

Sermon Draft for January 18, 2026

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:1–9

Sermon: “God in Action”

Our text is our Epistle lesson. The other lessons for today all emphasize God in action, God as doer, in one way or another. The Old Testament Reading from Isaiah 49 speaks of God establishing the Servant of the Lord who will restore Israel, the one who will be the Suffering Servant described several chapters later.

The Gospel in John 1 revisits Jesus’ baptism, the focus of last week, and we are reminded that God has declared Jesus the Christ (and told John the same). Then that same Jesus chose his first disciples, telling them enough here again we find a divine action of God in Christ so that Andrew could tell Simon, “***We have found the Messiah.***” At the end of today’s Propers, there is no doubt that God can do and has done all in his grace and love.

In the bustling metropolis of Corinth, a Christian congregation might be seen as an asset to outreach. With so much trade coming through, not to mention a resident population probably of more than half a million, there would be no problem meeting people who did not know the love of God in Christ. With temples as competition and a synagogue whose members might well not believe the Messiah had come, the Christians had potential for being a leaven, for standing out in what was (in)famously a freewheeling city.

Sadly, they fell short. The success of evangelism isn't to be tied to the morality of the people. Yet one hopes for better fruit on the tree, springing from faith, fruit of content and especially of witness. Given what we know of the Corinthian congregation, its members seemed little different from their neighbors. There was infighting, sexual immorality, dragging each other before secular courts, drunkenness.

And there were problems with their theology as well: disbelief about the resurrection of Jesus (and their own) even as they acted as if they lived beyond it, given the way they thought whatever went on must be all right.

Given the potential but also given the problems, where to start? Paul, in the text, starts just where we always ought to begin, with who we are because of what God has done. That is the only perspective to have, the only confession to make if anything else is to follow.

Old Testament texts often take some doing. We are a long way from that worldview and culture, so there is setting to be sorted through. Then the texts are often specific to Old Testament Israel, so getting a message for today must be handled with care lest we lapse into allegory or treat the Old Testament as if people are simply clinging to Law till Christ comes. No! They, too, lived by promise, but that sometimes is lost in translation. Gospel lessons can pose similar challenges. There are stories about Jesus with theological import attached to the way the events are told.

There is a point to how things are arranged to teach a lesson even beyond the facts themselves. But Epistles often—not always but often—are relatively easy when it comes to a sermon text. How so? Because these are so often straightforward theological points directed at people who, though long part of history, still look so much like us in fundamental ways.

So, Corinthians, and especially today's text, could just as well be read straight with little comment. There are times when it is fun to delve into intricacies and come up with theological fine points that feed and expand our faith. And there are texts and times when it is wonderful to rejoice in the obvious. We might even indulge in taking a long view of God in action through time and place, from the start of life itself, through Corinth, and on to Peace and the Dunnellon community today. Without that perspective, by nature we risk missing the forest for the trees. After all, tracing family to Eden, we have a way of going after the wrong tree and soon are hopelessly lost.

So, enjoy the next few minutes as we remember that it's not about me, it's not about us, but it's all about God, who calls us and gives us all we need in love and grace.

A moment ago, that Eden reference laid out the basic problem: we didn't want what God said and had to give. By rights God could give up, but since Eden he has done more than we could dream for the salvation of mankind, all in love and grace. There's no leverage on the part of humankind. Not all the blood of beasts would ever amount to anything. A ***“people that in darkness sat”*** could expect to sit lost in that night, were it not for epiphanies along the way. So, God himself spoke he promised that the seed of the woman, who was really the Lord himself, would someday come and crush the head of the devil, being himself deathly bruised, and as a result take back for himself the precious people he'd lost, through no fault of his own. Then for millennia he sent prophets to speak for him the same promise, and he took a nation to be his, bearers of the promise. Old Testament Israel was God's own, not by their credentials but by God's doing in love.

As the centuries stretched on, the promise was there. Actually, it was open to all. Those who would have embraced the same hope for the Messiah and stood with Israel were, in a sense, honorary members of the chosen people. Along the way Israel, though made God's own, turned away time and time again and would have things their way. It always meant disaster. Yet through no part of their own God never gave up on them. God called Israel and kept them and gave them all they needed to be his. God doesn't give up on us either.

By the time of our text, some things have changed. The promised Messiah has come, that ultimate Epiphany of God himself in Christ. Jesus has crushed Satan, has been himself killed, the promise has been kept. The focus no longer funnels inward toward Old Israel but now, with the True Israel having come in the flesh, died and risen, the thrust is outward, sweeping wider as God creates his New Israel, the church.

Two Sundays ago on Epiphany we marked the coming of the Magi, the Gentiles. Last Sunday another kind of epiphany showed Jesus for who he really was: the right person on the right path to fulfill all righteousness.

And today the Epistle sheds light on the New Testament church, on the body of Christ in Corinth, where there had been more reaching out.

By now, Jesus' Twelve have been active first in Jerusalem (the early post-ascension, post-Pentecost congregation), then in Judea and Samaria (courtesy of Jerusalem persecution that scattered witnesses in a wider circle), and even in the uttermost parts of the earth.

It happens already in Acts when Gentiles come to the brightness of Christ's rising: Cornelius, for example, in Acts 10, not to mention all those Paul draws in with his Gospel preaching, including those Gentiles in Corinth. There's a mission imperative for us!

The mission breakout, the evangelism expansion, was God's doing. He calls and gives all that is needed in his grace and love. No wonder then that Paul is so concerned, concerned that the congregation in Corinth not squander what God has given it (not to mention concern for bringing more into the fold). Time may be standing still in one sense with nothing more for Christ to accomplish before he comes again, but in another sense, time is flying by.

So, this is no time to get cute, to play games with the message brought by the apostle God himself chose to send to Corinth. It's a simple message at heart but that's not the same as simplistic. In truth the message is never exhausted, but to mine the depths, the foundation has to be sure. So, verse by verse Paul makes plain what God has done all for them, giving all they need to have and to hold. It's the basis of their life together. It is the basis of life eternal.

God not only has done all through time and does all for Corinth, he will do all for us and for our salvation as well. The basic relationship of men and women before God has never changed. It rests not on quid pro quo, on what we do in some effort to get or deserve what God has. Rather it rests on what God has chosen to do. We have the life and salvation of God because Jesus' death and resurrection bought it for us. God did it. God does it. Where and why the church should be, and how it may grow or how it may suffer decline in the latter days, is all beyond us. Look rather to the simple rundown Paul gives Corinth.

The same happens among us solely by God's doing, by his grace and love. Why? In one sense we can't think of one good reason. In another the answer is that I may be his own and live under him in his Kingdom. So, we take stock, we repent of our failures, and we pray God that we avoid the problems of Corinth, not to mention others sent our way. Instead, take heart and live by faith and hope, for ***“God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful”*** (v 9). It's as simple as that. It's as important and as wonderful as that!

Amen