

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11
Romans 10: 5-13
February 17, 2013
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
First Sunday of Lent

The most important thing to understand about the apostle Paul is that he is a Jew who never intended to start a new religion. He is steeped in the teaching of the Torah. He lives and breathes the traditions and practices of the Jewish people. Paul passionately believes in two promises which come straight from the Pharisaic teaching of Torah: the coming of the messiah and the resurrection of the dead to eternal life. Because he is also what is called an apocalyptic Jew he believes that the arrival of the messiah will inaugurate the end of human history. All of this is true *before* Paul experiences what must be called a transforming mystical encounter with the risen Christ on his way to persecute Christians in Damascus.

My point is this: Paul does not come from some spiritual vacuum. There is continuity between the pre-Damascus Saul of Tarsus and the Paul who has a transforming encounter with Jesus. Yes the man who formally persecuted Christians now becomes a formidable advocate for the faith. Yes, the universalism of the vision which flows from this experience profoundly alters his view of the mission of the Jewish faith. Yes, the logic that comes from this new perspective puts him at odds with key practices of the Jewish faith. But at heart Paul remains a Jew and sees his mission as the fulfillment of God's intention that Israel become a light to all the nations. It is an acute sorrow to Paul that he is understood as a dangerous schismatic who seeks to destroy

the very faith he believes he champions. It is bitterly confusing to Paul that his very passion and dedication seems to alienate the very people he hopes to attract. He would be pained by the ongoing controversy and division inspired by his ministry to this very day.

The passage we hear from Paul's letter to the Romans demonstrates this crucial understanding.

The Letter to the Romans is considered to be Paul's most systematic exposition of his faith. At the heart of it lies his struggle with his faith that Jesus is in fact God's promised messiah who fulfills the Law of Moses. Because Jesus in his earthly life perfectly fulfills the Law of Moses as no human being could do, his death on the cross takes upon his life the condemnation from humanity's inability and in some cases outright refusal to obey the Law. When Jesus is crucified he dies for the sins *of the world*. When God raises him from the dead Jesus' life is vindicated and he is now seen as God's divine agent of deliverance of the whole world. This new relationship, this new covenant is now available to all people not through formal obedience to the ritual, dietary and communal laws of Moses, but by faith that Jesus is in fact the true messiah who really lived and really died and really did rise from the dead. This faith is not just about *believing* these propositions about Jesus. Far more important is the trust that, through putting the whole weight of our lives on this proclamation, we experience the lifting of fear of death and judgment, not in the life to come, but in the here and now of daily life.

The passage from Romans illustrates just how *continuous* Paul's teaching is with his Jewish faith. In verse five he begins with a quotation from Leviticus, "the person who does these things (that is, who obeys the ritual, dietary and communal laws of Torah) will live by them. (Lev 18:5). Then in good rabbinic fashion he places a passage from Deuteronomy alongside to argue that Torah agrees that human will *alone* cannot perfectly fulfill the Law of Moses.

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven that you should say, "Who shall go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us, that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is (already) in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. (Deut. 30: 11-14)

Notice how Paul equates the Law of Moses with Jesus:

But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say, 'Who will ascend to heaven'" (that is, to bring Christ down) or, 'Who will descend to the deep?" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart." That is the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth and believe in your heart that God raised (Jesus) from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all, and richly blesses all who call upon him. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Rom 10: 5-13)

In these short eight verses Paul quotes four Hebrew scriptures. His mode of argument is thoroughly informed by the rabbinic tradition. We see through his words that Paul has no thought of creating a new religion. He believes that in Jesus of Nazareth God has fulfilled his promise. Humanity has only to believe that Jesus is in fact the

promised messiah. The good news, Paul proclaims, is that this faith has *already been given!* We don't have to climb up to heaven to get it. We don't have to go to the depths of the sea; we don't have to perform great acts of religious faith in order to merit this gift. *It has already BEEN GIVEN!* It is already in our hearts by the grace of God. We have only to acknowledge this gift, receive it and live according to the gift.

This message is not new. He has laid the basis for his statement by linking it with the fact that Israel did nothing to merit the gift of the Law. Not only was the Law given to Israel; but so too was the ability to obey the Law. In this Paul shows himself to refute the Christians who in all times and places have caricatured Judaism as a religion which demands blind obedience to onerous and irrelevant laws. Paul understands the Law as a gift of love. In Judaism obedience to the Law is an act of love. It is a form of communion with the God of Abraham and Sarah.

What is new and radical in Paul's teaching is that gentiles—those not born Jewish—must enter the faith by the way every Jew does: by circumcision and obedience to the Law of Moses. Paul asserts that Jesus perfectly fulfilled the Law. He died on the cross to satisfy the demands of the Law for death as a result of humanity's disobedience. Therefore we may experience forgiveness and the assurance of eternal life by believing that Jesus is the messiah. This is because Jesus did not simply fulfill the Law in some abstract and transcendent way. By faith he fulfills the Law *in us!*

Friends, the task is to accept this good news! Begin the journey of receiving!
Amen.