



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Before You Were Born

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was please to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being ... (Galatians 1:13-16).

“Listen to me!” Isaiah says. “The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.” Why? Because God knows we need to be reminded who we are, and *whose* we are. Knowing that we belong to God, the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, ought to be identity enough for anyone in this life. However else we define ourselves, we matter first and foremost because we matter to God.

Then Isaiah tells the people, on behalf of God: “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” God chooses Israel, not because they’re better than anyone else but because God will work through them to show the world what God’s love it like, and the story of Israel will turn out to be the story of the whole world’s redemption.

God had a plan for Isaiah before he was born, and God had a plan for Israel too. Centuries later, God has a plan for another young man, who will help to stretch the story of Israel all the way down to you and me.

Paul says, “You’ve heard of my earlier life. I was violently persecuting the church of God and trying to destroy it.” Now Paul had not been trying to kill the church out of hostility to God. He wasn’t one of those atheists who think religion is bunk. No, Paul wanted to destroy the church precisely because he was so committed to God. He wanted to wipe out whatever he thought was against God’s will. The trouble is, Paul’s understanding was too limited. He knew part of the story, but not the whole story. And people can be dangerous when their vision is too narrow.

But when Paul’s zeal outran God’s will, God caught up with him in the person of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord. Then, Paul says, “God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.”

When the church’s leaders heard that their great enemy was suddenly claiming to be a friend, they were suspicious, and for good reason: Paul had been a source of so much fear and frustration. But over time he won their trust because he came to share not only their faith but also the cost of discipleship. He earned his stripes. After a while people said, “The one who had been persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he set out to destroy.” And they praised God on account of Paul.

All of which is to say, in the providence of God, nothing is ultimately lost. God can take our misguided zeal and redirect it for good. God can use our mistakes and make them occasions for grace and gratitude. God can take our failures and turn them into triumphs.

Last week about ten of us from Westminster joined members of three other churches for a potluck supper at Valley View Church in the Garfield section of Pittsburgh. This was a follow-up to an event we all co-sponsored at Pittsburgh Seminary on race, poverty, incarceration, and justice. Our purpose is to get to know each other and build friendships across the kinds of boundaries that tend to divide people—urban and suburban, black and white, affluent and not-so-affluent. The starting point is one thing we all have in common: we all belong to God.

A man named Roger was invited to share his story after supper. Roger will be 70 in a couple months, but he spent 24 years in prison for delivering a little less than a gram of heroin after he had been on parole. When he went to prison he was still using drugs, but he says he cried out to God in his distress and flushed away the last drugs he managed to smuggle into jail. He started going to meetings to overcome his habit, and along the way God got a hold of him. “I’m a different person now,” Roger says, and recently he was ordained a deacon at Grace Memorial Church.

Those of us who have gotten to know Roger love his spirit—his sense of humor, his humility, and his simple eloquence in describing how God works in his life. Nothing is wasted in the end—not even 24 years in prison, when he missed so many things in the lives of his family and friends. Somebody asked Roger what his favorite scripture passage was and he said without hesitation, “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds....” That’s what Paul said to the church in Rome, when he himself had been in prison. And Paul knew what he was talking about, because his own life had been transformed by Christ.

Even five years out of prison, Roger still has trouble finding a job. One reason is that many employers won't hire anyone who has been incarcerated—which only has the effect of compounding poverty and all sorts of other social problems. How can you support yourself and your family if no one will hire you? What incentives do you have to contribute to society if people won't give you another chance?

Roger told a story about a friend who asked his wife to record a football game while the man had to work. When he got home, his wife said, "I recorded the game for you. The Steelers won!" The man was annoyed at first, because he thought knowing the ending would take away the suspense, but then he said he was able to relax and enjoy the game because he knew it would turn out well. Roger says he doesn't know the details of what God has in store for him, but now he can enjoy life more because he knows that in the end it will turn out all right.

The Bible tells us that, no matter how things go in the meantime, it will all turn out well. God wins in the end, and because God wins, the people of God win too. God will provide, and nothing ultimately is lost. Everything that happens is either a gift from God or something that will be redeemed one day.

One of our main tasks in life is to figure out what God has made us to be. We find that out by discovering and developing our gifts, and seeing how even our failures and frustrations can be redeemed. Parker Palmer, the Quaker writer and reformer, says:

In retrospect, I can see in my own life what I could not see at the time—how the job I lost helped me find

work I needed to do, how the “road closed” sign turned me toward terrain I needed to travel, how losses that felt irredeemable forced me to discern meanings I needed to know. On the surface it seemed that life was lessening, but silently and lavishly the seeds of new life were always being sown.¹

That can be true for each of us as individuals, and for whole groups of people as well. We tend to talk about people in categories, as social or economic or racial or religious groups. Somebody said at our meeting on religion and international affairs in New York recently, “Immigration is an issue; immigrants are people.” Every category we use to describe one another is like that. Poverty is an issue, but the poor are people. Incarceration is an issue, but prisoners are people. Children and the elderly are categories; the young and the old are people.

And God loves all those people. God loves you and me, and God had a purpose for each of us before we were born. Sometimes we only see our purpose in retrospect, and we’re still works in progress, aren’t we? God isn’t finished with us yet, and we don’t know everything that will happen along the way. But Roger was right after all: we can learn to enjoy life more in the meantime, because we know God loves us, and it will all turn out well in the end.

¹ Parker Palmer, “There Is a Season,” in Paul Robat Loeb, ed., *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: Perseverance and Hope in Times of Trouble* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 153.



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