

Revelation 5:11-14
Acts 9:1-19

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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ON GETTING KNOCKED OFF ONE'S HORSE

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" . . . Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. . . . Acts 9:3-5, 8a

The story of Paul the Apostle is the story of just about the most radical turnaround imaginable. Through twenty centuries of our faith, the Apostle Paul is arguably the most influential Christian disciple who ever lived. Yet before he became known as the Paul of Tarsus, Saul (his former name before his baptism) was a vicious, unrelenting persecutor and murderer of Christians, hounding people of "the way," as they were formerly known, to far flung cities like Damascus, raiding Christian's homes in the dead of night like a Gestapo henchman, and dragging them off prisoners to Jerusalem to imprisonment or death, and, as in his first appearance in the Book of Acts, holding the coats of those who stoned to death Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Luke, the author of the Gospel and Acts, nevertheless uses Paul's story to dominate two thirds of Acts, elevating Paul above the Apostle Peter as the apostle most perfectly embodying a follower of Jesus.

As the story in chapter nine opens, we know little about Saul, beyond that he was a brilliant young Pharisee (the guardians of religious law), and a ruthless persecutor of the early church. Later, we learn that he was a Roman citizen by birth, that he came from Tarsus, in what is now southern Turkey, which in his day was an important center of learning and trade. Paul himself would study in Jerusalem under the renowned Jewish scholar, Gamaliel—who, ironically, counseled the Jewish parliament to leave Christians alone, for if their movement was of God, he said, it would flourish; if not, it would die of its own accord.

Saul had been hard at work, as Luke writes, "ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women" (8:3) in the region around Jerusalem. Now, with letters of extradition signed by the High Priest, the ink barely dry in his hand, Saul sets out from Jerusalem for Damascus, 140 miles to the north, with soldiers in tow to enforce the arrests, as Luke puts it, Saul "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1).

Then, on the outskirts of Damascus, the most radical of events happens without a hint of warning. A light with the violence of a supernova "flashed around him" and knocked Saul to the ground, as if stunned. And as he lay there a voice cut through the fog of blinding light and sudden trauma, and asked a question—"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?"

From the bafflement of astonishment and awe, Saul asks, "Who are you, Lord?"

Then the unbelievable reply. "I am *Jesus*, whom you are persecuting."

We are not made privy to Saul's thoughts, but it has to be a moment of excruciating clarity. Jesus, the one who claimed to be God—to the horror of the leaders of Israel, and the fuel of Saul's hatred—is *God*. They are one and the same! No mortal could have engineered such a spectacle. Besides, Saul's companions on the road heard the voice, yet saw nothing. Then follow two brief observations loaded with implications. Saul's eyes are opened, yet he can see nothing. Then being led by hand to Damascus, we are told that for three days he lived in darkness, and neither ate nor drank. Does anything sound more like a

mirror of the tomb? Or, after three days of darkness, a resurrection as the prophet Ananias comes to him. At which meeting the scales fall from Saul's eyes, and he consents to baptism. Within days Saul is preaching the good news *in the synagogues* that Jesus is the Son of God, which has the predictable outcome that the hunter becomes the hunted—they want to kill him! It is the most extreme turnaround imaginable. But then, it had to be, given its subject.

In Flannery O'Connor's *The Habit of Being*, she writes of Saul's conversion, "I reckon the Lord new the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse." O'Connor may have been taking license with the horse (which the text doesn't mention), but the image is irresistible! Saul was a very hard case.

As is often the case, the very characteristics that Saul embodies before his conversion, become the hallmarks of Paul's new vocation for God. His intense commitment to God *against* Jesus and his followers, becomes his intense commitment *toward* Jesus and his followers. His fierce loyalty to fight a cause becomes his unending loyalty for the cause. Saul's mind had the extraordinary capacity to shape and convey a brilliant argument. He was someone raised in two very different cultures, yet at ease in both. He was born into his native Hebrew language and culture with its intense use of image to convey meaning. Look at any page of Old Testament poetry, or Proverbs, or the prophet's writings, and they are intensely imagistic, line after line replete with commonplace images. Yet, God would send him as the apostle to the gentiles—a Hellenistic, Greek speaking culture that dominated the Mediterranean, flooding its speech and writings with conceptual language brimming, not with images but ideas and rational thought. Paul, the new man, could reach between these two worlds with equal dexterity. God *wanted this man*. Yet, it wasn't the power of rhetorical argument in the Greek manner that won Paul over (which would become Paul's own chief method to evangelize the gentiles). On the contrary, it was the power of *experience*. God "knocked him off his horse," blinded him, locked him in a jet black tomb of self-examination for three days, and then gave him a radical new way to see the world, through the eyes of Jesus. His mortal enemy, Jesus, had become his savior.

But how did Paul get his teaching? He had never met Jesus in the flesh. Would barely associate with the disciples for fourteen years, by which time his ministry was well underway around the Mediterranean. There were no Gospel writings—his own letters to the churches (congregations he principally founded) would be the first in the Christian canon. How then? For three years, after his escape in a basket down the castle-like walls of Damascus, Paul spent three years in the wilderness near Damascus, engaging the Spirit of his Lord. Jesus was his teacher. Listen to what he says in a letter to the Corinthians.

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. ³And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—⁴was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. ⁵On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. ⁶But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, ⁷even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. (*2 Corinthians 12:2-7a*)

When did circumstance knock you off your horse? And did you take advantage of it to redirect you life? Sometimes life strips us of something we hold dear—something long planned and anticipated that circumstance (not God), ripped from you. But instead of looking for seeds of hope in the rubble did you hold on to your grief, even anger, perhaps never really moving on. Sometimes it's losing a loved one, a child, yet being so focused on what might have been that we walk forever backward into the future. Sometimes it's just living aimlessly.

Sometimes it's God who knocks us off our horse, as in Paul's case, needing to get our attention.

In January of 1972 I was a young man with a good life, not a profligate life but a purposeless one. I had a great job, I traveled the world. I met thoroughly interesting and engaging people—a few I hoped would be late for the gangway when we shoved off at night for the next port—but it was an aimless life. I'd been in the Royal Air Force for four years, then worked a year in the aircraft industry before I

spontaneously quit out of extreme boredom. Then in the entertainment and leisure industry for seven years. I was searching, but more in the manner of someone ambling along a beach, stopping to look at things of interest, a washed up clam, a piece of flotsam, driftwood that looked like something from the Cambrian era, a tribe of sandpipers scurrying in perfect formation—(how do they do that?) Then a friend from Florence, South Carolina, left me a “Good News” New Testament which I started to read, sporadically. In that Bible I didn’t find a path, but I think I sensed a companion. Then I met my Jane.

Late on the first night that we met she played Bach on the cream electronic organ on stage in the deserted first class ballroom. The next night, in Barbados, we left the ship to walk into Bridgetown to a calypso concert. We never made it. We sat on a huge rock by the harbor road and talked for two hours. Jane had the courage to pull out her faith from its velvet bag and smooth it out before me, with all the risk that takes in a new relationship. And for the first time I discovered that faith was not about abstract things or merely moral principles, but it was an invitation to a relationship that is personal (how else, in good conscience, could we talk about a “loving God”?)

At the end of that cruise on the QE2 ten days later, Jane returned to her family and teaching school in adjacent Green County, the poorest in North Carolina, and I went back to the UK on shore leave. As a parting gift, she gave me a small book of sermons by Peter Marshall, once the chaplain to the U.S. Senate, called *Mr. Jones Meets the Master*. I read one each night over a couple of weeks. Then, in the last sermon about Jesus’ encounter with a woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years, God knocked me off my horse.

It was about 1 a.m. The world was fast asleep, and I was sitting in my Dad’s big winged armed chair beside a dying fire. I was on the last page of the last sermon, and the last paragraph. It read,

He will let you know what you must do, and what you must be.
He is waiting for you to touch Him.
The hand of faith is enough. Your trembling fingers can reach him as he passes.
Reach out your faith—touch Him.
He will not ask, “who touched me?”
He will Know.

I thought about this invitation for a moment. I had never been so invited before, and I thought, rather matter-of-factly as I recall—‘Sure, that would be sort of neat.’ Then with barely a hesitation a voice spoke to me with exquisite clarity. It wasn’t the sort of muted voice like the voice of conscience or of an inward soliloquy. It was a voice with firm yet commanding authority, the way a policeman might speak who, out of the blue had just pulled you over and stands, oozing authority just out of sight above your left shoulder. It was not the voice of an old or a young man. It was a voice without noticeable accent—but English (after all, as R.F. Delderfield confirmed, *God was an Englishman*), yet firm, precise, and slightly terrifying, yet full of benevolence. I know that sounds odd, but it’s true. The voice told me expressly that it was time for me to make a decision. That moment changed my life. It was radical and transforming. It changed the way I thought and encountered the world and its people. Ever since I have known that God is completely real and present. I had touched the hem of God’s coat.

In the days and weeks that followed, I felt cloaked in a blanket of abiding grace, the way you feel alive and clean and freshly purposed after a Turkish bath or a sauna. Eventually, I bought a green bound copy of the *Living Bible* from a bookstore in Southampton, and I read four chapters a day until I read it through completely in nine months, while at sea. I started attending worship in a small, downtown Baptist church when I was home. I read devotional literature every day, and I talked to God a lot in prayer. I still do. That was thirty eight years ago.

I am not a saint—never will be. But I do know something with absolute surety. Jesus is a potently real presence. And he asks you the very same question. **“What are you going to do with this gift of life that is in you?”** It’s time to make a decision.

Amen.