

Third Sunday after the Epiphany—Year A  
Isaiah 9:1-4  
Psalm 27:1, 5-13  
I Corinthians 1:10-18  
Matthew 4:12-23

I could not help but imagine this scenario this week: **Paul** decides to enter his **letter** into the **official record in the Senate proceedings** currently underway, and after chastising both sides for their **lack of civility**, pulling out that wonderful word that none of us had ever heard, “*pettifogging*,” **Chief Justice Roberts** has just granted **Paul** permission to address the **Senate**, and the **nation**.

*Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.*

And let’s just note here that **Paul** never loses sight that *all* those whom he is addressing are *his* kin, *his* brothers and sisters.

**Paul** continues: *What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Adam Schiff,” or “I belong to President Trump,” or “I belong to Christ.” Has Christ been divided? Was Paul, or Adam Schiff, or the President crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul, or the House Managers, or the White House Counsel? I thank God that I baptized none of you, well except for Crispus and Gaius (even Paul goes off-script from time to time), so that none of you can say that you were baptized in my name. Oh, and I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don’t know whether I baptized anyone else.*

Again, a bit off-script, but it’s like **1:00 AM** and **12 hours** after this debate about Senate rules **started** and they can only have **milk and water** in the chamber, so we can **cut Paul a little slack** because **Paul is coming around to the point**, and here’s the point: *For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

Oh, that last bit, that last bit is loaded, and pundits and commentators having been going crazy for about **2,000 years** trying to parse out *that* bit of “**uneloquent**” wisdom.

In a nutshell, **Paul** is calling the **Corinthians**, and the **Senate**, and *all of us* on our ... *stuff*. **Paul** is **pulling back the curtain** on our **propensity to divide ourselves into factions and tribes** and *our love* of that game *our egos love* to play as they jockey for that **one-up position** and **claim to be better than your side**. And wherever we are **staking out our position**, whether it’s the **pedigree of our baptism** or the **rightness of our cause**, **Paul** **obliterates our argument** by removing *whatever* we are using to **prop up our ego** *and* **taking us into the heart of the gospel**.

Can we hear how radical a thing it is when Paul says, “*For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel?*” I mean, I thought baptism was *everything*. I thought the Great Commission in Matthew 28 tells us to “go baptize all the nations.” *It actually doesn’t even say it quite that way, but that’s what most of us have always believed that passage said.*

But *before* Matthew places *those* words in Jesus’ mouth, Paul reminds us that our FIRST call is to **proclaim the gospel**. To **proclaim the good news of Jesus**, and that **isn’t about fancy words and well-constructed arguments and gotcha moments**, but *that* is about **the cross of Christ**, pure and simple, and **to those who want to win, that is pure foolishness**, but to those who want to be *made whole*, *that* is the power of God.

The cross is about **stretching your arms out wide and commending yourself to a bigger life**. The cross is about **surrendering and yielding for the sake of a greater love**. The cross is about **understanding that God’s power is made perfect in weakness and a willingness to let things die trusting that new life will rise—can’t explain that one until you’ve lived it**. The cross is about **understanding that God has joined God’s very life to all who suffer, even to the suffering of creation herself**. And in some way that **explodes our little rational brains, God planting Godself there, on that cross, amidst all that suffering, it heals us**. I don’t understand it, but *I’ve experienced it*. Maybe *you have, too*. Maybe **those whom Paul is addressing, they’ve experienced it, too**, if they would just pause their quarrels long enough to *really listen to Paul*, and *to their own experience*.

Paul is **dressing us down**, trying to get us to **remember, and focus on, THE MAIN THING**. It’s *not about our allegiances*; it’s about **keeping our eye on Jesus**, and the **good news of his life**, and the **power of his way, even when that way lands him on the cross**; it’s about **keeping our eye on the power of that Life that swallows up death and violence and sin by holding it in its embrace**. Man, **that’s a kind of power** that neither the **powers-that-be then**, nor the **powers-that-be now**, have *ever* been able to understand. It’s **foolishness to them**, but it’s the *only* kind of power that can *save us*.

This is the kind of power that **shines out in the darkness** that can **give hope to those who’ve been living in exile**, to the likes of those of whom Isaiah speaks who were **deported from Naphtali and Zebulun**. This is the kind of power that can **break the yoke of their burden, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppression, whatever form that oppression takes, and oppression takes a lot of forms—I bet you could name a few that you’re acquainted with...**

This is the power that allows us to **claim the kind of resolve that the psalmist knew, that allows us to proclaim, against the odds: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?”**

This is the kind of power that **brings the kingdom of heaven near**, which is why Jesus tells us to **repent of all those other things that look like power, but are just false gods**. This is the kind of power that Jesus will **teach about throughout the synagogues in Galilee** and that will **heal people of all kinds of disease and sickness**, and could we just agree that *division and the drive to win is its own sort of disease in our day and time?*

This is **the kind of power** that truly *is* **good news** in a **world full of bad news** because, **for a whole lot of people**, the formulas for the “good life” *just don’t work*, but **the power of the cross**, oh, there is **hope there for all of us**. The **willingness to die and rise**, there is **hope there for all of us**. The **willingness to know that you have come to the very limit of your power** and to **throw yourself onto the mercy of God**, and to **feel God’s power lifting you up and setting you high upon a rock**, your footing sure, oh, **THAT is to be reborn**.

If **Paul can get our eyes focused back on the prize**, his **admonishment will have been worth it**.

*Today, where* have you **fallen into the ego trap of allegiance to a person or a cause**, *where* is your **desire to win severing your sense of kinship with others**, *where* are you **staking your claim**? Can you let **Paul strip away all those trappings**, so that the **only thing left** upon which you can **stake your claim is the cross of Christ**? *What* would you have to **give up, let go of, release to let that power flow in your life**? *What* might be **set free if you embrace that power alone**? *What* **good news** might you **speak into the world if the cross is your orienting centerpoint**? Can you hear **Jesus’ call to follow him from there** and **believe that, somehow, this really can save you and make you whole**?

**Be prepared** that if you **speak from that vantage point**, you *will* be **called foolish** by the **powers-that-be**, but **for the weak, the vulnerable, the broken, the less-than-perfect, the sick and tired and weary**, *it will be the good news they’ve been longing to hear*. And when **Jesus calls out to them** through the **witness of our lives to come and follow him**, they **won’t hesitate a second to leave their nets behind**. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks  
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Boone, NC  
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