

The Fifth Sunday of Pentecost

July 5, 2009

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10

Psalm 48

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Have you ever experienced a real panic attack? You would know if you had. We all have moments of being nervous; this is far beyond nervous. This is when you feel warm and flushed, your heart beats really, really fast, your hands shake and the rest of you shakes, you can't really catch your breath, and you seriously contemplate either fainting or running away. Obviously, I speak from experience.

Long, long ago when I took the first steps toward a life in the church, I was turned loose on an unsuspecting congregation that stoically suffered through the panic attack of one who suddenly realized the import, the significance of what God was getting me into. The reading must have been painful to hear and watch; the chalice had whitecaps from the shaking hands. Of course the worst part came later: the thought that I had let them down and, perhaps, let God down. That's a very painful thought.

I knew an officer of the British Army, the Queen's Dragoon Guards regiment, who was asked about the superb precision, the perfection, of the guards on parade. He said that they were like swans; above the water swans glide calmly and majestically, while below the water their little legs are going like mad. A panic attack is when your little legs let you down.

We have a reading from 2 Corinthians this morning. Paul speaks of an ecstatic vision, probably his own, that describes a confrontation with God. Then Paul talks about having a “thorn in the flesh.” Paul never says what that thorn might be, and people have puzzled about it ever since. The most frequent explanation, speculation, is that Paul was epileptic. Personally, I think it means that Paul was subject to panic attacks.

Now Paul was certainly an experienced public speaker. In fact Paul had a tendency to speak and speak and speak in public. The trouble with such people as Paul is that the world becomes lost in the verbiage, submerged in a sea of words, smothered by glibness. I think that Paul recognized his tendency to panic and realized that those were the moments when he was at his most powerful. He says “When I am weak, I am strong.” He knows that when God speaks through him his words are true and strong. Paul is content with that weakness; he knows that at those moments God’s grace is sufficient to sustain him.

When God called me to priestly ordination, I had occasion to explain myself to Bishop Paul Reeves, several Bishops of Georgia ago, while walking under the great oaks at Honey Creek. Bishop Reeves had been a Navy chaplain in the Pacific in World War II and took pleasure in ribbing an active duty Army officer on any occasion. This time he was silent and listened as I tried to express what was within me, struggling to find the words. I finally apologized for not being very clear. He replied “If you were clear, I would doubt you.”

The point is that when we are glib, we may get in the way of what God is saying and doing. God speaks not just to the ear but also to the heart. The moment of panic speaks to the immense importance of what God would have us say.

Ezekiel says, “Whether they hear or refuse to hear, they will know that there has been a prophet among them.”

In His Holy Name.