real. It's become part of our life. Ingrained in the very rhythm of our belief, our understanding of the world. We have different ways that Christ has entered our life.

Sometimes when we hear the story of Paul or we hear the stories of these disciples we may feel rather separated from their stories. "I don't feel like I really enter into the life of Christ" and, "I don't really see Christ in my own life. Where do I see him? I may not feel these dramatic voices speaking to me or dramatic encounters." I'm not going to suggest a method for trying to find Christ in my life but I might suggest three things that we've seen in the story of Paul today that might help us reflect upon the presence of Christ in our own lives.

In Paul, and as we read about Paul's story and Paul participating in the life of Christ, we see this as a life that is relational. When people speak of having a personal relationship with Christ, they are using the language of relational, relationship, Christ, himself, is in relationship with the father. The gospel that he brings to the people is to bring us into the relationship with the father. All through the whole Bible from the old to the New Testament there's an image of adoption into the family of God. An image of being brought into the family by the grace of God. Both ancient Israel being rescued from Egypt and Christ

himself fulfilling that story on the cross and bringing us into relationship with the father. There is this sense of communion. When I say relationship I don't simply mean relationship with the father because Christ is planted us within a people. We often understand our faith in the context of relationship with other people.

Again and again in Paul's letters he will defend and protect the body that Christ has raised out. The [inaudible 00:17:28] are the called out ones. It is in this communion of faith as we share our stories, as we listen to one another stories. We begin to behold Christ in our stories. This is the act of remembrance. If you follow the gospels it will say later the Holy Spirit brought such and such event to their remembrance. It is in Paul telling his own story of conversion that he realizes Christ has been at work in his life since the womb. It's often as we share our stories, as listen to the stories of the church from history, that we begin to develop an awareness of Jesus Christ present in our own life, in our own world. Sometimes it is a dramatic encounter. Sometimes it is a simple awareness of his faithfulness day by day.

As I think about his faithfulness day by day there is another thing I might think about. As I mentioned the life of Christ and his moment by moment dependence on the father. Life is a gift. One way I might begin to develop an awareness of Christ is being aware that every moment is gift. This breath is a gift. This breath is a gift. This breath is a gift. Any traditional prayers in the church when we arise from sleep uses the language of rising from the tomb, rising from death, because each day is a gift. Each moment is a gift. These moments, these daily moments, of living into the life of Christ are earthy, messy moments full of foul odors and messy noises and sweaty hugs. They're filled with struggle and pain and doubt and fear and anguish and sometimes people want to get beyond all that to just the perfect encounter with Christ but actually it's in that messiness for Christ is gifting, blessing us.

So that C.S Lewis can say, "The great thing, if one can, is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions to one's own or real life. The truth is, of course, that what one calls the interruptions are precisely one's real life. The life God is sending one day by day. What one calls one's real life is a phantom of one's imagination." The real life is the messiness. It's the day by day struggle. Christ is present, gifting, blessing, sustaining, so my response moment by moment is to be thankful that each moment is a breath, each moment is a gift. In that gifting I might realize that Christ is opening my life up. He's opening my faith up. All through scripture he is opening Paul up and Peter up to realize the

gospel is so much bigger than they realized. That they can't capture it and put nice borders around it. So that the Jews in Jerusalem assumed that gospel was given to them and Paul, following the call of Christ, has taken it to the Gentiles and it's opened up in ways that no one could have expected. That is Paul has to deal with the messiness of each of the churches. The gospel has opened up afresh in ways that he hadn't anticipated.

Or consider Peter who Jesus calls to the rock. Peter, who is the first and always ready to run and follow Christ, and before Jesus leaves he tells Peter, "Truly, I say to you when you were young you used to dress yourself, walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old you will stretch out your hands and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." Peter doesn't like that. He says, "What about him?" Jesus says, "That's not your concern." In fact, if we follow Peter's life all through Acts and even in today's story with Galatia where Paul has to rebuke Peter, Peter is constantly being challenged again and again through the book of Acts. His understanding of what the gospel means is constantly opening, stretching, getting bigger and bigger. That is what Christ is doing to us.

It is often in these messy places where I would want the purest spiritual experience and maybe I would want the light from heaven and the voice speaking down to me. It actually might be in the very messiness, the loneliness, the struggle, where I realize that Christ is present now. He is faithful now. In that moment, my understanding of grace opens in new ways because I find that he can touch me and heal me and restore me in ways that I had never anticipated.

Might we become people who are thankful. People who are trusting. People who learn to listen to stories and tell stories. As we learn to behold, Christ is present and he is leading us into his fullness. Or Jesus Christ opened our eyes to your goodness, to your mercy and grace, may we realize that we have been brought into the communion of saints and that somehow by our own lives you are fulfilling the great story of history and we have been put into the story of Christ, the very faithfulness of Christ, that may we rest in that faithfulness knowing that you have not forsaken us but you are faithful in the midst of every moment.

Thank you, Lord. Amen.

