

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
Lent 4-A; 26 March 2017  
Epiphany Seattle  
(rev. 201703251856)

**Your Super-power: Discernment**

*In nomine...*

For before you were darkness,  
but now you are light in the Lord;  
as children of light walk...

(for the fruit of light is all goodness and righteousness and truth)  
as children of light walk... discerning what it is that is pleasing to the Lord,  
and do not take part in the fruitless works of darkness,  
but instead even expose them. (*Eph 5.8-11*)

What you have heard twice, now, in two different translations, is a lesson all about your super-power. You have a super-power. It was given to you by God, and it is called *discernment*. That is the word I want to circle for you today.

Now if you look in your bulletins, you won't find that word. It's hidden behind a different translation. Languages can be tricky to translate from one to another, and ideas often get lost in the process. The NRSV from which our reading came this morning obscures this super-power a little. You might need X-ray vision to find it. The NRSV puts it as "Try to find out." But the Greek term, δοκιμάζω, gives us a lot more agency than just "try to find out." Instead, we are invited to test, to examine, to approve of. We are to be like a jeweler assessing the clarity of a gem or an appraiser considering the value of a piece of land or an investor considering the relative risk and potential of a particular financial instrument. We make decisions based not on rules but on our own powers of judgement. What we are involved in is the act of discernment.

So as Paul writes to the church in Ephesus, he admonishes the believers that, as children of light, they should walk in a particular way. A discerning way. Because that is their super-power. They, and we, have been entrusted with the privilege and the responsibility and the capacity to discern what it is that is pleasing to the Lord.

Discernment in life is like driving in the city. There are multiple routes to get where you're going. Some are better than others. Some are just plain wrong, like going the wrong way down a one-way street. Discernment means choosing the best route to achieve your purpose at this particular time of the day.

God isn't like a backseat driver, trying to tell you which way to go at every turn. It is possible to read the Bible that way. But reading the Bible that way quickly becomes problematic. Just take the book of Ephesians, from which today's first lesson came, as an example. We can read the various household codes and specific rules that Paul offers.

When I read in chapter 6, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" I feel pretty good about that. Yeah, children, you definitely should obey your parents. You may feel differently if your experience of childhood and parents was different from mine.

When I read in the middle of chapter 5, just a few verses after today's lesson, "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord," I'm much less confident. Is that a rule that makes sense for our present context? Kate gave me a squinty look when I brought up this idea as we were discussing this sermon. That instruction might be workable in some marriages. But it could be pretty terrible in others.

Then we come back to chapter 6: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ." Given the context of slavery in the United States and the terrible consequences which we continue to reap from that institution, I am horrified to find this in my Bible. Really? Is this God's word for me today, condoning slavery, the subjugation of one human being to another? That simply does not square with my larger understanding of the Bible and of God's purpose in the world.

All three of these instructions strongly reflect the context in which Paul wrote: a context very distant from the place and time where we live today. That's why Paul also tells us about our super-power, discernment. Rules are created with history and social location. Discernment involves sensitivity to exactly those factors.

As Kate pointed out to us a couple weeks ago, when God calls, God not only sends, but God blesses. Not only has God called me to a life of faith in this time and place, but God has blessed me with a super-power, with agency, capacity, and responsibility to discern, to judge, to figure out what it is that is pleasing to God here and now. Because I know that what is pleasing to God will be exactly what my own soul, in its deepest places, longs for as well.

God has not called me to live in the Roman Empire of 2000 years ago, but in Seattle in 2017. God calls me to live here and now, and to discern what is pleasing to God today.

God has not called me to live not according to my desires and pleasures, nor according to the wishes of my family, friends, employers or politicians. God calls me to discern what is pleasing to God alone, and thereby to understand the path that will give me life.

Now the question you're asking is, whence comes this capacity to discern well and rightly? How did you and I receive this super-power and how has it developed in us? Because I personally don't remember being exposed to massive amounts of gamma radiation like the Incredible Hulk, being bitten by a radioactive spider like Spiderman, or having my tongue touched with burning coals like Isaiah. I would suggest to you that the work of forming you and me to discern wisely what is good and right and true, what it is that is pleasing to God, is what the church is all about.

The church, through history, has had the job of forming and strengthening in us, its members, this super-power of discernment. The church accomplishes its tasks by inviting us to hear Scripture, to speak Rites, to participate in Sacraments, and to live into relationships. As you join with the church in words and actions, you are being shaped and empowered to discern what it is that is pleasing to God. When the Eucharist ends and you are sent forth with the admonition, "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord," that is your commissioning, your authorization, and your marching orders. To love and serve the Lord is in one sense a pretty vague set of instructions: it is a call for you to meet your life using your super-power of discernment.

Our super-power of discernment allows us, even compels us to walk into any situation and to discover what your calling is in that situation. Discernment is not always easy or simple. Sometimes discernment requires time for prayer and thought. Sometimes discernment requires conference with trusted conversation partners. As we go about the work of discernment, it is the Holy Spirit that is at work in us, it is the breath of God giving us life, guiding us, and calling us to do what it is that is pleasing to the Lord. Sometimes we make mistakes – but even these God redeems to continue the work of formation and sanctification in us, developing in us an ever greater capacity for discernment and love.

Thus, as we live out our lives, exercising our super-power of discernment, we participate in the work of God and we make the world a better place. Our light shines in dark places, leaving less room for evil to hide and more opportunity for others to discover the perfect, undying, eternal love their Creator holds for them.

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### **Questions:**

1. “With great power comes great responsibility.” How can this super-power be misused?
2. As a Christian, do you have any choice about whether to use the super-power of discernment?
3. How do you feel about having the responsibility to discern what is pleasing to God?