

## **BLINDED BY THE LIGHT**

Sunday, May 5, 2019

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Mark D. Hostetter

Scripture: Acts 9: 1–20 and John 21: 1–19

Good morning!

Today's scripture about the conversion of Paul, his being blinded by the light, is one of the most vivid stories in the bible. Its images and metaphors have even seeped into our everyday secular language, and our music too thanks to Springsteen and Manfred Mann's Earth Band. [singing] Blinded by the light.

You know the story well. Saul was the zealous catcher and killer of Christians, a young 28-year old and full of himself. From Judea to Syria, Saul would ferret out any sympathizers, men or women or children, any followers of the Way, and bind them up and bring them to the high priests in Jerusalem. Full of threats and murder, Saul was feared far and wide by followers of Jesus. His pursuit scattered the remaining Christians in Jerusalem, and perhaps ironically caused Christianity to spread even faster.

So Saul is on his way to Damascus to try to stop the spread of Christianity there, to round up more disciples to eliminate, when suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. Saul falls to the ground, and a booming voice from heaven cries out "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you," Saul asks. The reply: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Get up and go to the city, and you will be told what to do."

All becomes quiet, Saul gets up from the ground, and discovers he has been blinded by the light. His eyes are open but he could see nothing. So his friends lead him by the hand to Damascus. Saul is without sight for three days, and neither ate nor drank. The powerful prosecutor all of a sudden powerless, the first is now last, felled by weakness, totally dependent on others.

At the same time, there was a follower of Christ in Damascus named Ananias, willing to do anything for his Lord. When God calls, Ananias answers famously, "Here I am, Lord." But when God tells him to find Saul in Damascus, at Judas' house over on Straight Street, and restore Saul's lost vision . . . well, that seems a bit much for him. "This Saul is pure evil, killing your followers in Jerusalem and now Damascus." But God tells Ananias, "I have chosen Saul to be the one to bring my name to gentiles and to kings and to all the people of Israel."

So he goes over to see Saul. He lays his hands on Saul, saying "The Lord Jesus has appeared to you on your way here, and has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

The scriptures tell us that something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and his sight was restored. He was baptized, he regained his strength, and immediately Saul – newly-born and soon-to-be newly-named Paul – began to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God.

So many powerful images in this familiar story: Blinded by the light. The first becoming the last. "Here I am, Lord." Scales falling from eyes, vision restored. Newly-born in Christ. Leadership from the most unexpected places.

I often wonder . . . wouldn't it make life a lot easier if things were always that clear. If we were blinded by the light, then scales falling from our eyes, so that there could be no doubt as to God's message for us. For us preachers, wouldn't it be great if we could make God's message that clear too? I am reminded of

the story of a brand new priest in a catholic parish, it was his first church, and just by coincidence in his first four weeks he did eight funerals. Completely overwhelmed and at his energy's end, during this marathon month he didn't have time to write his regular Sunday sermons. So each Sunday, he just used the sermon from the Sunday before – three more times! A whole month of Sundays.

Very upset, the church council went to the bishop complaining that this new pastor had used the same sermon four times in a row. The bishop asked what the sermon was about. Well, none of the council members could remember. They scratched their heads and hemmed and hawed, but for the life of them, they really couldn't remember what the sermon was about. So the bishop thought a moment, and then quietly told the council, "I think we'll let him use it one more time."

Well, I'd like to make it clear that I'm not preaching a recycled sermon this Sunday, but there are so many topics here in today's story. Three of them come to mind right away. First, there's a message about call, vocation, finding God's purpose and meaning for our way in the world. Second, there's a message about dramatic shifts in our focus, our direction, changing our perspective in response to God's intersection in our lives. And a third one too, a message about redeeming the unredeemable, forgiving the unforgivable, a righteous God working with unrighteous human beings. So let's take a look . . . .

How do we figure out what God would have us do with our lives? Saul's experience – dramatic though it may be – is not really the experience of most of us in our decision making process. If we wait for the blinding light, for the angels singing and the blare of trumpets from on high, we might miss the clues, the pointers, the confirmations of the path, the direction, the road we should travel. Sometimes we just have to act on faith. Sometimes we have to step out without knowing what's ahead. Sometimes we have to close a door when we don't know what's behind another.

This past week, we just came back from college day at our 11<sup>th</sup> grader's school. Remember those life-changing choices? Well, there was one student on a panel of seniors reflecting on her decision process. She said she was waiting for that blinding flash that would tell her which college was the perfect fit. But that flash never came. It was more like a slow ember coming to life as direction and discernment became clearer. She found the perfect fit, but it took some time, and a lot of hard work.

We're going through a whole set of searches here at First Church, looking for our new senior pastor and our new organist and choirmaster. Ghost Ranch, the national Presbyterian Center out in New Mexico, is in the midst of searching for their new executive director. Wouldn't it be nice to see the light, that blinding flash that pointed to the right answer, the right call? Maybe a single sunbeam piercing the clouds, landing on the head of the perfect candidate?

We wait, but no flash. So we look for motivation, fit, experience, skills, recommendations. We see if there's fire in the belly. We listen, we pray, we discern together. Clarity coming more like a slowly growing wave, rather than an overwhelming and cataclysmic revelation.

Or romantic love. Books, movies have us looking for that blinding light, instantaneous love at first sight, the violins and French horns lifting to crescendo. But maybe it's just that gentle hand reaching out to support us in times of need; the joy of hot chocolate and snow angels after a winter storm; just looking into the loving eyes of the one who reflects back our love.

Nature gets us close. Sunsets – how many times has a wonderful sunset brought time to a stop. Now I guess there is an elusive green flash at the moment the sun drops into the ocean at sunset. Or how about those telescope photos of black holes that were on the front page of every newspaper in the world just two weeks ago. The pictures of the most powerful forces in our universe, power that distorts space and time into eternity. The article in the New York Times called it maybe the closest thing to God science has ever

found, where physical space and even time have no meaning. I can't understand it all, but for sure it is pretty awe-inspiring.

It's been preached from this pulpit that church is really just a place where we seek glimpses of grace in our world. The strategy for worship is maybe to create space, to create thin places, for the divine-human encounter.

You know that image of thin places. A thin place is where the fabric of the barrier between God and us is so thin we can almost catch glimpses of God. The ancient Celts in Scotland came up with the concept of thin places, awe-inspiring, mystical places. For them it was like the wind-swept isle of Iona or the craggy peaks of Croagh Patrick – a place where the veil between heaven and earth, between this world and the eternal world – are thin. And it is easier to encounter the sacred. Where we are jolted out of our old ways of seeing the world.

Which brings me to a second message lurking in our story: that dramatic, 180-degree turn, that revelation that God has a different perspective than the one we previously thought was right, than the one we so zealously followed.

Last week's sermon was about doubting Thomas, and the idea that faith, at its truest core, that faith is about keeping our eyes open. And our minds open too. Open to the idea that maybe, just maybe, there's a different perspective. If we approach life with a healthy dose of humility, that maybe we don't know it all, that maybe there might be a better approach, that maybe we might be on the wrong track . . . at least we are keeping our souls open for the seeds of change that God plants in our lives. Our God has been doing this for a long, long time. And a lot has been said about this creative, active work of the Holy Spirit.

As early as Ezekiel, it's clear that work of transformation is part of our faith:

“A new heart I will give you,  
And a new spirit I will put within you;  
And I will remove from your body the heart of stone  
And give you a heart of flesh.”<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and social activist, wrote about the creative power of a limitless God acting beyond our imagination. “The theology of creativity,” Merton wrote, “will necessarily be the theology of the Holy Spirit reforming us in the likeness of Christ, raising us from death to new life, with the very same power which raised Christ from the dead and showed us that life does not end with death.”<sup>2</sup>

For Karl Rahner, that famous 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, God's grace is ever active, stirring in people a restless drive to live the “mysticism of everyday life,” in orientation to God's self-sacrificing love. Rahner writes, “Wherever there is selfless love, wherever duties are carried out and people are good without hope of reward, in all these instances the Spirit is experienced. Touching them, moving them, sometimes gently, sometimes brusquely, being in relationships that are caring and unselfish.”<sup>3</sup>

Where do we find that light, that message from God, the intention for our life's meaning? It might be in a blinding light, or in scales falling from our eyes. Or it might just be in the voice we hear in stillness. The support we feel from others. It might come in the overwhelming certainty that we are loved, that nothing can separate us from the care of our creator. But as we heard last week, we must remain open. Faith is not about certainty. Maybe it's more about openness.

God's power to transform is beyond our imagination. With God all things are possible. And that is the great hope in these post-Easter moments, the hope not so much for the world to come, but the hope for

transformation in the here and now. We are not talking here about global transformation, societal change, though that happens too. This is personal, individual. Maybe about as personal as God gets.

Shirley Guthrie, Presbyterian pastor and seminary professor, writes in his definitive work on Christian doctrine: “We can avoid all kinds of superstitious ideas about the Holy Spirit, if we think of the Spirit’s relationship with us as a personal relationship between God and ourselves.”<sup>4</sup> That clarity in our lives, in our vision, seeing the light, scales falling from our eyes, revelations of meaning that touch our very soul – shows us that God is alive, still creating, still caring. Supporting us all the day long.

And then there’s that third message of today’s story. The idea that there is nothing beyond God’s power of redemption. That’s a message about redeeming the unredeemable, forgiving the unforgivable, a righteous God working with unrighteous human beings. How great would it be if God would just step in wherever we see injustice. And provide that blinding light that would force those we think of as evil to change their stripes so dramatically. Particularly, I suppose, I might pray for that in this upcoming election year.

But of course, that’s not the moral of this story. It’s not about the evil in others. It’s about the hope, that despite our own weaknesses, that God forgives the unforgivable in each one of us. God can use even the unredeemable to redeem the world. God will use even us to live out God’s limitless love. Even as God has revealed that love to us in the life and message of our savior.

So let’s newly dedicate our very selves, our focus, towards looking for and finding those moments of grace. Even as we walk through our valleys of shadow. Even in the depths of our despair and sadness.

God’s power is limitless. And just when you think you’re beginning to know, just beginning to understand what God is all about, God turns around and surprises us. Christ is risen. God is alive. And God will not be bound by our humanity’s lack of imagination.

Today I’ll leave you with a story about clarity in finding your passion, your calling, your strength. Once upon a time, a powerful Emperor advertised for a new Chief Samurai. After a long search, only three applied for the job. “Demonstrate your skills!” commanded the Emperor.

The first Samurai stepped forward, opened a tiny box, and released a single fly. He drew his samurai sword, and . . . Whoosh! The fly fell to the floor, neatly divided in two. “What a feat!” said the Emperor.

“Number Two Samurai, show me what you can do,” the Emperor commanded. The second Samurai smiled confidently, stepped forward and opened a tiny box, releasing a single fly. He drew his samurai sword and . . . Whoosh! Whoosh! The fly fell to the floor neatly cut into quarters. “That is great skill!” nodded the Emperor.

“How are you going to top that, Number Three Samurai?” The third Samurai stepped forward, opened a tiny box releasing a single fly. He drew his samurai sword and . . . Whooooooosh! He flourished his sword so mightily that a gust of wind blew through the room. But the fly was still buzzing around. In disappointment, the Emperor asked, “What kind of skill is that? The fly isn’t even dead.”

“Dead?” replied the third Samurai. “Dead is easy. But circumcision . . . now THAT takes skill!”

As we go out into the world, today and every day, keep your eyes open. Our God might just surprise us on our own journeys, our own roads to Damascus.

AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel 36: 26-27.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey B Kelly, *Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning*.

<sup>4</sup> Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*.