

Apostle at my door (Matthew 5:13-20)

by [Mitchell Hay](#) in the [January 27, 1999](#) issue

*You are salt to the world. And if salt becomes tasteless, how is its saltiness to be restored? It is good for nothing but to be thrown away and trodden underfoot.*

I guess I have to blame it all on Robert Duvall. *The Apostle* had just come out on video and I watched it late one evening. Duvall's portrayal of the scoundrel/saint giving his whole salty self to a calling from God had me questioning the somewhat comfortable nature of my pastoral ministry. So when a stranger showed up on the doorstep of the parsonage two days later, announcing meekly that he was here on a mission from God, my guard was down. "Come on in, would you like some coffee?" I mumbled in as noncommittal a way as I could manage.

Daniel explained that he had bicycled from his home in Alabama. He said that God, through a series of dreams and visions and experiences, had told him to ride north with a message for the nation. I looked out at the flowers in front of the church, now desiccated stalks, felled by the first hard frost. "Are you sure God isn't thinking about sending you back south? You're about as far north as you can get and stay in the country. It's going to be getting cold," I said.

Over coffee, Daniel said that God had told him to share a message for "folks to love each other" because "Jesus Christ died for their sins because of his love for us." Under my black coffee, I tasted salt--sharp and invigorating. Part of me was bemused by this scene--the rural pastor having coffee with the would-be bicycle prophet. Part of me was unexpectedly jealous--why does my relationship with God feel so much more ambiguous and elusive than Daniel's? Part of me wondered if this encounter wasn't precisely the way God planned to shore up our tenuous relationship. Maybe I just had to be open to God's ironic movement of the moment. Or maybe Robert Duvall had just made me gullible.

As Daniel continued describing some of his dreams and messages, I waited to hear the visions of damnation and lakes of fire that I expected from modern traveling prophets. But they never came up. His was a simple story of a simple man for whom the love of Jesus had defeated the demons of alcohol and, I hazarded to guess,

mental illness. His demeanor was completely disarming. When he asked if he could speak the next Sunday at the worship service, my mouth said yes before my more cautious judgment could protest.

Daniel got up from the table, headed to the door and said simply "Pray for me" by way of good-bye. As he rode away, my worries both for and about this man came crashing down on me. Where is he staying? Will he be warm and dry? Is he dangerous? I thought of Sunday's service and the unknown liturgical variable he brought. "Shout aloud without restraint; lift up your voice like a trumpet. Declare to the people their transgression . . ." Isaiah sounds safely churchy chained to the lectern, but a real prophet on the loose is a terrible thing to contemplate.

When Sunday came Daniel shyly stood up during the prayers of the people and quietly spoke. I thought of Paul on his first preaching trip to Corinth: "When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling."

After worship that day, the Sunday schools of our churches hosted their annual picnic to kick off the fall programs. In the midst of sack races and accordion-led hymns, Daniel's presence added a nervous novelty to the event. People reached out to him with heaps of potluck and practical advice. They listened attentively, their eyes glancing to the side only when his stories seemed to skirt the fuzzy line between revelation and hallucination. Almost to a person, they replied, "Are you sure God isn't telling you to head back south before it gets cold?" Whenever they offered, he made it clear he didn't want any money or a place to stay. "I feel closer to God under the stars."

Daniel stopped by the parsonage almost every day over the next two weeks. He seemed to find some calm in telling and retelling his story, like someone who rubs a worrystone. He continually asked us to pray for him. Spiritual stuff. He asked about my interpretation of his visions. I asked him if he wanted polypropylene underwear and a small camp stove for warding off the morning frost.

I wanted to be a useful part of his quest or mission or whatever it was. But I didn't want to get sucked in too deep. I played it safe. I waded into his world up to my ankles and proceeded to offer him *stuff*. I was unwilling to engage him where he wanted me to--in the language of visions and dreams and conversing directly with

the divine presence. Daniel's first words to me each morning were, "Did you pray on what we talked about yesterday?" And my first words to him were, "Did you stay warm enough last night?" Both of us were frustrated that we couldn't meet in the same place. *Why, Jesus, do you have to show up in someone so different from me?*

Daniel, in a place filled with demons, had heard the voice of the Lord offer him something better: Be salt. Be light. The offer came with costs. He would ride, he would be poor, he would be homeless, he would be seen as less than fully sane. But he said yes anyway. Fully, unreservedly, Daniel was willing to give all of himself to be salt and light. I hope in my place and circumstance and time, I will do the same.