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"Red Lights, Tiny Twigs, and God's Work " The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (06/16/2024, The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost)

Let us pray, Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.
I don't know if you've noticed as you drive periodically, they put these red lights to stop
you.
And so this gives you a time to answer text messages.
It's really helpful if you've noticed that.
So convenient.
People use stop lights for lots of things.
Sometimes it's taking an extra bite of the egg McMuffin.
Sometimes it's to put on mascara.
Sometimes it's to have a word with the people in the back seat.
Lots of things you can do at the stoplight.
I know someone who uses red lights to pray, which I think is so beautiful, but that is not
what I do.
I use them to judge people, to look around at my fellow motorists, examine their vehicles,
the state of cleanliness of the cars.
Maybe what they're driving tells me something about them.
And whenever I see an especially fancy vehicle, it brings about this confusing emotional
state for me, I simultaneously want what they have and I hate them.
I want that vehicle.
I would love to have them McLaren, but also what a terrible person you are for driving
that thing.
I heard recently about a man who drives a lime green Lamborghini, and I was listening
to a podcast.
He was talking about his life and his story.
And I heard that.
I heard that.
He's a tech bro.
He made enough money by the time he was 25 that he could retire and he bought this lime
green Lamborghini.
Now picture yourself seeing a lime green Lamborghini next to you at the stoplight.
Do you have any thoughts?

Do you have any assumptions?

Do you have any feelings about that person?

I certainly do and would, but as I listened to him talk about his life, I realized there

was more to him than I first thought.

His name's Alan, and he's the son of Chinese immigrants.

His father grew up as an orphan and was put into a farm for other children without parents

made to work on that farm, very difficult conditions.

He managed to get away from that, and as a young adult was able to put together a flotation

device made of tennis balls and crossed from mainland China into Hong Kong where he found

more opportunity.

And then from there he was able to take his family to New York City where he found a job

working from dawn to dusk, very difficult labor.

But he wanted his family to have more opportunity than he had as a child.

And so the son of this man, this Lamborghini driver, he saw his father doing that and he also

began to work hard in his own career, had a nine to five job, but what often happens when

you have a very difficult traumatic childhood and difficult adult life, this father began

to have some serious health problems with physical and mental, and he died quite young.

And so this son, Alan, decided he did not want that to happen to him and he began to

have a side hustle.

He began developing apps at home at night.

He would code after he got home from his nine to five and he would release these apps

to see if something would work and all of them failed except for one.

And this one app struck gold and he began seeing monthly returns to the tune of \$300,000.

So he quit his job and went to live in Florida where he bought a home where his mother could

live with him because her health was declining as well.

And he spends his days now caring for his mom and also volunteering in the community because

he doesn't have to work and he found his life was much more meaningful caring for others than for himself.

So yes, he has the green Lamborghini in a backup orange one, you know, if it's in the shop.

But there's more to this man than met my eye and this to me was an example of this thing

that exists.

It's often a huge difference between what people see on the outside,

the family that you
show in your annual Christmas card or what you show your life on
social media.
The outside is often very different from what's going on on the
inside, the stories that
people carry.
We have this set of scripture readings this morning that, you know,
you heard this
reading that Debbie talked about a tree and a twig and I'll talk about
a mustard seed
and a shrub, a lot of greenery today, a lot of shrubbery in the
readings.
But these are readings about how God works, how God actually works in
people's lives.
And I have found that the stories that we're told about how God works
are often very different
from what actually happens.
I was driving in a large city in Texas recently and I saw a billboard
for a church and it had
a picture of the leading pastor couple and had the words, you can be
victorious.
And that's how we think God works, you know.
We are victorious.
We're pretty on the outside because we've sort of gotten our act
together.
But I find that's not often really how God works.
I find that God works in unseen and hidden ways, in surprising ways,
in unexpected ways.
And often in the parts of our lives where we think it actually
wouldn't, that's not
where God would work.
We think God works in the pretty places and not the difficult places.
And I want to talk about how God actually works because if you are on
the path to holier
living through effort and grit, sort of the spiritual version of
pulling yourself up
by your bootstraps, you will find it exhausting.
You will find yourself either a judgmental, hypocritical Christian or
an atheist.
Because you can't, it doesn't work.
You run out of steam at some point.
So what these passages say is Ezekiel 17, Mark 4 and 2 Corinthians 5,
they all talk about
how God works in surprising, unexpected and difficult places.
In Ezekiel 17, God says, you think God works in the big tall tree,
he's speaking metaphorically.
You know, the big impressive things in life.
But actually, God brings down those tall trees and he'll take the
little twig, little branch
at the top of the tree and that's going to be the place where God

actually works.

Those big green trees will be brought low, that dry tree, the one that you're about to cut down.

That's the one that God is actually going to make green, that's where God works.

And in the Gospel reading from Mark 4, Jesus says that God works this way.

He said, it's like somebody takes seed, a farmer, scatter some seed on the ground.

And the farmer goes to sleep, the farmer wakes up, the farmer goes about his life, and

the seed just grows on its own and he has no idea how it happens.

Verse 26, he would sleep and rise, night and day in the seed, it would sprout and grow,

he does not know how.

The farmer's not going out to the little plot of earth and saying, hey, seed, you can do it.

Try harder.

Grow.

The seed just grows and the farmer has no idea how it happens.

And in 2 Corinthians 5, St. Paul says to this Christian community in the 1st century that

we're tempted to see people from a human point of view, he says in verse 16, a human

point of view, we tend to look on the outside, but actually God looks at the heart and knows

what's going on on the inside.

So all these things are about the fact that we tend to focus on the exterior where we

think God is working, the shiny, happy places, but God is actually working in the dark and

in the difficult places, the things that we would overlook, the places you cannot see.

God is working in the people you don't like.

God is working in the family situations you would not have chosen.

God is working in the reversal, in the diagnosis that has shocked you.

God is working in your life crumbling, actually God can work there.

Maybe that sounds dramatic, maybe your life is not crumbling, but I bet there is some

thing where you have tried to fix yourself for a long time and it hasn't worked.

If it has great, but I would bet that if you are someone who procrastinated in high school,

you are probably still an adult who files their taxes on April 17th.

If you are someone whose backpack always had permission slips jammed in the bottom and

you had to make a phone call on the day of the field trip, you are probably still living

in that mode a little bit.

If you are someone who has dealt with anxiety or depression, as Churchill called it, the black dog, that black dog probably still comes and visits you from time to time.

If you are someone who always buys books and never reads them, you are probably still

buy books and they are stacked up on your bedside table.

These are areas of life where we want to get better and here is the thing, many preachers

and secular folks, motivational speakers will give you tips and tricks about how to through

your effort, improve yourself and make yourself the person you want to be to just do it.

But I find that people are not just doing it.

I find people more or less stay the same and if they do improve, it is often a two steps

forward, five steps back off the edge of the cliff.

I heard recently an interview with Rick Rubin, a brilliant music producer, he is the one

that took the Beastie Boys from relative obscurity to great fame, made hip hop really a global force

with many other people, but he was right there on the ground floor.

He is the one that produced everybody from Johnny Cash to Slayer, the avid brothers.

Johnny Cash's career was resurrected almost single handedly by Rick Rubin.

Rick, in this interview, was talking about his recent physical transformation.

He lost about 135 pounds, has gone to very clean eating, he lives in this house, overlooking

the sea in Malibu, sort of has this yogic retreat feeling in Rick's house.

And the interview asked him, how did you make this transformation? It's incredible.

And he said, well, you know, I found this doctor who was just an expert in sort of living

healthily and I invited him to live in my house for two years.

He helped me watch what I ate and monitor my sleep and all these things.

And then I also hired a nutritionist to also come consult and sort of be on a retainer.

You know, I could reach him 24-7 and he helped me really fine tune my diet.

I bought a sauna, there was a big sauna in my house and an ice pool and the podcast I heard

on this interview, every 15 minutes it took a break.

They recorded it in the sauna.

This is the level of commitment.

And then he would get up, they'd take a break, go to the ice bath,

come back, and like
Garrett, you do this, you have one of those, so we have our staff meetings.
And so his interview asked him all these things about how he did it, he explained this process
and then he asked him, well, what did you learn through this process, this incredible transformation that you underwent?
He said, well, I learned that really if you put your mind to it, anybody can change.
As long as you have a live-in doctor, a giant sauna and a nutritionist for whom you are their only client, anybody can do it.
I was like, great, come on, man.
Most people don't have those things at their disposal and most people therefore are not transformed.
And this is where I think most of us get a little confused by the church because the church says anybody can do it.
You can get better, but then the church seems to assume that you have some metaphysical strength that you don't actually have, some stick-tuitiveness that you seem to lack.
And this is why I feel like it is such good news that the church is here not to give you more things to do on your exhausting treadmill, but the church is here to remind you of the grace of God.
And that God works in dark places, in difficult places, in surprising places.
God works in the parts of your life that you thought he wasn't present.
And that's where he's actually working, the areas of your lack, your failure, your difficulty.
That's where God is at work.
The little twig, not the big tree, the seed under the ground.
That's where God is at work, in the dark.
Mary Carr is a seventh generation Texan on her mother's side, fifth on her dad's side.
She's a best-selling author, memoirist and poet.
She's kind of a big deal.
Mary Carr grew up with a lot of trauma and she said a dysfunctional family is any family with more than one person in it.
So maybe that applies to some of you.
In her late 20s or early 30s, her career was beginning to take off.
She was a professor at Harvard and also lectured at other schools in the Boston area.
She was the kind of person that would give poetry readings, people

would come to hear her
read her books.
She was beginning to get a well-known name in her field.
She also had a young son.
She was raising as a single parent.
And she not only had the full-time job of being an academic professor
and writer in the
full-time job of being a single parent, she also had the full-time job
of being an alcoholic.
And she is now a person who is sober and when asked how she got sober,
she did not say
what I hired an nutritionist to live in my house or get a son or
anything.
She said the thing that really worked for me was that my son was
really sick all the
time.
She was raising this infant and toddler and he was the kind of kid
that just was always
picking up whatever germ was going around and he just couldn't ever
really beat it.
He just always had the runny nose.
He was always sick.
He was never sleeping.
He was always crying.
It was just a very difficult time for her and for him.
And she said if I had had a perfect child, I would not have gotten
sober.
But I realized it was so much work to care for this child.
I realized I couldn't do it all.
I couldn't have those three full-time jobs.
And so she said that's what got me into the church basements with the
bad coffee and
the chain smokers.
These annoying recovered alcoholics who were so obnoxious with their
high-marry, these
nice people.
It just made her sick.
And then they wanted to talk about prayer and getting on your knees
and praying to God.
She did not believe it.
But the person said it's not, don't pray for God.
Pray for yourself.
And even if you don't believe it, it's fine.
Just get on your knees and say at the beginning of the day, help me be
sober.
At the end of the day, I say thank you for helping me not drink today.
And the funniest thing being happened.
She transformed.
She became into someone who by the grace of God, not because of her
own efforts, but because

of the falling apart of everything, she became the person who now says that that's when her life began.
She went from being a dead person to being a live person, not through her own efforts.
Because she tried those.
She tried the all-only drink beer, all-only drink wine, all-only drink with friends, all-only drink by myself, all-only drink on a weekend.
She tried all that.
And none of that worked.
But coming to a place at the end of herself, that dark place, that hidden place.
She found God and healing.
So this is what I'm talking about.
This is what the spiritual life is like.
It is not in the shiny places and the victorious places.
It's at the end of your rope, is where God works.
That God works in places where you're not in control.
And God works in the dark places you cannot see.
Now if that's not true for you, if you are the person who is going to the gym and has
an organized garage and whose yard is free of weeds and who reads all the books you buy
and gets eight hours of uninterrupted sleep per evening and makes it to church every Sunday
and volunteers at the soup kitchen and as a parent who never fails to show patience and
grace to any spilled milk or forgotten homework who calls your aging parents every day.
And if you are a person who maintains equanimity and poise in every situation and never loses
their temper at a driver.
If you are a person like Garrett, then this is not for you.
That's two.
I can't do anymore.
I'm not going to pick on you anymore.
But if you are not like that, then you're someone who needs a savior.
And I know a guy.
Let us pray.
Oh, my God.
Thank you for working in the dark and in the surprising places and where we are not in
control.
Help us to find you or help in time of need.
We pray in Christ's name, Amen.