

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 7th Sunday after Pentecost, July 8, 2018.

One of the practices here at St. Christopher's is providing an opportunity at announcement time to share an epiphany, an insight into one's faith, based on an experience of some sort. Sometimes these experiences are over time, and other times they are sudden. At all times, they are powerful, maybe even life-changing.

Well, imagine coming to church and sitting next to a visitor. You introduce yourself, and the visitor introduces himself. "Hello, my name is Paul. I'm visiting today." At announcement time, Paul, the visitor, responds to the opportunity to share an epiphany. And what he shares is essentially what he has written to the early Christian community at Corinth.

This passage (**II Corinthians 12:2-10**) is highly personal. Usually we don't share these kinds of experiences. But sometimes we do, especially if we feel called to do so. Nobody makes us share, but the situation seems to invite it. And, in Paul's case, his relationship with Jesus compels the sharing.

Remember that Paul had a powerful experience with the Risen Christ. He went from persecuting believers to being a believer himself and being persecuted. On the road to Damascus, he was overwhelmed, and for a purpose. His life was changed radically, and for a purpose. And it is this purpose that he writes about to the Corinthians.

The purpose is to prophesy, which means to share what God reveals to us. It does not mean to predict. It means rather to share, to convey. We are not the author of prophecy. The content is God's, which we receive and pass on. A prophet is a sharer, not a creator. The prophet's message is not original. It is handed down. And, depending on the content, the prophet can be one who warns or reminds or comforts. The point is simply that God initiates, we respond, and then we invite others to respond.

In our first lesson today, Ezekiel responds (**Ezekiel 2:1-5**). God has spoken to him and told him to confront the people of Israel who have "transgressed" against God. God assures Ezekiel that, even if the people refuse to hear the message, they will know that a prophet has been among them. Ezekiel obeys.

In Mark's gospel (**Mark 6:1-13**), Jesus is the prophet. He obeys God's call. Of course, as God Incarnate, Jesus the man has little choice. But that discussion is for another day. For now, we focus on what a prophet is likely to face if the prophet obeys God's call. The Mark passage is really touching, and it is one we can identify with. Sometimes it's easier to deal with those outside the family than those within the family. Those outside the family know us through results. Those inside the family, those in our hometown, as it were, know us up close and personal, warts and all.

When Jesus returns to Nazareth, he brings a following. He is on a roll. People are listening to him as if he might even be the Messiah. This is a change, a big change. When Jesus left Nazareth, people saw him simply as the son of a carpenter. Now there are people from places other than Nazareth who view him as a potential Savior.

Ezekiel foresaw this development. "Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them." The people of Nazareth and other towns have a growing sense that something really special is happening. This guy Jesus is no ordinary prophet. He is not just sharing what God has revealed to him. He may in fact be God in human form. More than a prophet. More than a spokesperson. More than one who simply transmits what God has shared.

Could it be that this son of a carpenter is the Messiah? Can that possibly be happening in our generation? Remember that the concept of a Messiah was centuries old. The promise of a Savior had been out there for a long time. A series of people had even claimed the title, but never produced. Could this Jesus be different? Could he be authentic? Could he be the One?

We know that these questions were circulating among the people. It is also clear that these questions were very much on the mind of Jesus himself. He was struggling with his identity, and it is likely that this struggle was not new, but ongoing. We don't have a lot of reports of Jesus before his baptism at age 30. The one we do have is of Jesus at age 12, when he is teaching the elders in the Temple. And it is likely that Jesus had heard the stories surrounding his birth. He probably had been wondering about his identity most of his life. Am I a little p

prophet. Or am I perhaps a big P Prophet, the Prophet, the Messiah, the Savior, the One for whom the people had been waiting?

St. Paul came to believe that Jesus was the One. He had a personal experience with the Risen Christ. And he had personal experiences with the early apostles, those who traveled with Jesus, those who witnessed the crucifixion and resurrection and ascension, those who themselves were willing to die for this carpenter from Nazareth.

Paul was so impressed by these witnesses and by his own experience, his own epiphany, that he himself would die proclaiming Jesus as God Incarnate. This conclusion didn't happen all at once. It happened overtime. And it happened through "weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities."

As Jesus had struggled with his identity, Paul had struggled with Paul's identity. Was it Satan speaking to him, or the Lord? Paul came down on the side of the Lord. His journeys and his writings are filled with struggle, but also with growing conviction, conviction that continues to inspire you and me. From today's passage: "Power is made perfect in weakness." Another way of proclaiming this thought is that "Struggle –intellectual, emotional, physical – is good for the soul."

And what else is good for the soul is to share with one another our own struggle and joy as we engage this son of a carpenter. That combination of struggle and joy, of weakness and strength, is the really amazing thing about Jesus. So many questions, but also so intriguing the journey, and so satisfying the outcome. From **Psalm 123**: "To you, O Lord, I lift up my eyes, to you enthroned in the heavens."

Our final prayer at today's service will be for "Quiet Confidence."

O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength: By the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that though art God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.