



“Blinded by the Light”

a sermon by

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Our Scripture lesson for this afternoon comes from Acts 9:1-19. As we continue to look at the formation and life of the early church from a post-Easter perspective, we come to a turning point in Luke's narrative with the conversion of Saul and the initiation of the Gentile mission, where the disciples would begin to undertake the part of Christ's commission to them to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. Just before this passage is the conversion of an Ethiopian Eunuch, which follows the violent stoning of the disciple Stephen, who spoke out against the council of high priests for denying God's law in Christ in order to preserve themselves. As Stephen breathed his last, our author introduces a new character into the mix, Saul, also known as Paul, saying that he approved of Stephen's death and played a part in the severe persecution of the church that began in Jerusalem by, to quote Luke, "ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, and committing them to prison."

"Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." But the Lord said to him, "God, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength."

Paul's conversion is probably the most famous account of conversion in Christianity. Everyone loves a good conversion story and this is among the best, spinning off of it such colloquialisms as 'seeing the light' and having a 'Damascus road' experience, the story being mainstreamed onto virtually every story board in Vacation Bible School history. The story is so familiar, in fact, that I myself was tempted to skip over it in our survey through the book of Acts - but as is so often the case - it is usually at the point when you feel like you are in your 30th year of marriage with a text that you realize you have only just begun to honeymoon. And this passage is no exception.

It is a big deal that Paul should encounter Jesus on that road to Damascus. You probably know the history, but let us refresh our memories. Paul was at home in Tarsus, the center of Greek culture and trade, the seat of stoic Philosophy. He was raised in a strict Jewish home and taught out of the tradition of the Pharisees, emphasizing ritual purity, adherence to the law, and a posture of reverence for your elders. He went to Rabbinical School in Jerusalem and was insatiable in his hatred for the people of the Way, who taught that the fulfillment of the Hebrew scriptures, the Messiah for God's chosen people, was Jesus, who was dead. This would have been a profanation to him, and he grew in his reputation among believers as someone to be hated and feared. It could be argued that he was single handedly responsible for scattering believers into the country of Judea and Samaria, for fear of his presence in Jerusalem. He was so convicted of his cause that he requested letters from synagogues in the surrounding areas permitting him to bring any Christian back to Jerusalem for trial if he caught them- at distances of up to 150 miles - a long haul for a cause if you are on foot or donkey.

He didn't ask for Jesus to come into his life - quite the contrary, actually. And yet come into his life Jesus did, with a force that knocked him to the ground and a blinding light that shocked his eyes into submission. The call to Paul, 'Saul, Saul,' was of the same form that had been spoken to Abraham- 'Abraham, Abraham!', and to Jacob, and to Moses and, being well versed in the Hebrew tradition and a good Jew himself, Paul knew it was the Lord that spoke - but could not identify when he had persecuted the Lord God. It would not have been in his books - that line where God says 'that which you do to even the least of these, you do unto me.' And then there was the shock - the shock of his life, I would imagine. God's voice, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and go ..." He didn't want this church, and as we'd see in Ananias' response to God's call to meet Paul, the church sure didn't want him. But Jesus was alive - Jesus was alive - that meant he was the Messiah. Paul's conversion was in God's hands, and it turned quickly to commission. The drive for seeking success in the misery of the disciples transformed to a quest to spread the significance of this new gospel. Doesn't it just drip with irony? But God wasn't being ironic. Even though when Paul received his true sight, he was blinded for three days. And for three days after realizing the bread of life, he neither ate nor drank. This certainly didn't fit into Paul's plan - but it sure fit in to God's.

When I try to imagine what had to have been running through Paul's mind when Jesus came to him on that long road, I cannot help but think back to C.S. Lewis' description of his own experience of conversion at age 31. The story may be familiar to some but it bears repeating. There was no blinding flash of light, no voice from above, but there was the unexpected approach of that which he had resisted for so long. He writes the following: "You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen College, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in

every direction for a chance of escape? The words *compelle intrare*, compel them to come in, have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them; but, properly understood, they plumb the depth of the Divine mercy. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.”

The compulsion of God - the beckoning of Jesus. The approach of that which he tried so hard not to meet. The conviction sent from Savior to Saul that he was persecuting the very God he sought so hard to protect, the realization that his life was no longer his own and that the thing he hated most would become the most important thing in his life. Is it any wonder that the element of blindness should be relegated to the sidelines of our storytelling? When this whole story is about gaining new sight, and extending God’s vision of love to the ends of the earth and the empowerment of a new ministry, I find it striking, the response, “Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”

For three days he went without sight. We tend to think of conversion in an instrumentalist or reductionist kind of way. It is that which everyone should aspire to, and the benefits are unlimited. See Jesus and your problems will be solved. Accept Christ into your life and your questions will be answered. Have more faith and good things will happen. Walk with God, and your path will stretch out clear before you. And yet, the first step for Paul is blindness. Incapacity. A total inability to tend to himself and reliance upon the words of a Messiah he did not know, finding healing at the hands of those he did not trust and who he had despised and harmed. Jesus’ appearance to Paul gives him no other choice but to believe and surrender his own mission to God’s, so too does his blindness give him no choice but to submit to the direction of Lord and to the care of the community of faith.

As theologian William Willimon puts it, “this sort of conversion involves a journey from self-confident independence toward child-like dependence. The one who knows so much must become as one who knows nothing, one who must be led by the hand, healed, and instructed by the very ones he once despised. In this painful, baffling interim we turn and become as a little child. We progress by regression and go forward by falling backward. Such turning and helpless regression, accompanied by blindness, confusion, speechlessness, hunger, and childishness is, for this peculiar faith, the very beginning of wisdom.”

Perhaps you have been blinded by the presence of God like Paul. Or maybe blind sided by faith like C.S. Lewis. Perhaps you find yourself along a Damascus road, or stumbling, starving, in the dark, and realizing that faith is less about finding answers than it is about having questions. Perhaps you find yourself reconciling with an enemy being called by God to be your brother, or grappling with the fact that submitting to God does not always promise clarity of vision or direction for your life or an easy journey and, in fact, usually means quite the opposite. But wherever you fill Paul’s shoes in this narrative, the power is in the presence of God. When horror fiction writer Steven King was asked about his approach to his writing he replied, “I like to lead you around a corner, and leave you in the dark.” Ours is not a God who simply savors divine ironies, but is a God that understands the power of days in the dark upon our lives. Paul was converted into an understanding that we worship a God who will lead you around unexpected

corners and may very well guide you into the dark, but promises never to leave you there for such a place is not an end in itself, but for the ends of carrying out God's work to the ends of the earth.

After all, it was his three days in the darkness of a tomb that brought salvation and freedom for eternity, blinding and blind-siding the world with a love that it will never recover from. And so it is our great challenge to trust and to submit, and to follow where we are led for Jesus meets us on every road to call us to discipleship, and the work of the kingdom is at hand.