

“For power is made perfect in weakness.” Hold that idea. It’s what I have been living through these past three weeks, and if I am at any point incoherent, please forgive me.

As Father Ed mentioned from time to time when he was with us, one of the requirements for ordination to the priesthood is a psychiatric exam. It consists of an in-person interview, followed by a series of standardized tests: Strong’s Interest Inventory, Myers-Briggs personality assessment, and the one whose title I love the best: the Minnesota Multiphasic Exam, all of which are intended to evaluate the candidate’s natural inclination toward the peculiar and wide-ranging skills of ministry. One of the blunt questions on the Multiphasic was this: “Have you ever had a vision?” I remember how reluctant I was to check “yes,” but I did.

Two weeks later when I returned to hear the results, the psychiatrist began, “These are standardized tests. It is impossible to standardize people. That is why it is so important to have a real person meet the candidate and read the results.” As it turned out, in the world of the Minnesota Multiphasic, having visions was one of several red flag questions which might indicate insanity. But, as the good doctor said, “Almost everyone seeking ordination has experienced a vision. In the religious world, it appears to be perfectly normal, if not an outright qualification.”

That is only one of the reasons this week’s passage from Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians ranks among my favorites. It’s all about the power, or lack thereof, of visions. It also reveals a great deal about Paul, his struggles with God and his struggles with himself, which, in many ways echo my own struggles and those in the world around me.

So rewind to the most recent presidential debate. How devastated so many of us were. A shining candidate with all the answers, a haunted incumbent who knew the truth of the devastating situation we are in and could barely put it into words. It’s so true: how can we speak

coherently about a moment in history whose essence is disinformation and incoherence? “For power is made perfect in weakness.” These were the exact words which came into my mind after the debate. At the time I had no idea we would be reading them this morning. Power in weakness is a perfect example of the paradoxical nature of spiritual insight. Power and weakness shouldn’t even be in the same sentence, and yet, here they are, in the writing of one of the most powerful figures in Christian history, in a letter which is a masterpiece of inner reflection and psychological revelation. A letter in which we learn less about Paul’s ideas than about Paul. And about ourselves. Few Americans see anything at all powerful in weakness. Our shared vision is of red-blooded masculine strength, our aspirations heroic. (Remember the Joseph Campbell Hero Journey craze? The teaching that we are all the heroes in the story of our own lives as if our lives were a private possession, a personal work of art? I taught all this to my students.) Like the ancient Romans, we Americans are a hyper-masculinized, militaristic society.

Paul doesn’t tell us what he saw when he was lifted into the third heaven. He says only that he “heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.” From my own experiences of the numinous, what I bring back is less something that I am forbidden to repeat than something so contrary to everyone’s expectations that people would simply dismiss the whole thing as crazy and cease taking me seriously if they ever did. (Back to the Multiphasic!)

As befitting their paradoxical nature, all visions speak on at least two levels: a transpersonal experience of the divine and those hidden parts of myself that need to be revealed as they will ultimately shape the direction of my life and ministry and it is better that I be conscious of them than just let them act out in some messy way.

Meanwhile, the whole prophetic tradition in the Bible is visionary. The prophets are called by God and charged with speaking what they heard to the people, which reminds us that

no revelation is ever to be kept to oneself. Indeed, and the Book of Ezekiel says this plainly, It does not matter if the people do not believe you. It matters that you speak what you have seen. That is all God asks.

Are you beginning to see what a crazy-making world this can be? Why the people of Nazareth thought Jesus was out of his mind? Why Paul said earlier in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, “For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.” (2 Cor 5:13)

Or this very famous passage from Isaiah:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Isaiah 55.

Unlike most of us moderns, Paul believed that a vision was something of which he could boast, because he lived at a time when religious visionaries were honored and ordinary consciousness included visionary states, (there were entire temples dedicated to mystical, healing dreaming, and families were often awake at midnight sharing dreams), but today, unless a vision is cleverly marketed, it has no cachet whatsoever. I’ve spoken many times about my own visions, which rocked my world at the time and continue to do so, and even when I share every juicy detail, the typical response has been momentary interest concluding that the vision, being unique and personal to me need not to be taken particularly seriously by anyone else.

I hear Paul struggling with all this, too. In Second Corinthians we learn that he is not particularly tall or good looking, as opposed to the super-apostles flooding Corinth with their

Apollonian good looks and smooth words that everyone wants to hear. (There have always been false prophets, you know. Life is a matter of discernment.) Indeed, in the very next verse after today's reading, he says, "I have been a fool! You forced me to it. Indeed you should have been the ones commending me, for I am not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing." (Nothing, Paul?)

Whether in ancient Corinth or modern America, weakness is a very hard sell. I love it when Paul says: "So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

Can one really boast of being weak, or is that just another version of insisting I am the most humble person in the room?

I've been talking about visions. About the prophetic command to share them. I would be a perfect tease if I didn't give you a taste of my own. So here are bits of two of them. Both come from dreams so vivid that like Paul, I wondered whether they had been in the body or out of the body, God knows.

The first arrived in 1968, right around the time I turned eighteen. It was all about a Dark Lord and the world he ruled, where some were masters and others servants. In the dream I was a governess, serving two children in a wealthy household, living in a beautiful house I could never call my own. The country we lived in was reminiscent of Denmark. Its Dark Lord was not at all like other, more famous Dark ones: Sauron the monster in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* or Darth Vader the heavy breather in *Star Wars*. He was devastatingly handsome, seductive, dressed all in black, a huge black feather in his hat, his steed dark and shiny, a great gray wolf at his side, and when he and his entourage crossed the stream, our eyes men, and he fell in love

with me. He promised to lift me from my life of servitude and make me his queen. The children I was caring for said, “Don’t throw yourself away.” I ignored them. How can the rich ever know what it means to be poor? Later, the dream ended in a horrific vision of flying reptiles and the beginning of a dark winter’s night which would last six months. I met the Dark Lord again, but did not marry him.

The message? Evil is rarely terrifying at first. Indeed, evil usually arrives in an irresistibly beautiful form.

The second vision came sixteen years later, right before I graduated from seminary. After many adventures and showings, I was taken to a world that had refused to crucify Jesus. This world was wonderful beyond my ability to comprehend, but it was both exciting and non-violent. “Oh yes,” smiled my guide. “Even when we didn’t kill him, it still took 1,000 years for us to stop.” In one luminous moment, it flashed across my heart that crucifying the son of God was perhaps the greatest and most persistent sin ever committed in history. Unfortunately, although I woke up transformed, two days later I was sitting my General Ordination exams. And what do you think the central theme of those exams was that year? You got it. How the death of Jesus atoned for our sins. You can imagine how badly I did! But the dream shaped me anyway. Everything I have pondered since then about the world and its pain has led me straight to the cross, showing me how inevitable it was in a militaristic and fear driven culture. Every Good Friday I sit at the foot of the cross with Mary Magdalene watching the one I love die. Because that is what really happened in my world.

Both these visionary dreams, of which I’ve shared the tiniest part, ended with the promise of new life and resurrection, and both showed me how difficult the journey to new life could be.

Make of all this what you will. In Jesus name, AMEN.