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Acts 18:1-18
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Paul Goes to Corinth

I thought I'd begin this morning with a few pictures of Corinth, Greece, that I took several years ago. Corinth is where we find the Apostle Paul in our story today, about fifty miles west of Athens. And Corinth was quite a city.

It sat on a narrow strip of land connecting mainland Greece with the Peloponnese. Because of its location, it became one of the most beautiful and strategic commercial centers of the ancient Mediterranean world.

Ships traveling between the Aegean and Ionian Seas could avoid sailing all the way around southern Greece by transporting their cargo across this narrow passage of land. Eventually, they even developed a system for hauling ships across the isthmus. Basically, Corinth was the ancient equivalent of a mainline city on the I-5.

And wherever there's a major transportation hub, people show up. Merchants. Sailors. Soldiers. Travelers. Immigrants. Entrepreneurs. And, apparently, everybody else. Corinth was wealthy, cosmopolitan, religiously diverse—and notorious for its immorality.

There were temples everywhere. People worshiped Poseidon, Demeter, Asclepius, Aphrodite, and a whole host of other gods and goddesses. At the temple of Asclepius, the god of healing, people would leave clay models of the body parts they wanted healed.

Imagine walking into church this morning and seeing a table full of little clay knees and shoulders. And then there was the famous temple of Aphrodite high on the hill top overlooking Corinth. With its nearly one thousand temple prostitutes, it certainly contributed to Corinth's reputation for sexual immorality.

So if you were putting together a church-planting strategy, Corinth probably wouldn't have been the obvious choice.

It was a weird, difficult city. Maybe like Portland. And yet, it became one of Paul's most important churches.

Which is a good reminder that God has never been particularly intimidated by difficult places.

So let's listen to what happened when Paul arrived in Corinth from Acts 18:1-18.

8 After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. **2** There he met a Jew named Aquila, who was a native of Pontus. Aquila had recently come from Italy

with his wife Priscilla. The emperor Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see Aquila and Priscilla. **3** They were tentmakers, just as he was. So he stayed and worked with them. **4** Every Sabbath day he went to the synagogue. He was trying to get both Jews and Greeks to believe in the Lord.

5 Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia. Then Paul spent all his time preaching. He was a witness to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. **6** But they opposed Paul. They treated him badly. So he shook out his clothes in protest. Then he said to them, "God's judgment against you will be your own fault! Don't blame me for it! From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

7 Then Paul left the synagogue and went to the house next door. It was the house of Titius Justus, a man who worshiped God. **8** Crispus was the synagogue leader. He and everyone living in his house came to believe in the Lord. Many others who lived in Corinth heard Paul. They too believed and were baptized.

9 One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Keep on speaking. Don't be silent. **10** I am with you. No one will attack you and harm you. I have many people in this city." **11** So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half. He taught them God's word.

12 At that time Gallio was governor of Achaia. The Jews of Corinth got together and attacked Paul. They brought him into court. **13** They made a charge against Paul. They said, "This man is talking people into worshiping God in wrong ways. Those ways are against the law."

14 Paul was about to give reasons for his actions. But just then Gallio spoke to them. He said, "You Jews don't claim that Paul has committed a great or small crime. If you did, it would make sense for me to listen to you. **15** But this is about your own law. It is a question of words and names. Settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things." **16** So he made them leave. **17** Then the crowd there turned against Sosthenes, the synagogue leader. They beat him up in front of the governor. But Gallio didn't care at all.

18 Paul stayed in Corinth for some time.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

I want us to begin by imagining Paul walking into Corinth for the first time. What do you think he looked like? I doubt he arrived like a motivational speaker walking into a convention center: "Good morning, Corinth! Are you ready for Jesus?"

No! Paul had just come from Athens. And if you remember from last Sunday, Athens was a tough assignment. Paul had been debating philosophers and intellectuals at the Areopagus. He had presented a sophisticated argument for the gospel. And there were some converts. But there was also plenty of skepticism.

Paul seems to arrive in Corinth humbled. Defeated. Low self confidence. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes his condition: "I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling." That's not how we usually picture the Apostle Paul.

We picture Paul as bold. Fearless. Confident. Standing on a street corner with his Bible under his arm, ready to debate anybody who walks by. But Paul says, "I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power."[1]

I find that strangely comforting. Because Paul was an apostle, but he was also human. He got tired. He got discouraged. He experienced rejection. He sometimes wondered whether what he was doing was working. And I think there are moments when most of us know exactly what Paul is talking about.

There are seasons when life humbles us.

Sometimes it's something we've done.

Sometimes it's something somebody else has done to us.

Sometimes it's simply circumstances.

We lose a job.

A relationship becomes strained.

A dream doesn't work out.

Our children make choices we can't control.

Our health changes.

Retirement gets closer.

The church doesn't respond the way we hoped it would.

Or we simply wake up one morning and realize, I don't have this figured out as well as I thought I did."

Those moments are uncomfortable. But sometimes they are also holy. Because God can do something in us when our confidence in ourselves begins to run out.

C.S. Lewis illustrates this beautifully in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Eustace Scrubb is a miserable little boy—greedy, selfish and arrogant. And, appropriately enough, he turns into a dragon. Eventually Aslan begins the process of changing him back. Eustace tries to remove his dragon skin himself, but every time he peels away one layer, he discovers another underneath. Finally, he realizes he can't fix himself. He has to let Aslan do it. And the process is painful. But once the dragon skin is gone, Eustace becomes a different person.

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[1] 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

I wonder if that's something like what happened to Paul. God was stripping away some of Paul's confidence in himself. His brilliance. His ability to debate. His need to persuade. His assumption that if he could just explain the gospel well enough, everybody would believe.

Paul had to discover: The gospel doesn't depend upon us being impressive. Paul says: "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Paul wasn't becoming anti-intellectual. He was simply learning that Jesus—not Paul—was the power of the gospel.

And that's an important distinction. We can prepare. We can study. We can plan. We can work hard. We should give our best. But ultimately, we cannot manufacture spiritual transformation. Only God can do that.

Notice what God does next. God doesn't tell Paul to go off by himself and figure things out. God gives him people. Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla. Jewish Christians who had been forced out of Rome by Emperor Claudius. Like Paul, they have experienced displacement. They had to start over. They understood something about Paul's journey because they'd been through their own difficult journey. And they had another thing in common: They were tentmakers. So Paul goes to work with them, making tents for many Roman soldiers and travelers throughout the land.

I love this. Paul doesn't immediately plant a megachurch. He gets a job maybe doing something he thought was beneath his education and intelligence. He makes tents. Which means that if Paul were here today, he'd probably have a day job and be preaching on Sunday.

But there's something more important here. Paul needed friends. He needed people who understood him. People who could encourage him. People who could work beside him. And eventually Timothy and Silas arrived as well. God surrounded Paul with a community. And I think that's one of the most overlooked parts of this story.

We tend to focus on Paul. But Paul didn't do this alone. Aquila. Priscilla. Timothy. Silas. Titius Justus. Crispus. And countless unnamed people. The gospel spread through a network of relationships. And that's still how God works.

We are not designed to follow Jesus by ourselves.

We need people.

We need people who encourage us.

People who pray for us.

People who tell us the truth.

And, occasionally, we need people who say, "Chris, you're overthinking this." That's a spiritual gift. I've discovered that one of the marks of a good friend is somebody who loves us enough to tell us what we don't necessarily want to hear. Not somebody who always agrees with us. Not somebody who simply tells us how

wonderful we are. But somebody who can say, "I'm with you, but I think you're wrong about this."

That's community. And the church ought to be that kind of community. A place where we don't have to pretend that everything is fine. A place where we can say, "I'm discouraged." "I'm struggling." "I don't know what to do." "I need prayer." And somebody says, "Okay. Let's walk through this together."

Now here's where the story gets interesting. Paul started preaching in the synagogue. Some people listen. Others oppose him. And eventually the opposition becomes abusive. Paul got frustrated. He shook out his clothes and basically said, "Fine. I'm done. I'm going to the Gentiles."

And where did he go? Right next door. Paul left the synagogue and moved into the house of Titius Justus. Apparently his church-planting strategy was: "If they won't let us use their building, we'll use the building next door." As a result, Crispus, the synagogue leader, believed. His entire household believed. Many Corinthians believed and were baptized. And suddenly Paul discovered that God was doing something in Corinth long before he arrived. Not necessarily the way Paul expected. But God was working.

There's an important lesson for us here. Sometimes we assume faithfulness means getting the results we want. But Scripture doesn't actually promise that. We're called to be faithful. We're called to speak out. We're called to love. We're called to serve. We're called to make disciples. But the results belong to God.

Paul can preach. He cannot make somebody believe.

Paul can love. He cannot make somebody love him back.

Paul can teach. He cannot make somebody listen.

Paul can plant. But God gives the growth.

That's freeing. Because some of us, myself included, spend an enormous amount of emotional energy trying to control things that were never ours to control.

This brings us to the heart of the passage. Paul received a vision from the Lord. God said:"Do not be afraid; keep on speaking. Do not be silent. For I am with you."

Notice what God does not say.

God doesn't say: "Paul, everybody is going to like you."

God doesn't say: "Paul, nobody will ever oppose you again."

God doesn't say: "Paul, your ministry will always be easy or successful."

God says: "I am with you."

That's the promise. And that promise appears all through Scripture.

Isaiah says: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine." And: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you."[2]

Jesus says: "I am with you always, to the very end of the age."[3]

The promise isn't that the waters won't come. The promise is that God will be in the water with us. That's a very different promise. And I think that's what some of us need to hear this morning. Because life doesn't always get easier simply because we follow Jesus. Sometimes following Jesus actually makes things harder. But we don't walk alone.

There's one final detail I want us to notice. Paul got dragged before Gallio, the Roman governor. His opponents accused him of breaking the law. And as he was preparing to defend himself, but before he can even speak, Gallio said, "This isn't a criminal matter. Take care of it yourselves." And he threw them out. Paul didn't have to defend himself. God took care of it.

And I wonder if that's a word some of us need today. Because we can spend a lot of energy defending ourselves. Explaining ourselves. Proving ourselves. Trying to make sure everybody knows our motives were good. Trying to convince people that we were right. Trying to get the last word.

But folks, sometimes the most spiritual thing we can do is say: "God knows." God knows what happened. God knows our motives. God knows our hearts. God knows the truth.

And we can trust God with the things we cannot resolve ourselves.

That doesn't mean we never speak up. It doesn't mean we never correct injustice. It doesn't mean we never apologize or make things right. But it does mean we don't have to live our lives constantly trying to prove ourselves. Paul's job was to be faithful. God's job was to take care of the rest.

So perhaps the word for us this morning is pretty simple.

We don't have to be impressive.

We don't have to control the outcome.

We don't have to do this alone.

We simply have to be faithful.

Paul arrived in Corinth exhausted, discouraged, and afraid. But God gave him friends, opened doors, and reminded him, "I am with you." And that's the promise we take with us. Whatever we're facing this week—whatever feels uncertain, difficult, or beyond our control—we don't have to figure it all out.

Let's listen to the Spirit of God. Let's love the people God puts in our path. Let's do what we've been called to do. And let's leave the results in God's hands.

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[2] Isaiah 43:1-3a

[3] Matthew 28:19-20

Because the gospel doesn't spread because we have the perfect strategy or the perfect words. It spreads because God is already at work.