

“Eyes Closed”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 13, 2021

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 30:2-12

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 9:1-20

We skip ahead in the book of Acts from the second chapter – and the story of Pentecost, the birth of the church – to here in the ninth chapter and the dramatic conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus; possibly the best-known story of being called and transformed in all of scripture.

The first time readers hear about Saul, Luke tells us that he was standing guard over the coats of those who would brutally execute the apostle Stephen. But, he’s not just a passive witness. Saul is portrayed as the early church’s arch-persecutor, tracking down and dragging off both women and men to shut them behind bars.

Of course, Acts was written by a Christian for other Christians. Thus, Luke’s readers already know who this man Saul is; they know what amazing turns his life will take. They – and we – know how the movie ends. But, by introducing him this way, Luke highlights the complete U-turn that Saul’s life is about to take. In doing so, he draws a portrait of Christian calling that continues to shape how we understand God’s graceful – but not always subtle or easy – work in and through our lives.¹

Many see this story as being about a villain struck down by a flash of light; the voice of Jesus calling him out. We tend to assume that Saul is the bad guy in the story. But is he? It’s important to remember that Saul sees himself as the good guy trying to protect his faith. Saul loves God; when he breathes “threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” Saul acts as God’s champion going after “bad Jews.” He asks for letters that will give him authority to conduct his policing in Damascus, to clean up his own faith community and get rid of the straying, unrighteous ones.

Saul is the classic example of the devout person who is so determined to do good that they are blinded (literally) to the destructive consequences of their purity campaign. He does harm as he is trying to do good. His one-track focus on righteousness narrows

¹ Eric Barreto from *WorkingPreacher.org*

rather than expands his vision of what God is up to. He is so convinced of the error of others that he cannot see the new thing that God is doing in Jesus Christ.²

At the beginning of chapter 9, Saul is continuing to persecute the faithful followers of Jesus, known as the people of “The Way.” There is a rich irony, of course, that Saul travels great distances chasing these followers of the Way, only to be struck down on the way to Damascus. The Way is a powerful metaphor for Christian identity – even today. Instead of being known for a set of beliefs, these communities were known by their character in the world. Christian faith was a way of life; one that often compelled individuals and communities to leave the safe confines of home to walk on the road that God has set out. “The Way” implies an active, living faith.

But what Saul does not yet know is that the road to Damascus has changed; it is space now inhabited by the Spirit of the Lord. Saul pursues, but he is also being pursued. Saul turns from defending the name of the Lord to serving Jesus. He has crossed the line that separates the Christian faith from all others. He hears the voice of Jesus, the crucified God; a voice that asks Saul why he has sought to persecute *him*. When Saul afflicts the faithful, he actually persecutes Jesus himself.

What happens on the road to Damascus is that Saul changes from seeing to being blinded; or maybe his lack of vision has now fully been revealed. He changes from a man who intends to lead captives back to Jerusalem in chains to one who needs to be led into Damascus by others. He changes from a man on a clearly focused mission to one who must wait to learn what to do next. He changes from a man exercising great power over the church to one who is overpowered by Jesus.³

God certainly works in unusual ways in the book of Acts. Instead of continuing to give instructions from the clouds, Jesus calls upon a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. Naturally, he resists these instructions; for he also knows about Saul, and understands that even being in Saul’s presence could be a death sentence. But in one brief sentence, Jesus reveals to Ananias the nature of Saul’s new calling. He will bring the gospel to both kings and Gentiles. And he will suffer for the sake of the gospel.

Here, in brief form, we learn what shape Saul-who-becomes-Paul’s ministry will take in the remaining chapters of Acts. In doing so, Luke also reveals what is central to the gospel. The good news can be expansive and broad, reaching to the farthest corners

² Amy Oden from *WorkingPreacher.org*

³ Matthew Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*

of the world seeking the lost; but God also turns to the powerful of the world and demands justice and peace. Yet, this good news often comes with a price; a price we must consider whether we are willing to embrace as Jesus' disciples.

Ananias is granted the ability to see another person's future. God shows him the road that Saul will travel. He must overcome his fear of who he knows Saul to be in order to follow what Jesus is telling him to do. Often, this is the role we are likely to be called to play: we may not be the one who experiences total transformation, who makes the complete U-turn in our lives; but instead are the ones who encourage or assist others in making change. This is where discipleship – truly being a follower of Jesus – causes us to reorder our knowledge. The truth we assume about a person, or of people, must move to the background; and what we know of God's desire for them must move into the foreground.

Ananias lays his hands on Saul and calls him "Brother;" then something like scales fall from Saul's eyes and he can see again. Here is where Ananias disappears from the story, his work is done. Nevertheless, he was there for the crucial time of blindness when someone could not see their way and did not know their future. Luke makes sure that we see the courageous actions of this disciple, even if Saul does not.⁴

Paul – of course – will go on to become Christ's chosen vessel; the same word is used here in Acts as Paul himself employs in his second letter to the church at Corinth, saying that the treasure of the gospel of Christ is to be found in "earthenware vessels." (2 Cor. 4:7) Paul sees himself as a clay pot; an easily disposable, everyday object that is chosen for the most important of tasks; to carry the good news of the death and resurrection of Christ to the Gentile world. With this detail that Saul is a "cracked pot," Luke paints a picture of the greatest of the apostles by reminding us that God repeatedly chooses the least likely of persons to do the great work of God: from Abraham to Jacob to Moses, God has odd criteria for servants. Is it so strange, then, that a persecutor of Christians should himself become one?⁵

Saul's temporary blindness can help us to see the ways that sometimes our religious commitments – or political or ideological or historical – can keep us from seeing the new thing God is up to; causing us to question who should be counted in a census, or allowed to participate in youth sports. How do we, like Saul, narrow rather than expand God's work of justice, peace, and reconciliation in the world? What – amid

⁴ Willie James Jennings, Acts from "Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible"

⁵ John Holbert, "The Cracked Pot Saul" from *Patheos.com*

our good intentions – do we misread or misjudge? And how does the church – our congregation as well as the larger Christian community – miss opportunities to advance the true cause of the gospel: to share the promise and possibility of life in abundance; because our vision is restricted?

It is always good practice to wonder whether our zeal has been misdirected or even become destructive. God may ask us to do difficult things and go to unexpected places. Sometimes, our partners in this work will be the very people that we are most likely to exclude; possibly even those who regard us as enemies. We are called to be not only like Saul – whose closed eyes are opened; but, also, like Ananias – who placed God's leading ahead of his own discomfort and fear, even of death. The church – the people of the Way – are called to live this way. All so that the gospel can be shared; in word and in deed. Amen.