

Have you ever noticed how some art museums post guards near the paintings? If they don't post a guard, they put a red velvet rope in place to prevent people from coming too close to the paintings. The curators have told patrons, "You can come this close and no closer." If you reach out your hand to point to a detail, a guard may correct you and ask you step back. Art has a way of drawing us in. We find ourselves moving closer and closer to the painting, examining small details of things that are there. The only problem with this way of viewing art is that sometimes you can be so close to the painting that you lose sight of what it is really about. Being immersed in the details sometimes prevents you from seeing the larger picture.

Something like this can happen in reading this chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. One is drawn in by the strangeness of Paul's words. Paul is discussing the status of Israel in God's plan of salvation. At some points, Paul speaks of the hardening of Israel. He voices claims that God has rejected his people, hardened their hearts. At other points, Paul speaks of the salvation of Israel, their election and being beloved for the sake of their forefathers. When read up close and out of context, his words can become confusing. They have led some to argue that Paul here lays the foundation for anti-Jewish sentiment in the Christian church. After the Jews were expelled from Rome, the Gentile church survived and now would have little reason to welcome back their brothers and sisters in the faith. Others have used these verses to argue for a future day when God will restore the Jewish people and to fight for that restoration as a prelude to the return of Christ. This concern for Israel gets expressed in political action and becomes a way in which the church can hasten the return of Christ. Has God rejected Israel or not? Will God save Israel or not? These are the questions arising from this passage. Even more troubling, however, is the picture these verses can give you of God. God seems unfaithful – one time calling a people to be his own and then rejecting them only to call another. Can God be trusted when he makes promises . . . when he claims people . . . any people . . . Gentile or Jew?

Paul is aware of how confusing this is and so he is quite clear about the points that he makes. First, Paul wants all to know that God remains faithful to his promises. God has not rejected Israel, for Paul himself is an Israelite. If God rejected Israel, then Paul would be condemned. Instead, God brought Paul to faith in Jesus Christ and uses him to reach out to the Gentile nations. In doing this, God is remaining faithful to his plan. From one nation, Israel, God promised a Savior for all nations and now, Paul, a Jew, believes in Jesus as this Messiah and reaches out to Gentile nations with this good news from God. Does this mission to the Gentile nations mean that the church should forget about Israel? No way. And this is Paul's second point. The church is part of God's mission to his chosen people. Paul uses himself again as an example. His ministry to the Gentiles is a ministry that seeks to lead Israel back to God's grace. And here is where Paul asks us to take a step back from the art piece and to see the larger picture. Paul sees himself and his ministry as part of the larger working of God.

God has a greater story for this world. It is story of peace found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for salvation from sin. All have been disobedient. "All have sinned

and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23). And yet, God is faithful to his promise to have mercy on all. All “are justified freely by God’s grace through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ” (3:24). When you come near to Jesus, when you are brought to faith by the power of God in his word, you are then sent near to those who are in need of Jesus, Jews and Gentiles, neighbors and family, as God continues to work out his story of bringing salvation to the ends of the earth.

God’s word brings people to life, people like the apostle Paul, and people like you and me. And God’s word then reaches out to others through the lives of his people. Each person becomes one more revelation in the flesh of God’s mission of mercy in this world.

Over these past months since March, I have seen it time and again. God’s Word bringing people to life. God’s Word bringing courage and hope. God’s Word giving us words to say when there aren’t any other words to be said. With God’s Word on our minds and in our hearts, we always have something to talk about. What conversation is God calling you to have with others? What strange and difficult speech is God calling you to say? It may be bold or it may be quiet. It may be large, like a life-long conversation with your father, or it may be small, like a brief conversation with a stranger in the store. But it is God’s Word at work through his people in the world.

Paul reveals to us that we are a people who live by words – the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. God is here, today, for you. Forgiving you your sin. And God is here, today, for others, seeking to bring them to the faith. He will not stop. He will not remain silent. He will work through you, through moments with individual people, to fulfill his vision of bringing all nations into one body, the Church, the new Israel, in Christ.