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Psalm 146, Galatians 1:11-24
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Perhaps you caught the words right at the end of this reading. Paul says *And they glorified God because of me*. Paul was never lacking in self-confidence. Paul has this kind of spiritual cockiness, so we're not surprised that he says *And they glorified God because of me*. However, if we think about this, this might be worth contemplating. This might be worth setting as your life mission, you know. What is your life mission? What are you about? What might it be like if your life mission was that at the end of your day, someone would say they would glorify God because of you, someone would glorify God because of you.

This passage from Galatians, it's so Paul. What a complex fascinating character Paul is. He's moody, he's inspiring, he's pouty, he's brilliant, he's irascible, he's demanding, he's prickly – Paul. He just sort of lets it all out. And he tells about all these travels that he made. The scholars get very excited because they can reconstruct his life from this autobiography. Paul travels all over the place. He starts in Eastern Turkey. There is rugged hill country, and he travels to Caesarea, and he goes to Damascus, and he goes to Jerusalem and he talks about going into Arabia. We're not sure where he means when he says Arabia, but many scholars think he means the place called Petra, one of the wonders of the ancient world, the treasury of Petra. You know I've taken groups to Petra before and you go down this path between all of these cliffs and then you come around a corner into this clearing, and there is the treasury of Petra. Groups always just gasp and say "Oh my goodness – wow" – and they pull out their cameras and they're snapping photos, and you see this whole city cut into the stone. It's just stunning. I always wonder what Paul's reaction was when he arrived at Petra. Paul doesn't seem like the kind of guy to walk in and say "Wow, look at this." Paul is the kind of guy who would come in and say, "Human vanity – people are reaching out for they don't understand what's really important." This is the kind of guy that Paul is, no fun to travel with at all.

Thinking about Paul's travels, Paul finds great meaning from all of these places that he went, and let me just ask a question. This whole sermon, by the way, is just a bunch of questions, not any answers at all. We've already asked one question, "What would it be if your life mission was that others might glorify God because of me?" Here's a second question: If you travel this summer, I mean maybe the economy is just bottomed out for you and you're not going to be able to go anywhere. But if you're able to travel somewhere, what will the meaning of your travel be? Will it just be fun? Will it just be refreshment? Will it be sightseeing, a photo opportunity? Or might your travel be a chance to get some distance and to reflect on life, on love, and discover God's work, the meaning of travel. What could that be like?

I love these poignant meetings that we read about in Scripture. I love the one where Mary is pregnant with Jesus and she goes to visit Elizabeth who is pregnant with John the Baptist. That's so moving, to think of those two women, spending their pregnant days together. I think about David going to visit his friend Jonathan, and Jonathan is the son of King Saul who is breathing murderous threats against David, but yet, Jonathan and David meet in the wilderness for they are friends – they love one another. And this meeting that is narrated in the passage that

we just heard – this is so amazing. Paul goes to Jerusalem and he spends 15 days with Peter, the main one of Jesus' disciples, and James who is the brother of Jesus. Peter had spent the days of Jesus' earthly minister with him. James had grown up with Jesus. And Paul goes to Jerusalem and the three of them spend 15 days together. This is staggering to contemplate. What did they do during those 15 days? We do not know. We can be sure they did the obvious things. They ate, they slept, they walked. They were pious Jews. They would have gone to the temple to worship. Imagine the Scripture scholars that they were, they would have unrolled the scrolls of the Torah, would have debated over the meaning of God's word. I imagine that Paul, as obsessed as he was with the crucifixion of Christ, said to them, "Show me the place where he was crucified." It had only been a few years and I imagine that Peter and James took him out to the edge of the city and said, "It was here that our Lord died." And as obsessed as Paul was with the resurrection, surely he asked them, Where was the tomb where they laid him, and they showed him and said "It was here" and they told what it was like the first Easter morning when they came and the tomb was empty. Just 15 days, a time of great learning and exploration for Paul.

The question that I have to ask you is about 15 days. Fifteen days ago it was May 22, and my question for you is "What have you been doing since May 22? What have you been talking about, where have you been, what have you been doing? Have you grown closer to God during this time? Have you slowed a little bit away from God? Has God crossed your mind over the last 15 days?" You may say to me, "Oh, it's just 15 days." But what is life but a long succession of 15-day periods of one, then you have another, and another, and you get to be 83 years old. Oh my goodness, what happened? What have you been doing in the last 15 days or what's going to happen in the next 15 days? This would take us to June 21, the day after Father's Day. By that time, what will you have been doing the last 15 days? Who will you have been talking to? What will you have been putting into yourself? How will you have spent your time? Will you be any closer to God in 15 days or might you have drifted just a little bit further? It's just 15 days.

Paul talks about a three-year period in this reading. Go back to the year 2007. Where were you in 2007 and what has been going on all of that time? How has your life changed? Have you grown a little closer to God or have you drifted over the past three years? Or think ahead to 2013 – oh my goodness, that's such a high number. Where will you be in three years? What will your relationship with God look like in three years?

Paul is dealing with critics of Christianity, and he tries to buttress the case for Jesus Christ by telling his own personal story, and it's something to listen to Paul's story. He brags on everything when he talks about his sins. He says, "I was a greater sinner than any of you," and when he talks about his spirituality, "I was a greater follower of God than anybody." It's just Paul, he's just this way. But he tells his personal story and through that he thinks the people will come to believe in Christ.

I tried to think about it this week. I was thinking, "I wish I had a personal story that could persuade you of the truth of Christianity." When I try to think about my life – you know, Lisa and I are part of a supper club, and they recently asked for photos of us from college, and I guess the plan is you show the photos, have a good laugh. The only photos that I could dig up – this is just embarrassing – is one in which I have just absurdly long hair and in another one I'm

dressed up. I'm in a coat and tie for a more formal photo and this coat and tie, it's hard to believe anybody ever, for one minute, thought it looked good. And there I am in it with the long hair. And then there's a photo of me with my college girlfriend, and she was just so not me – I mean when I was in college I was such an unserious person, I was such a vapid person, I was such a silly person. In a way, my conversion was from being a vapid, silly, unserious person to taking life seriously. I think that's what God helped me with. I started taking school seriously. I started taking other people seriously. I started taking my life seriously. I started taking God seriously.

With Paul, it's really very different. Paul is very serious. Paul is very zealous. What happens when he meets Christ is not that he changes somehow, it's that his passion, his zeal comes to be directed from what it had formerly been to his new direction following Jesus Christ, and he's every bit as passionate and as zealous. This is no temperate religion that Paul has, he is every bit as passionate and zealous in his following Christ as he had been in his former life.

The question is,, What are you passionate and zealous for? What are you willing to invest in? What keeps you up late at night? What really matters to you? What drives you? And can you take that and point it toward following Christ?

Paul says that in his former life he tried to annihilate the Gospel, and there are forces in our society that would try to annihilate the Gospel. The question that I have is, "What's going on inside you that is annihilating the Gospel?" Now you never get up in the morning and say "I want to annihilate the Gospel." You never do that. You want to be a Christian. You want to be a follower of Christ, but what happens is we unwittingly annihilate the Gospel because of how we arrange our day. We get up in the morning and we are busy and we rush from here to there and then we have some discretionary time and maybe we watch a dumb movie or we have a trivial conversation or whatever it is that we're doing and we're just going and then 15 days pass and then three years pass and then we look up and we're 71 years old and we think, Oh my. What we've done is we've annihilated the Gospel. We've never really denied it, we've never really given up on it, but yet, we've never really given it space. We've never really let God do God's work in us and through us. That's a question, how do we annihilate the Gospel?

Paul says that when he was converted he stopped trying to annihilate the Gospel and instead he becomes a great advocate for the Gospel. Here's the hard question: How do we become advocates for the Gospel of Jesus Christ? How do we persuade somebody else about the goodness, the wonder, the life that is Christianity? Now this is a hard question to ask in our day because we've sort of been schooled that you're supposed to give people their space. You're not supposed to intrude. You're supposed to respect the beliefs of others. You sort of keep your own beliefs to yourself. It's a private matter to intrude and to suggest to someone else what they should believe, we're a little bit uneasy about that. But let me suggest to you that we're all the time trying to persuade somebody about something. We're all of us great sales people. I am now the leading advocate for a new restaurant that I had never eaten in until this past week. Somebody took me to this restaurant and I am now their best sales person. I went to a restaurant called Pio Pio. It is on East Boulevard. It is very near my office. Some of you are nodding and you've beat me to it. I'd never been to Pio Pio. It is a Peruvian restaurant. It's just fun to say the word Peruvian. And when you say Peruvian, people say "What is that?" And I say "It's a Peruvian restaurant and the hospitality is great, and the food is really good, it's affordable and it's

just right around the corner." So I am suddenly telling everyone "Go to Pio Pio, you'll have a great meal there." I'm a sales person; I'm trying to persuade somebody. Ask my wife about her car. Lisa has never cared about a car before but now she has this Toyota Prius and she is cocky about her Prius. She brags about the mileage and how green the car is. You can drive what you want but she thinks you ought to buy a Prius really, is what she thinks.

I was out on my bike the other day. I was wearing a Duke T-shirt, I'm biking around and I see this child from our church. He's in his yard, and I pull over and I'm talking to him, and he's kind of looking at the shirt and he says "Dr. Howell, I'm really not a Duke fan" and I said "But you've got a lot of time, you've got years ahead of you." We're always selling something. When are we going to realize that you're at a party with somebody and they're doing the right thing. They've got their cocktail, they're smiling, they're laughing, and they're saying funny things. You think that person looks to be just giddy happy. When are we going to learn how to see beneath the veneer of that and there's somebody inside there that is hurting? There's somebody inside there who is confused. There's somebody inside there who is trying to figure out the point of their existence. When are we going to realize that? When are we going to look at the person at work who is achieving so much and they're working hard and they're charging ahead and they're the model employee and we're so excited about all that they're doing. When do we see that that being driven comes from somewhere, that they are perhaps being driven for some reason, that there's something that maybe they are running from or trying to get solved or trying to fill an empty place inside and when can we look at people and discover their hurt and find a way to say something? Don't be like Paul. Don't be cocky and brag on your spirituality but find a way to say something. It may be something as simple as, "You know, my church really helps me" or "I was at a tough time a couple of years ago and just praying really made a difference. I can't even explain it. Somehow with God I'm able to get by through the grace of God. It just matters to me." I think we find ways...Somebody the other day in a waiting room at the doctor's office, there's a stranger there in the office and the guy just begins to talk about what he's dealing with in terms of his health. Our church member could have just said, "Oh, gee, that's a shame." But instead he said, "You know, I believe in God, I get hope from God, I'll pray for you." It really mattered – the person followed out and spoke with him later.

How can we find ways to persuade, to share what we have inside? Here's the last thing and it's really the most wonderful thing of all. Paul says this. Paul talks about God's great miracle in his life and for Paul the miracle isn't really what happened on the road to Damascus, as important as that was for Paul, Paul was going in one direction, Jesus appeared to him on that road, and Paul turns around and goes in the opposite direction. He is struck blind, but really for the first time he finally can see. He has discovered what God has called him to but Paul says that's not really his first meeting with God. He said the work of God really began – this is amazing, did you hear it? – before he entered his mother's womb. Think back to the time – you can't do it, can you? – that you were not yet in your mother's womb, and then one day you appeared in your mother's womb. Before that time, God knew you, God loved you, God devised a plan for you, God began to call you, God began to woo you to protect you, to lead you home – before you were even in your mother's womb. And that time that you were growing in your mother's womb and she began to feel a stir and a kick, God was there, God was nurturing you, God was calling you, and you come out and you become a child and you cry for a couple of years and then you play with toys on the floor and then you go off to school and you try to make

good grades so that you can get into a school and get a job and you're working. All that time, all that time, and you weren't even aware of it. You weren't paying any attention. God is right there holding you, nudging you, sheltering you, wooing you, calling you to follow, to be with God. God has even used you in times that you were not even aware of. But how good is our God, how powerful is our God? I guess the question that comes out of that is, When are we going to wake up? That's a tough question to ask church-goers on a Sunday morning. At 8:30 a.m., I think a couple of them snapped to when I asked that. When are we going to wake up? God's been there all the time but we've got these blinders on and we've just been busy. We've missed it but it's the most wonderful thing. When are we going to wake up and realize that before we even were in our mother's womb, God called us, God loved us. God began to draw us to God's own self. When are we going to wake up? What are we going to do the next 15 days? What are the next three years going to be like? How can we discover what it is not to annihilate the presence of God in our lives, to experience God, to know God's presence, to feel God's love, to be transformed by that and then to find the way to seize the opportunities to share God's love with somebody? If we can do this, then at the end of our life, the question that we started with will be answered. Can we live our lives in a way that at the end of life somebody will glorify God because we've existed. That's really the only question that matters, isn't it?

Thanks be to God that we can ask it. And that there's an answer, and that God is good.