

# Feeling Foolish

Texts: Psalm 27: 1-9; 1Corinthians 1:17-31; Matthew 4:12-23

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I don't know whether you have heard the story out of Iraq. It happened back in 2003.

A certain Muhammad al-Kitab, a renegade religious leader with a small cell of followers, was going around stirring up the countryside with religious fervor.

This was back when Paul Bremer was the American Administrator overseeing Iraq, and this guy, al-Kitab was brought to his attention by some of the local religious leaders who were worried that he was going to start some sort of uprising against the Americans.

These local religious leaders had got a guy on the inside and they were very disturbed by what they heard, so they arranged the capture and handover of al-Kitab to Bremer in exchange for American goodwill.

Bremer took al-Kitab and interrogated him, but got nothing but a few religious phrases out of him.

He didn't think the guy looked *that* dangerous and he was prepared to let him go, but the religious leaders insisted that this guy was trouble, a rebellion just waiting to happen, and they didn't want any trouble, and they certainly didn't want to have to see America messing about in their religious affairs because of the difficulties this guy might cause.

Bremer didn't want to be accused of getting involved in Iraqi religious affairs, a no win situation if there ever was one, so he decided to interrogate al-Kitab with waterboarding, to see if he was really holding out on him.

If there were plans for a rebellion, Bremer wanted to know them. He was in charge of keeping the peace, after all, and even a minor rebellion would look bad on him.

But he got nothing about a rebellion, per se. What he did get was Al-Kitab insisting that he was telling the truth and that Allah would vindicate him in the end, that Allah was going to bring judgment on the world.

Bremer didn't like the sound of that, too fanatical and all, so he decided to have al-Kitab executed in the public square where Saddam's giant statue had stood – remember seeing that on the news when they pulled it down?

Al-Kitab died, and just to make sure that he was really dead, one of the soldiers put a bullet in his chest. Then some of al-Kitab's followers started claiming he wasn't dead, but had come to life again.

Now, why have I told you this story? It's not a true story. At all. I just made it up, from beginning to end. But it might have sounded familiar to you because it's essentially the story of Jesus dressed up as if it happened a few years ago.

I told the story because I wanted you to feel how the story of Jesus would sound to a Roman citizen living in a city like Corinth, which was a Roman colony at the time of the New Testament, and not a Greek city as of old.

To the Romans, Jesus was a wild religious renegade of a conquered people, betrayed by his own religious leaders, executed by the Roman official on the scene after gruesome torture, with a kind of death that wasn't mentioned in polite company in Roman society.

Death on a cross was reserved for slaves, terrorists, and the lowest kind of criminal. It could never be imposed on a Roman citizen, and was never used for the more respectable kind of criminal.

To go on to claim that this man, Jesus, had risen from the dead and was the Savior of the world without further information about his life would be no more believable to most people than it would be to claim that Muhammad al-Kitab, whom I just made up, had risen from the dead, especially if the only people claiming to have seen him in this resurrection were his own followers.

And yet that is what the followers of Jesus did, and that is what they made stick to the point that we believe it two thousand years later. We believe the claim about Jesus' resurrection because we do know the rest of the story of Jesus, about Jesus' wisdom, Jesus' kindness, Jesus' embrace of outcasts, Jesus' feeding and healing and confronting and outwitting and living like no one ever lived before.

We believe it because Jesus, of all people, is the sort of person who should have been resurrected. It's not just the story about some guy who was raised from the dead, but about a very specific person, whom people recognized as being special, different, holy in a new way, long before his death.

But we have been believing it for so long that the cross, far from being so scandalous that it can't be mentioned in polite company, has now become a piece of jewelry to be worn as a necklace or as earrings.

When Paul says that the cross is the foolishness of God, he's not kidding. It's an affront to common sense and an embarrassment. If it's a sign of anything, it's a sign of weakness. Only the powerless died on a cross.

Jesus is going to rule the world? He couldn't rule the Romans. He couldn't rule the Jewish religious leaders. Why, he couldn't even rule his own disciples because one of them betrayed him!

And this is the Savior of the world? He couldn't even save himself! The whole thing is the height of foolishness, the incarnation of idiocy, not the incarnation of God.

We have lost all sense of how crazy the whole thing sounds, and because we have, it's easy to think of Paul's wonderful words about how the foolishness of God is stronger than the wisdom of the world as being mere rhetorical flourishes instead of statements about the reality of the situation.

For Paul, the foolishness of the cross shows just how far God's ways are from human ways, how utterly incompatible God's way of being in the world is with all of our ideas about the way to be in the world.

God's way of being in the world is to serve, to teach, to heal, to die for others if that is necessary. You won't find books on that in the self-help section!

God's way of being in the world is foolishness to anyone who knows anything about how to get ahead in the world, but it is precisely this foolishness that gives us hope.

Our way to save ourselves is always for us to do something: be holier, be better, be something we are not. Our way is to give more money, more time, more something to show how good we are.

God's way is for us to take Jesus' life on board, and to trust that God has already worked out the details. As we let God get nearer to us in Jesus, we start to look more like Jesus, showing kindness, mercy, love, acceptance, forgiveness to those whom we meet, and challenging injustice wherever we come across it. But it's God who's reshaping us by our nearness to Jesus. We're not doing the reshaping ourselves.

Christ's humble and humiliating death on the cross is what makes Jesus approachable even to those who have been humbled and humiliated.

The weakness of God on the cross did what no human wisdom could do, and that is to win eternal life for us. God's foolishness is thus more powerful than human wisdom.

Paul says, "Hey, wanna hear another one? It's even better. Not many of you were wise by human standards when Christ called you. Not many of you were influential, powerful, of noble birth.

"Wanna know more about God's foolishness? God has chosen *you* to be the bearers of salvation to the world!

"God didn't put the news of salvation in Caesar's hands. God didn't put it in the Roman Senate, or in the great speakers of the age. No, God put it in your hands – God gave it to nobodies and nothings, as far as the world is concerned. Now talk about a foolish plan!

Yep, God gave you the message of Christ, so that once more God could use the foolish things of the world – that's you! – to shame the wisdom of the wise.

God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong, the lowly things of the world and the despised things – the nothings of the world – to show the utter foolishness of worldly wisdom and to display the utter wisdom of God in ways the world thinks are foolish."

That's what Paul wrote to the Corinthians long ago, and as we learn from the rest of Paul's two letters to Corinth, there was certainly a lot of foolishness going on in the churches there.

And yet, here we are, two thousand years later, saved by the foolishness of the cross because those fools of Corinthians managed to do the job.

They didn't have power or influence or the privilege of birth to fall back on. They didn't have huge resources or even great leaders. They had a crazy story about some cross-nailed Galilean who rose from the dead.

And they had God with them, working with God's power in the midst of their foolishness, using their foolishness to confound the wisdom of the wise.

What we offer to the world today the world, in its wisdom, often sees as foolishness.

"Jesus the Savior of the World? That's just crazy talk. We modern people know better than to believe in miracles and resurrections and spirits, Holy or otherwise. We know there's just this world and that's it. Christianity is just a primitive fantasy that mature people have grown out of, a kind of projected wish fulfillment weak people use as a crutch."

Many dismiss the story of Jesus as they would dismiss the story of al-Kitab because they do not really know the story, they do not know that Jesus of all people has the best case to be the Savior of the world, that he alone of all people has a life that makes resurrection believable, that he cannot be anybody's projection of their desires because nobody would project God on a cross instead of God in glory.

It is the very nature of Christ's call to his followers to really be his followers and to serve the world that makes wish fulfillment as a reason for believing in Jesus unlikely, because whose wish is it to put others first?

It is the willingness to die for faith in Christ, as Christians have done throughout the centuries, that puts the lie to those who say faith in Christ is only for those who are scared of death.

In our day, it is very easy to be discouraged and feel that we are too weak to do anything great for God. We look around us now and we think to ourselves, we don't have enough wisdom to build this church up further, we don't have enough money, our people aren't well-enough connected, aren't influential enough to do it. There aren't enough of us here.

We look around and we see that, as far as this world is concerned, most of us are nobodies and nothings. How could we possibly pass this faith on to anyone?

And Paul speaks to us, as he spoke to the Corinthians so long ago, and he says, "Just watch. God will use your weakness to shame the wisdom of the wise. God is most powerful when you are weak. Just wait, and see what God will do with you.

"For your God is the God who uses a cross to save the world, whose foolishness is stronger than the wisdom of the wise."

Following Paul, then, I say to you for 2020: Let us be fools for Christ, and expect great things from the God whose power is made perfect in weakness, whose wisdom is shown in the foolish things of the world. With trust in God and Jesus by our side, with the Holy Spirit's power at hand, there's nothing we can't accomplish for God. If the Corinthians could do it, we can do it!

Amen