

Sermon by the Rector
February 7, 2010
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Psalms 138 ends with a “cri de coeur”, a cry of the heart: “Lord, do not abandon the works of your hands.” By “the works of your hands” the writer means us, God’s human creatures, formed, as we believe, by God’s own hands. “Do not forsake us”, the psalmist cries.

We hear ourselves in these words. During a time of trial, especially, we wonder if God has lost interest, turned away his countenance, left us to fend for ourselves. Even in better circumstances God can seem, at the least, distant.

With these thoughts comes the temptation to abandon the work of our own hands, to declare something, even someone, even ourselves, a lost cause, a hopeless case.

Surely this temptation came to Isaiah the prophet. Called to preach repentance to a stiff-necked people, a ministry of which he believed himself unworthy (he only asked God to send him after an angel purified his lips with a burning coal), Isaiah learned that his preaching would be futile. The more you talk, the less they will listen, God told him. After the frustration had built up over time, Isaiah must have entertained the idea of forsaking the work God had given him. If any people were ever a lost cause, those to whom he had been sent certainly were.

And Peter had already given up, at least for the night. The Sea of Galilee had yielded no fish. Time to put up the nets, dock the boat, and get some rest. Not a permanent forsaking of the work of his hands, but enough nights like this one and Peter and his partners might have been ready to look for another way to make a living.

We rarely, if ever, admit that we’re ready to give up. But our actions betray what’s in our hearts. We might disengage, from a person or a situation, almost imperceptibly – at least to ourselves. We might lose patience when a situation demands more of it, or let our attention wander when a person we care about most needs us to listen. We might over-engage, attempt to “take over” a situation, because we’ve come to think its resolution depends completely on our own efforts – because God, or the fates, or luck, have forsaken us. And over-engagement sometimes prepares the ground for surrender. We can readily imagine Isaiah letting everybody have it, one last time, then abandoned the field of (spiritual) battle. Peter might have insisted on working hours past quitting time, then given up in a fit of disgust.

But for God, there are no lost causes, no hopeless cases, no forsaking the work of his hands. God certainly had every reason to give up on Paul. Utterly committed to persecuting Christians, utterly blind to the fulfillment of God’s promises in Jesus, he appeared to the disciples as an implacable foe. But not to God. Late in the story – “last of all”, Paul says - God appeared to him in a blinding flash of light on the road to Damascus, and turned his heart. “As one untimely born”, completely unworthy of the task given him, like Isaiah only moreso, yet

Paul became a new person, saw with new eyes, heard with new ears. A lost cause, hopeless, by all accounts except God's.

Two colleagues and friends, Rex Bateman (I've spoken of him many times here at Grace) and Grant Gallup, shaped my understanding of the ordained ministry just as I was getting started on the path of priesthood. Father Bateman, born and raised on a Kansas farm, saw things with the eyes of a farmer waiting patiently for the harvest. He stepped back from situations, watching to see what might emerge. He didn't fear failure, as far as I could tell. When things fell apart, he'd counsel those around him to wait and see what new possibilities might emerge.

Father Gallup, on the other hand, grew up in a hardscrabble mining town in Northern Michigan, "da U.P." Father Bateman said he believed in the use of "main force and awkwardness" to get where he wanted to go. Fit the square peg in the round hole – by whatever means necessary – "get 'er done". The creed of a miner, maybe; one who does not wait for the earth to yield its fruits, but drills down to find and extract its treasures.

Here's an iron law of God's ways with us: the work of the miner's hands can prosper only when he learns to think more like a farmer, and the farmer's only when she comes to appreciate the miner's approach.

Paul embraced the miner's approach. He was breathing threats on his way to Damascus. He did not plan to wait for the Christians there to reveal or betray themselves. He intended to penetrate their defenses, extract the leaders, and take his "treasure" to the Jerusalem authorities for punishment. He "over-engaged", laboring in the anxious conviction that everything depended on him. He did not, perhaps could not, know that his early successes only laid the groundwork for later frustration and surrender.

Paul could only defend his faith if he could learn the farmer's wisdom. Doing this required God's dramatic intervention, the blinding light and a fall to the ground. Afterwards Paul spent some 14 years in the wilderness. When he came out of the desert, he was ready to plant seeds, water them, and wait patiently for the harvest – see the First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 3.

God had brought to fruition the work of his hands, but not in accordance with Paul's expectations, or on Paul's terms.

Peter embraced the farmer's wisdom. It was easy for a fisherman of his time, whose job required lots of patience. Wait for the sea to give up its riches, as the farmer waits for the land to bring forth the harvest.

But on the night he met Jesus, the situation called for "main force and awkwardness", persistence, urgency out of season, a willingness to violate the sea's late-night calm in order to extract its bounty. "Cast down your nets again", Jesus commanded him, and after remonstrating briefly Peter complied. Peter could only become a fisher of souls if he learned a little of the miner's wisdom, got a little more like Paul.

Christ will bring to fruition this work of his hands, Peter, but not in accordance with Peter's expectations, or on Peter's terms.

“Set us free from the bondage of our sins”, says today's collect. It's our own dominant self, farmer, fisher or miner, that enslaves us and leads us into frustration and tempts us to surrender. In our self-imposed bondage we give voice to an ancient “cri de coeur”, a cry of the heart: “Lord, do not abandon the works of your hands.” We over-engage, or disengage. Paul won't listen to Peter, and vice-versa. But God has no lost causes, no hopeless cases. When we think we're finished, God constrains us to cast the net one more time. When we're tempted to take over, God – gently or not so gently – compels us to watch, and wait. Peter's works bear fruit through Paul's wisdom, and Paul's through Peter's, the fisher through the miner and vice-versa; Father Bateman's patience and Father Gallup's “main force” complement each other. God does not abandon the works of his hands, but brings them to completion on his terms, not ours.