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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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1 Kings 17:17-24, Psalm 30, Galatians 1:11-24, Luke 7:11-17

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am a Lutheran preacher, and so I am drawn to the epistles of Saint Paul like a bear to honey, because Saint Paul was so very important for Martin Luther. A lovely thing about this summer stretching ahead of us is that the appointed Bible readings include many passages from Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. There are six chapters in that magnificent letter, and the lectionary assigns six Sundays to them. I bet it would be a worthwhile sequence if I were to focus on these Galatians readings for the coming weeks, working our way through them one by one. Probably I will not do that, because the other Bible readings will interest me too. But let me make a beginning now. This sermon, then, is an introduction to that great spiritual phenomenon Saint Paul.

I begin with a passage from this morning's reading, from Galatians Chapter 1. Saint Paul is recalling his early days as a follower of Jesus Christ. He says that he had received the gospel he preached through a "revelation of Jesus Christ." He emphasizes this direct teaching from Jesus in order to defend his apostolic credentials. He does not want the Galatians to believe that he is secondary to the twelve disciples. And so he writes this:

...I did not confer with any human being, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. (Galatians 1:16-17, NRSV)

Indeed, Saint Paul worked on his own as a founder of the early church for three years before he went to Jerusalem and introduced himself to Saint Peter and to Saint James. He stayed with Saint Peter for fifteen days, and then he was off again. He did not return to Jerusalem for fourteen years. He was an independent-minded man.

Chrysostom admits that there is a somewhat combative tone to Saint Paul's letter to the Galatians:

Now that this Epistle breathes an indignant spirit, is obvious to every one even on the first perusal...
(*Commentary on Galatians*, Chapter 1)

This is true. But we can also point to Saint Paul is a beautiful example of integrity and devotion to the Lord. Sometimes Saint Paul rebukes the churches, sometimes he is affectionate. Sometimes he boasts of his own labors and his own sufferings, and sometimes he is humble-minded and refers to himself as the lowliest of the apostles:

⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Corinthians 15:8-9, RSV)

In all things, whether he rebukes or encourages, boasts or confesses his weaknesses, or whatever, his goal always is to praise Jesus Christ and to build up the holy church of God. He is whole-heartedly devoted to God, and nothing else much matters to him. Even shipwrecks and scourgings and imprisonment and abandonment by friends—none of life's sorrows seem to matter to him much so long as, by some means, he can save souls and advance Christ's church one earth. I admire him greatly.

Maybe in your own profession you have encountered such a one as Saint Paul. I have. I have met theologians and clergy who have filled me with wonder and admiration. Here they are, younger than me, but much more learned, much more eloquent, much more powerful. I have wondered, "Where did this one come from? He did not have my parents or childhood pastor. She did not have my teachers. It is as if he or she has suddenly sprung forth full-grown on earth." I am sure that is how Martin Luther struck many of his own generation. "Where did this man come from? Where did he get such power and such wisdom at such a young age?"

Saint Paul was like that, I feel certain of it. He was late on the scene, but rather overwhelmed everyone else with his intense combination of brilliance, piety, and pastoral heart.

SOMETHING OF HIS BACKGROUND

Let me tell you something of Saint Paul's background. I have said that he was "late on the scene." That is true. Scholars calculate that Saint Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus took place *five years* after the resurrection of Jesus:

In A.D. 34– 35, five years after the resurrection, when Paul was a relatively young man (though we have no certain information about the date of his birth), his life was turned

around through an encounter with the risen Christ on a trip from Jerusalem to Damascus.¹

So, the early church had been living and serving Jesus for five years before Saint Paul even came on the scene.

Paul was not one of the original twelve disciples. In fact, it is unlikely that Paul ever met Jesus during the days of our Lord's earthly ministry. Paul's upbringing was different from that of Jesus and the twelve disciples. For one thing, Paul was a Turkish gentleman. He was born and raised in a town called Tarsus, which is on the southeastern coast of modern Turkey. It was a Greek-speaking town. Paul was Jewish—part of the Jewish Diaspora across the Roman Empire. But he was Jewish and so we can be sure that he knew Hebrew and Aramaic, but he wrote in the Greek language of that day. Jesus had been put to death by the Roman Empire, and there were many Jews in the Holy Land who resented the Roman Empire and wished to be freed from it. But Paul was a Roman citizen and he did not hesitate to refer to that significant legal fact when he needed to. (See for example, Acts 22)

Paul was out-of-sequence with the ministry of Jesus. It is unlikely that he heard the mighty preaching of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount. He did not witness Jesus calming the wind and the waves on the sea. He did not see Jesus heal the leper or open the eyes of the blind. He did not witness the miracle we read about in today's Gospel Lesson—the raising back to life of the widow of Nain's only son. He did not witness the Transfiguration of our Lord.

The Bible records conversations between Jesus and his disciples—conversations that those disciples probably cherished for the rest of their lives. But Paul was not part of those conversations. He was not part of the original apostolic band.

In fact, in his letters, Paul seldom mentions the preaching of Jesus or the holy events in the life of our Lord. And it might be that he did not know them. I mean, the New Testament had not yet been written. He wasn't there with Jesus and he did not have the New Testament to read about Jesus. I said earlier that after *three years* of ministry, Paul went to Jerusalem for fifteen days to be with Peter. Maybe Peter taught him then many of the stories about Jesus, because those stories were cherished and preserved and passed on in Jerusalem.

AND YET PAUL DID KNOW JESUS

So, Paul did not have the advantage of knowing Jesus in the same way as the other disciples did. But one thing Paul knew for sure was that Jesus was risen

¹ Wilken, Robert Louis (2012-11-27). *The First Thousand Years* (p. 19). Yale University Press. Kindle Edition.

from the dead. Paul knew that because he had met him and lived to tell the story, though he came away blinded and humbled by the encounter. That happened on the road to Damascus when a sudden bright light surrounded Paul and he fell to the ground, and he heard the very voice of Jesus:

³And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:
⁴And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? (Acts 9:3-4, KJV)

Also, there was the mystical side of Paul. I mean the grace that was given to him to be instructed by heaven itself. For example, Saint Paul certainly seems to be speaking about himself when he speaks of being “caught up to the third heaven”:

¹I must boast; there is nothing to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven -- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise -- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows -- ⁴and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. (2 Corinthians 12:1-4, RSV)

So, Paul knew about the resurrection of Jesus with a certainty that threw him to the ground and eventually raised him up as the church’s greatest missionary, one of its most brilliant theologians, and a true witness to Jesus Christ all the way through martyrdom.

THE DRAMA OF GALATIANS

Now, the drama of Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians stems from the biographical fact that Paul was late on the scene compared to the original twelve disciples. Looking back, I think we can see that Jesus tried to prepare his twelve disciples for someone like Saint Paul. Do you remember the story of the fellow who was preaching and doing miracles in the name of Jesus yet was not one of the twelve disciples? The twelve are troubled by that fellow and want to rebuke him. John, that “Son of Thunder,” railed against the man:

³⁸John said to him, “Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was

not following us.”³⁹But Jesus said, “Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me.”⁴⁰For he that is not against us is for us. (Mark 9:38-40, RSV)

Such a one was Saint Paul. He was not part of the original apostolic group, yet he was passionately for Jesus.

But the story becomes more complex than this. The issue was not simply that Paul arrived late on the scene. The real drama of the epistle to the Galatians is that Saint Paul seemed to be out of harmony with the original disciples. At least, that is what Paul’s opponents in the church at Galatia were saying. Martin Luther imagines their argument:

Paul was forced to recite [his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus] to refute the slander of the false apostles, who endeavored to bring the disfavor of the Galatians upon him. They said that Paul was far inferior to the remaining pupils of the apostles, who had received from the apostles what they taught and kept; that they had observed the behavior of the apostles for a long time; and that Paul himself had received the same instruction from them but was now denying it. Why were they listening to an inferior and despising the authority of the apostles, who were the ancestors and teachers not only of the Galatians but of all the churches throughout the world? (LW 26:63)

Let’s try to picture what is going on here. Saint Paul was like Billy Graham: he came to a town, preached powerfully, drew people to Christ, but then moved on. So Paul established churches in Galatia, which is a region in his home land, Turkey. Then he moved on. But when he moved on, he thereby created space for other leaders to nurture the churches he had established. He needed good leaders for those churches.

Sad to say, what seems to have happened in the churches in Galatia is that a generation of leaders took charge who *disagreed* with Paul. Not only did they disagree with Paul, but they tried to discredit Paul in the eyes of the people by saying that he was a lesser apostle than the original twelve, that they had learned the Gospel from the earlier apostles, that Paul had corrupted the original Gospel, and that the Galatians should disregard Paul and return to the more pure doctrine of Jesus Christ.

The issue is the holy law of God. Paul taught an amazing new teaching: he taught that Gentiles could become members of Israel without obeying the very

laws that helped identify the Jews and set them apart in the world: the laws concerning circumcision and dietary laws.

Of course, Saint Paul is our hero, and we are grateful to him for standing up for the doctrine of justification apart from works of the law. But, to be fair, let us try to give a sympathetic view of Paul's opponents there in Galatia.

Theologian Robert Wilken gives us such a sympathetic view:

It is easy, looking back from the far side of Christian history, to see only Paul's side of this controversy and to slight the arguments of the leaders in Jerusalem. Their insistence on keeping the Jewish law seems alien to the "freedom in Christ" (Galatians 2: 4) celebrated by Paul. But the dispute shows that the first Christians were pious and observant Jews, not renegades. For them the law was a good and holy thing, a gift from God that gave grace and beauty to their lives and lifted their hearts to the praise and adoration of God. Their faithfulness to the Jewish law (in matters that still define Jewish observance) was a sign of a living faith. It is tribute to their faithfulness that they were unwilling to jettison the ancient ways of their people without a vigorous defense of their traditions.²

From the point of view of Paul's opponents in Galatia, he was the liberal, he was the innovator, he was the preacher of a newfangled and impious gospel. Paul's opponents, then, saw themselves as the defenders of ancient traditions. They were preaching the old-time religion.

BOTH WERE RIGHT, WITHIN THEIR BOUNDS

In our day and age, I think that it is crucial for us try to understand that *both* sides were right *within certain boundaries*. Paul's opponents were right to uphold the holy law of God conceived as the moral law of God. Our Maker gives us his holy law that we might know the path we should walk in order to be living a life that is pleasing to him and fulfilling of our humanity. We need to stand up for God's holy law in our in our modern age.

But Saint Paul was right in releasing Christians from that portion of God's law which is called the "ceremonial law" — or those practices like circumcision and kosher food restrictions that distinguish Israel from the world.

² Wilken, Robert Louis (2012-11-27). *The First Thousand Years* (p. 22). Yale University Press. Kindle Edition.

Furthermore, Paul was right in preaching against what is called “works righteousness” — the notion that we can justify ourselves by way of our good works. We need to stand up for Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith, for it is with us as it was with Luther and with all people: we will never be able to earn heaven by our good deeds. They just are not *that* good. We must do good deeds, but not boast of them and build our house on such a foundation.

Especially Saint Paul is right in his chief passion: for him, what matters is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one who knocked him to the ground on his way to Damascus. Jesus is the one Paul knew was risen from the dead and therefore victor over sin, death, and the devil. Paul was determined that our chief boast in this world and the only ground of our hope of heaven is that Jesus is alive and is in charge. He wanted us to brag of nothing else, not even our obedience to the holy law of God. Jesus was the one Paul was willing to live and to die for, and Jesus is the one Paul wants us to live and die for too, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.