

Epic Moment(s)

Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)

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,

“Go, 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.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately

he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

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Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)

May 4, 2025

Rev. Michael Catanzaro

I.

Our scripture reading for this morning from chapter 9 of the Acts of the Apostles, the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, represents an *epic* moment in the life of the church. Prior to this moment, the Apostle Paul was known as Saul of Tarsus, a zealous Pharisee who actively and brutally persecuted the followers of Jesus; quietly literally terrorizing the early church in the years (3 to 7) immediately following the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

Having received his marching orders from the high priests in Jerusalem authorizing him to take his reign of terror some 200 miles due north to the city of Damascus, Paul sets off for the Syrian capitol located in the nation's southwest corner. As he neared the outskirts of the city, however, Paul was met by the risen Christ and was literally, rather than proverbially, blinded by the light...of God.

II.

"Saul, Saul, *why do you persecute me?*" said a voice as he fell to the ground. He asked, "*Who are you, Lord?*" The reply came, "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.*" With his ensuing obedience to the voice of Christ, Saul ushered in an epic moment which forever changed his own life, the course and direction of the church, and, correspondingly, the history of our world.

The recently birthed church went from an obscure sect of Judaism with a localized following who were relatively few in number and almost certainly soon to be extinguished, to a vast ecclesiastical enterprise which eventually expanded to every corner of the globe to encompass hundreds of millions of followers over a span of 20 centuries...and counting. *All* of this because of the evangelical actions, pastoral writings, and theological concepts of just *one* person soon to be known as the Apostle Paul; the instrument God chose to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world.

III.

Looking at the broad sweep of the biblical story arc there is no question that today's scripture reading depicts an epic moment of the same order of magnitude as Noah's boat building, Abraham putting Isaac on the altar, Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai with 10 Commandments in hand, the Word incarnated and born in a manger, the atoning work of the Cross and, of course, the miracle of the empty tomb at Easter. While it might be natural, or even appealing, to give ourselves over to the grandiosity of such moments and see the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus in such a brilliant light, today I would like to encourage us to dim the bulb a bit and take a different approach and perspective in this morning's sermon.

IV.

Spiritual discernment as revealed through the study and interpretation of scripture is always a balancing act between what it was *meant* to be at one time, what it *might* be in *our* time, and what it *must* be for all of time, as it is the role and function of Scripture to serve these three masters simultaneously. Moreover, it is often a downright tricky business to allow ourselves to be open to discovering something *other* than that which we hoped (or assumed) to find in turning to scripture in the first place. That is to say, to find the truth which is on its way *to* us rather than the truth we believe we wish to pursue.

Before we go any further with the sermon, I need you to hear me when I say that the Apostle Paul was a remarkable person and one without whom we would not be sitting here today. However, *this* day is very different than *his* day, which is something many in the church both flail and fail to grasp.

V.

So here is this the thing, at least from my perspective and experience. While I can greatly admire Paul's courage, perseverance, intellect, and efforts, not to mention the results he achieved, his is not a story or a life to which I can necessarily relate very well. Nor do I really want to try. Folks in the church, ministers in particular, often talk about their call to ministry. I can tell you right now, my call to ministry was *nothing* like the call Paul received that day on the road to Damascus. I mean, good for him and, as it turned out, good for us as well. Mostly, anyway.

Yes, Paul brought the Gospel to the world but he did so with hands forever stained with the blood of all those he persecuted prior to his departure to Damascus. My guess is, if you were to ask *him* he would tell you that never got quite right with regard to that particular ledger. Regardless of what he was eventually allowed to achieve, it was never enough. It was that thought, I am sure, he carried with him to his grave.

VI.

I would also venture to guess that in spite of the weight of the cross he was made to bear moving forward from that day on the road to Damascus, he considered himself fortunate to bear it as the alternative was too terrible to consider. In many ways, Paul got lucky. He discovered the truth while there was still time and opportunity to do something about it.

He also got lucky that the process for figuring out the truth was unequivocal. Meeting the Risen Christ, being blinded, and having the scales fall from one's eyes will tend to do that for a person. It really takes the guesswork out of it. Which, I am sure, worked well for Paul with his tendency toward zealotry.

However, this begs the question of how much actual and inner change took place in Paul that day on the road to Damascus. Or, was it more a matter of getting his priorities rearranged and simply switching teams? Regardless, few of us are so fortunate to receive such a lack of unambiguity about our faith.

VII.

Again, let me reiterate, today's sermon is not an exercise in picking on Paul. While it is certainly more interesting for me, after 32 years of sermon writing, to poke the bear rather than pet it, I think there was a divergence that day of the road to Damascus and, for the most part, the church chose the path *more* travelled by, rather than less. Which, to me, has made all the difference, unfortunately.

Whether consciously and conspicuously, as is the case with many churches, or subtlety and silently, in the case of almost all other churches, there is an assumption that our faith will both be found in, and predicated on some epic moment when something like scales fall from our eyes, and our sight is restored. Now, it might be the case that I am simply hanging around

the wrong crowd, but this has never been my experience of faith conversion; my own, or that of others. Instead, if we are lucky, it is more a fleeting feeling to which we struggle mightily to hold on.

VIII.

Worse, when we do not receive the gift of the kind of vivid experience we have been taught to expect and, instead, must settle for being on the believing side of doubt our whole lives we feel ourselves to be lacking in some way. For many, this is simply not enough to go on to keep going to church, as faith turns out to be *way* more work than they had imagined. They are not sold on the idea, and they get tired of waiting around for some snazzier sales pitch or better bargain to finally seal the deal. For others, *pretending* to have had such a vivid experience of faith is good enough, so they resign themselves to fake it until they make it. Which, at some level, is admirable; but, that is a hard way to go to get nowhere at all. Which leaves just a relative few who hang in there long enough to figure out that faith does not come gushing out in firehose fashion from some epic moment in our lives when we finally manage to see the light but, rather, from a slow and steady trickle of regular old moments which eventually, like the morning sun in twilight, chase away the shadows of the night.

IX.

While you would not be wrong in assuming that today's sermon arises from having recently come to the end of a very long and grueling experience, that is only the lesser part of it. Instead, the real genesis arose from an encounter I had at the hardware this week after having returned from my mother's Memorial Service.

I happened to run into a person I know. One whom I am always happy to see and one who is always happy to see me, in a comfortable, small town kind of way. After a little chit chat, I remembered that it was the birthday of a member of this person's family and mentioned this to them knowing full well (having living here 27 years) it was a strained and difficult relationship. "I didn't know that," they said. Probably because of my recent experience, I kind of blurted out, "Well, I *do* know that, and I am saying it so *you* now know it, and so can call them up and wish them well." With that the person's arm waved me off and they said, "I'm not doing that." To which I said, "Really? Life is too short."

X.

Whether it was my place to say such a thing, I cannot decide. Still, I said it nonetheless. I did so because life, and the life of faith especially, is defined not by one epic moment akin to what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus, but by the quiet and steady string of epic moments when one is given the opportunity not just to see the light, but to *be* the light in the all the small things we decide to do. Like simply picking up the phone and calling a friend or loved one to wish them well or see how they are doing, sending a note or a card of condolence, bringing a meal to a family going through a challenging or hectic time, keeping people in our prayers, offering a kind word and comforting hug at just the right time, going the extra mile, affording a bit of forgiveness and grace, anything that simply allows another person to know that you are with them on the journey. When others do these things for us, as all of you have recently done for me and my family, we are met by the risen Christ on the road that is our very own lives. Amen.