

Sunday, March 11, 2012: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

## **"You're a preacher, I can tell," the woman said to me. "But not yet."**

by [Casey Thompson](#) in the [March 7, 2012](#) issue

A year before my ordination I shadowed a seasoned pastor as he visited some of the saints of our church at a care facility in Austell, Georgia. We went from door to door and sat and listened and prayed.

"We have one more to see," said my companion as he stepped into the elevator. "Miss Fraser. She's normally unresponsive, but we'll check on her."

We exited the elevator and stepped into a semicircle of wheelchairs in a small alcove, a kind of welcoming committee for expected visitors. No one paid us any attention. A few people knitted, a few whispered about lunch, and one spry gentleman flirted with the woman next to him.

Miss Fraser sat alone, her head dipped low, hands upon her knees. "Miss Fraser, it's Jim. Miss Fraser, I brought someone to meet you." He clutched her hands, but she looked only at her feet. "I want you to meet Casey."

After a few moments, a nurse interrupted, "She's been like that all day, Jim. We'll tell her you came."

Then Miss Fraser tilted her head up and fixated on me, her eyes vibrant. "You're a preacher, aren't you?"

"Yes, he is," Jim answered. "He's working with us for the summer."

"Yes, you're a preacher, all right. I can tell. I can see it on you." I assumed she meant like you can smell stink on a skunk.

"What's your name, young man?"

"Casey."

She smiled and caressed my hand. "You're a preacher, I can tell." She repeated it but then deflated back into silence. I thought we had lost her, but suddenly she clutched my arm and pulled me toward her. "But not yet. You're not a preacher yet. Something's holding you back. Not a preacher yet—but you will be."

She didn't say another word. Like a Delphic sibyl she slipped back into her daze, her hand lingering on my hand.

I remember this story when I reflect on what holds me back from full discipleship. In my youth I demanded signs, clear indicators that God was real and active in history and in my history in particular. Later I desired wisdom, wisdom that speaks to the deep reservoirs of human experience but which I could use for my own lightweight purpose—my need to feel superior, the satisfaction that comes from seeing how forces shape my environment, the security won by being a step ahead.

Miss Fraser, the oracle of Austell, discerned something deeper. Perhaps what she saw was that even in my embryonic witness as a preacher, I might convince others that God was real by being a sign of God's movement in the world. But if others heard God through my words, that would be even better. If I suggested that there is something larger in life to which we should aspire, perhaps others would see the Spirit move through me as I preached. If I plumbed the depths of wisdom, delivering pointed commentary on how power structures frustrate the aims of God and prompting the congregation to turn over those power structures, perhaps they would see the path of discipleship more clearly. If I knew the intricacies of modern psychology, coupling its wisdom with the plainspoken advice of proverbs and parables, perhaps I could save them from the frustrations of broken relationships, and they would give God the glory.

But Paul asks powerful questions of all of us who would speak of Christ. "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" Indeed, there are none wiser than Christ. He has made foolish the wisdom of our world.

Consider his biography. He chose the weakest path to exclaim the power of God. He was born in a manger, but the heavens sang. He was hunted by a tyrant but protected by flimsy visions in the night. He hungered for 40 days but afterward was waited on by angels. He was scorned and threatened with death but passed through the crowds without resorting to violence. He proceeded to his throne on the back of

a donkey. He was arrested but healed his adversary. He was deserted by his followers but used that as the impetus for their second conversion. He was convicted in a miscarriage of justice and tortured, but even crucifixion—the worst of our machinations, the most powerful weapon we could turn against him—was simply a prelude to his breaking the power of death.

Here is our sign: an empty tomb we will never see. Here is our wisdom, handed on by those who came before us: the greatest powers at our disposal are overcome by the weakest expression of God imaginable.

Christ's biography becomes our story: "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

It seems foolish until we begin to trust in this truth: signs and wisdom are bankrupt ideologies compared to the way of God, the way that overcomes everything, even our misperceptions of who we are or should be. I know that God has not brought to completion the good work started in me and that my conversion into the ways of God continues, but I know that God is working. You may not be the person God is calling you to be either. But you will be.