

Place your fingers gently on your neck...Feel that pulsing? That's a sign of life, a vital sign. When going for an annual physical exam, that's one of the first things examined—checking for a pulse and blood pressure, along with measuring height and weight, temperature, and results from any blood tests.

Vital signs are also helpful if one arrives on the scene of an auto accident to determine whether life remains, about whether to begin life-saving procedures. If one arrives and finds a weak pulse, one could administer CPR, hoping to prolong life until medical care arrives.

It appears that the disciple Peter was checking vital signs as he traveled from town to another. When he arrived at Lydda, he encountered Aeneas who had been stuck in a bed for eight years due to paralysis. A doctor might have used one of those little hammers to check his reflexes as a vital sign, but Peter bypassed the exam and told the man, "Get up and make your bed, for Jesus had healed you."

Next, Peter arrived in the coastal town of Joppa, the same place where hundreds of years earlier the prophet Jonah began his adventure in trying to run away from God. Jonah tried to ignore God's invitation to help those

he believed had no vital signs, for Jonah considered them enemies. Peter, however, did not run away from an invitation, and he discovered life even where no vital signs seemed to exist.

Peter had heard of the death of a woman named Tabitha, though in the common Greek language of the day, she was known as Dorcas, a name meaning Gazelle. Dorcas was described as a disciple, the feminine form of the same word used to describe the twelve disciples of Jesus, including Peter who now encountered two men who came to get him. "Please hurry up and come with us."

This request seems a bit odd, for the narrator has already told us that Dorcas had become ill and died. Her body had already been washed and laid in a room for the funeral. Going from Lydda where the men met Peter to the town of Joppa is about a half hour drive today, which would have been a much more extensive walking trip in Peter's day. What did those two have in mind when inviting Peter to hurry and up to get to Dorcas?

Maybe they wanted Peter to offer kind words at her funeral, for she was well known for her acts of compassion for those in need. When he arrived, the other

women showed Peter the beautiful clothing Dorcas had made as they expressed their grief and cried. Something strange is going on here. More than just the ordinary. As Methodist Bishop William Willimon commented on this story:

Here in this new community no one stays in his or her place. Common fishermen are preaching to the temple authorities, paralyzed old men are up and walking about and changing lives, and a woman called Gazelle heads a welfare program among the poor at Joppa. In her work Tabitha is busy making a new configuration of power in which God uses what is lowly and despised in the world to bring [something new].¹

Somehow those around Tabitha saw in her creative work a sign of God's presence, which is something blogger Nell wrote about as she reflected on her time sewing after leaving her face-paced life as a lawyer:

It's cold out. It's winter. My children are both napping. I do what I always do to reconnect with myself and God: I sew. I'm sewing. I love sewing. I live to sew...

I took a turn toward sewing during my third trimester of my second pregnancy. I was inspired by wanting to make gifts for friends and their babies. I did not realize I would be giving myself a gift. The gift of space. The gift of time. The

gift of making a little room in my life for me, and in turn, for me to connect with God.

I hadn't realized that in my hustle and bustle, hurried night-time prayers and Sunday [church] obligations, there was no place for God in my consciousness. I hadn't cleared a chair off for [God], much less the entire room of my heart.

I'm sitting in an old office chair, huddled over yards of fabric and muttering to myself while ripping out a seam gone awry...

When I sit down at my sewing machine, frowning slightly at my troublesome project at hand, or flicking through my fabrics for the right one, I'm sitting down inside myself. I'm opening my hands and waiting for God.

And [God] comes for a visit, as...always..., just awaiting our invitation. And the repetition of the needle up down up down mimics the steady beating of my lub-dub heart as it simply sits in [God].²

Somehow through sewing for others, Nell and Tabitha both discovered the presence of God and reflected that through their creativity. As theologian Frederick Buechner recognized:

If you lose yourself in your work, you find who you are. If you express the best you have in you in your work, it is

more than just the best you have in you that you are expressing.³

I think Buechner recognized that the best in you is the presence of God, which finds expression in how you live your life and what you do for others. How might you express your love for God in what you do? Maybe in raising your children. Moms often have a way of encouraging their children to sense God's presence, and today on Mother's Day we give thanks for moms giving us life. Maybe you have expressed your trust in God through your career. In mowing the lawn or cleaning this church. In cooking meals. In making music. In creating art. In tending your yard or garden.

This graceful woman, known as Tabitha or Dorcas, was a like Gazelle that gracefully moved among her community through her skill of sewing for others. Peter sensed the deep love for Tabitha from those who gathered to mourn her loss. In response, Peter did something surprising—he told everyone to leave the

room, which may have seemed rude to those who were mourning. Peter seemed to follow the example of Jesus, who also asked everyone to leave the room before healing someone. Interestingly, no one had asked Peter to heal her. They hadn't asked for a miracle. They may not have even expected anything amazing to happen, but Peter was so moved by the stories about this woman that he did something unexpected—he brought life back to one that everyone thought was dead. Even with no vital signs, he saw life.

As one commentary noted,

At first glance, Peter may seem the headliner in this story, the disciple who is summoned and then comes to the rescue of a saintly woman who has died. Look more closely. The true headliner of this story is neither Peter nor Dorcas. It is God, who uses Peter to restore Dorcas to life.⁴

Whether or not you sew, use your gifts and talents to reflect the healing presence of God, one who can bring life in those places that feel dead. It's through God that vital signs can show life.

¹ William Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 84.

² <https://motheringspirit.com/2013/01/how-i-nurture-my-mothering-spirit-nell/>

³ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized* (Harper & Row, 1988), 113.

⁴ Marianne Blickenstaff, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*.