

I usually preach on the gospel text. Whatever the story is, I assume it carries both the weight of your attention and the questions that most dog or support your faith. So for that reason, it usually gets most of my attention. But this week we're doing different, because the good news can be found in any of the four readings we hear each Sunday. This week, our Romans reading commanded most of my attention.

Paul's letter to the Romans is likely one of the youngest of Paul's letters. He wrote it late in his career after years of working out the significance of Jesus. In that way, I find that Paul's story mirrors our own in some ways.

At some point in our lives, we were introduced to Jesus. In Paul's case, it was a vision of Jesus. Struck blind in the encounter, Paul was brought back to sight by Ananias, a community leader of *The Way*.

We were presented with Jesus – whether in Sunday school, in worship, by a friend, or by a vision of Christ himself. But at some point, for some, a broader picture emerged that complicated that first Christ-encounter – discovery of the Church's sometimes horrifying history for instance. Whatever it is, doubt is given a seat at the table and slowly starts commanding the conversation. Some rage against the Church as I did. This can turn into a blindness that ... an outright rejection of the church.

If this is you, something brought you back. Was it a friend, was it questions you wanted answered? Was it the community, or the desire to understand the faith of a beloved family member - someone who was an example of the best that faith can be? For whatever reason, you came back, maybe bringing that doubt with you, with maybe still only a dull sense of who Jesus is and was. Perhaps like Paul, you invested yourself in “working out” who this Jesus is to you. For Paul, this letter was the result.

Romans: his most developed understanding of the goodness of God, the reality of sin, and how Jesus saves us from it. I was surprised this week that, after all that time, he seats death in such a prominent place.

Just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all (5:18). Paul writes this just verses before our reading. He's saying Jesus' righteous act saved us from sin. But a question remains: *How can we who died to sin go on living in it?* Paul answers the dawning question^{**}: *Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?* He's saying that, joined to Christ in baptism, we join him in death, dying to sin. Martin Luther picked up on this and wrote about it in his Small Catechism, saying, "[Baptism] signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die" in those waters.

But Paul goes a step further, saying that our sin was crucified with Christ on the cross, *that the body of sin might be destroyed, that we might no longer be enslaved to sin.*

All this sounds like a lot of death. But really the word is transformation, and that's a word interests me when it comes to church and the world we live in. For we are a culture fully enslaved by our fear of death. Think of all the ways we run from death; Entire industries that have bloomed out of that fear, including the American for-profit healthcare system; diet trends, supplement companies, and every kind of fitness program you can think of. Numbing devices are their own category – Entertainment and Social Media along with substances, sex, "busyness", and whatever else we swear fealty to in exchange for complete distraction and mythical distance from the reality of mortality.

I heard this week a description of President Trump's UFC birthday party as a device for running further and faster away from death. Strength and dominance on display. But on a grander scale, couldn't we also see the War on Iran as an unconscious attempt to deny death? It's the definition of irony of course – killing to keep from feeling helpless in the face of death. But at the same time, it's revealing of all our death-defying/denying efforts: death exerts more and more dominance over our lives, making and keeping us afraid, slaves to that fear, and to the sin fear can produce.

But enter Jesus, strength and power on display in complete weakness. And Paul, encountering this Jesus and being so transformed by him that for the rest of his life he devotes himself to starting and supporting communities of faith across the known world, and writing to them – working out with each letter what Jesus means for our life together. Death remains of course, but defanged because of Jesus, who underwent it and rose again, thereby denying and breaking its power, *once for all*.

In the way Paul speaks here of baptism, death has its place. But life has one too, and it's way bigger. Luther knew it, for from the waters of baptism in which that “old person in us with all sins and evil desires” is drowned, “daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness” and I'd add confidence. And Paul who walked in that newness of life, long before he had it all “worked out”, proclaimed the good news of Jesus far and wide. His life (one lost then another found in the face of Jesus) was made a building force for what would one day (eventually) become this community – a community beyond the nuclear family, a community of a different kind with deeper bonds and wider boundaries, a community made up of brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, Gentile and believer alike, afraid no longer, slaves no longer. But free. AMEN