

May 5, 2019

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*"Seeing the Light"*

## THE INTRODUCTION TO THE READING

The season of the church year following Easter Sunday is called "Eastertide." These are the Sundays, leading up to his Ascension into heaven, in which we often hear the stories of the Risen Christ appearing to the disciples: for example, Thomas, Peter, and the couple on the Road to Emmaus.

The Revised Common Lectionary, used by most Protestant denominations including the United Church of Christ, also adds passages from the book of Acts to the list of readings for each of the Sundays during this season. These stories tell us how the news of Jesus' resurrection spread *beyond* the disciples, who was converted in the process, and how the Church went forward in the power of the Holy Spirit. Today's text is one of these.

Luke, the author of Acts, is recounting the call of Saul. Saul was one mean dude! He described himself as "furiously enraged" against the church, and he methodically persecuted those early believers – otherwise known as followers of *The Way*. But after the experience that we are going to hear, Saul profoundly changed – not only his name – and all Paul's zeal was poured into the mission of love that the Lord Jesus entrusted to him.

For our benefit as the church of today, let's listen carefully to Acts 9:1-20.

## THE READING - Acts 9:1-20

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup>He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' <sup>5</sup>He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup>But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.'

<sup>7</sup>The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

<sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' <sup>11</sup>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, <sup>12</sup>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.'

<sup>13</sup>But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; <sup>14</sup>and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.'

<sup>15</sup>But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; <sup>16</sup>I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.'

<sup>17</sup> 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.' <sup>18</sup>And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup>and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, <sup>20</sup>and immediately Paul began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'

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## SERMON

The refrain of the old Hank Williams song fits with today's reading:

*I saw the light; I saw the light,  
No more darkness, no more night.  
Now I'm so happy, no sorrow in sight.  
Praise the Lord; I saw the light!!*

**"Seeing the Light" is a way that Christians describe the joy of coming to faith and following the Risen Christ.** The singer is rejoicing that the Living One is in his life and has

changed it. His sentiment is like that felt by the Hebrew people when they followed the God-given pillar of fire out of Egypt into the Promised Land – they rejoiced when they saw it – and then in Acts 7, by the disciple Stephen as he breathed his last in martyrdom, at peace seeing the glory of Christ shining before him. (Saul was present at that occasion – guarding the coats of those who were throwing the stones.)

Sometimes the Light of Christ is **subtle and gentle**; I think of John 1, often symbolized by candlelight in an unlit sanctuary: “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” At other times in scripture, however, the Light of Christ is **undomesticated - wild**; I recall the flames of the Spirit that landed on the early Christians at Pentecost!

During my ministry in Seattle, I listened in pastoral care amazement as a young man in the hospital told me of his divine vision. This very experienced skier had hit a snag on the slopes and landed on his head! He told me how God had come to him, looking like a powerful, searing, orange/yellow light in front, around, and within him, helping him to recover. *He saw the Light!*

Similar drama met Saul on the road to Damascus. The glory of the Risen Christ merged with the sun, and Saul had to hang on for dear life! *This Light* was bright and blinding. I think of those times when there have been record-breaking days of rain and gray, overcast skies, and the weather people warn us to wear sunglasses on our commute on the first sunny day since the light could cause accidents; only this was, I guess, ten times more bright!

Saul had been working hard to follow the Law of God; he was a man very tied to religious rules. Being right on the Law must have helped him feel close to God, but my guess is that somehow this approach wasn't working for him as it used to, so when he heard of these Jesus followers, it *really* angered him and, in order to feel close to God anew, he amped up his zeal, going after Jesus' followers in hate. Saul didn't grab a weapon for a shooting spree, but he carried this same evil intent in his heart. To stop him and to use him, God had to get his attention by extraordinary means!

This story certainly reminds us that people *can* change! Even a horrible terrorist like Saul! But it sometimes takes incredible circumstances to bring any of us to our knees! Saul saw the Light, but at this stage of his journey, it brought him no happiness, in contrast to the refrain of our earlier song.

**So another feature of seeing the Light of the Risen Christ and accepting this incredible Good News– is that it provokes a period of NOT seeing.** In other words, before you and I can see clearly, we can expect a stint of confusion!

My call to ministry, for example, began when I was *not* certain about what to do vocationally. Growing up in church, I had seen the Christ Light, and now I was in college, following a well-thought-out plan to become an architect, but after a couple of years of prerequisites, I felt this track suited me less and less, and it was all quite disconcerting, terrifying even, for one who really liked things sewn up. For six months, I wandered

uncomfortably in this 'wilderness,' until my minister in the campus church asked me a question: "Have you ever considered ministry?"

You also may have experienced a degree of stress during this TriCon transition – a long time in preliminary work and two pastoral searches. I know very well how uneasy it is to be off-balance, unsure of your destination! And anxiety often pushes a group to a quick, premature solution, but in the long run, faithful waiting and work together strengthens congregations, grounding them as they decide upon and welcome new leadership.

Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann offers a helpful rubric from his study of the Psalms: the life of faith unfolds along a sequence from 1) orientation, 2) through *disorientation*, 3) to *new orientation*.<sup>1</sup> Though it may indeed overwhelm our retinas, the Light of Christ eventually brings clarity and joy.

**People need help to navigate these stages. This is where the church comes in.**

After the bright light and the puzzling voice, Saul could not see, so like a toddler – imagine! – he had to hold hands with the soldiers who had accompanied him on his mission, until they got him into town and into lodging. He couldn't do for himself and didn't know how long this would last. But the Risen Christ communicated with Ananias, a member of the church in Damascus, as they both were praying.

Initially, Ananias balked at the divine directive. After all, Saul could have been feigning blindness – a devious plot to draw Christ followers to arrest! Ananias might be opening the whole community to danger, but he trusted the Voice and the Light.

**Ananias represents the Church**, and like him, we should anticipate that God will lead people here that we don't know, into the orbit of faith through us. Like him, we must be willing to change and walk with the enemy too! In verse 13 Ananias referred to Saul as "this man." But in verse 17 when he met him and prayed over him, he called him "*Brother Saul!*" Thomas Merton remarked: "love demands a complete inner transformation – for without this we cannot possibly come to identify ourselves with our brother."<sup>2</sup>

**The Church, then, must do both what is difficult and what is easy.** Through Ananias, they laid healing hands on Saul the persecutor. Then they fed Paul, gave him drink, and baptized him. Some scholars have wondered if this feeding is also an allusion to sharing the Eucharist – the Church offering the sacraments to him.<sup>3</sup>

Working on this sermon, I remembered a soldier from Oklahoma, stationed at Fort Bragg, who briefly attended our church in Fayetteville, North Carolina. He was there to do SERE training – Survival-Evasion-Resistance-Escape – a *really* tough course! He returned to worship one Sunday after some months of it, earlier than expected. He was still in shock and

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (New York: Fortress Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions Books, 1960), 18.

<sup>3</sup>William H. Willimon, *Acts – Interpretation Bible Commentary* (New York: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 77.

totally discouraged; he could barely speak because he had failed the training. After service that Sunday, we did what we normally did: invited him to lunch with our church group, and at Ryan's Steakhouse, he looked at the food as if he had never eaten before. We respectfully sat with him in this 'blindness,' open to what he would need. We only had that day with him; he returned home, but I think as Church, we helped the 'scales' fall from his eyes enough that he could follow the Risen Christ somewhere else with joy.

**In short, it is your and my privilege as Church to accompany people as they see the Light, and to learn *together* how to live with resurrection eyes!**