

“The Road to Damascus”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Lent, Sunday, March 24, 2019
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Acts 9: 1-22 (NRSV)

The Conversion of Saul

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² 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. ³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵ He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹ 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, ¹² 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.” ¹³ But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” ¹⁵ 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; ¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

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

Saul Preaches in Damascus

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” ²¹ All who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?” ²² Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

Theme: Discerning Which Detours Harm and Which Heal

Detours are rarely, if ever, welcome experiences.
Just the mention of the word detour,
 and already our minds start to wander,
 remembering the pain and frustration and angst.
Yet here we are, going to Jerusalem with Jesus,
 Moving along the roads we travel,
 moving toward the Cross and the restoring, resurrecting grace of God,
 and detours keep popping up.

A letter to Dear Abby, an advice columnist, helped change how I look at detours.

Emily Perl Kingsley wrote “WELCOME TO HOLLAND”

“I am often asked to describe the experience of raising a child with a disability,
 to try to help people who have not shared the unique experience
 to understand it, to imagine how it would feel.

It's like this...

When you're going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip--to Italy.
You buy a bunch of guidebooks and make your wonderful plans.

The Coliseum.

Michelangelo's “David.”

The gondolas in Venice.

You may learn some handy phrases in Italian.

It's all very exciting.

After months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives.

You pack your bags and off you go.

Several hours later, the plane lands.

The flight attendant comes and says, “Welcome to Holland.”

“Holland?!” you say. “What do you mean, Holland?”

 I signed up for Italy! I'm supposed to be in Italy.

 All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy.”

But there's been a change in the flight plan.

They've landed in Holland and there you must stay....

So, you must go out and buy new guidebooks.

You must learn a whole new language.

And you will meet a whole new group of people you would never have met.

It's just a different place.

It's slower-paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy.

But after you've been there for a while and you catch your breath,

 you look around, and you begin to notice

 that Holland has windmills, Holland has tulips,

 Holland even has Rembrandts.

[The fact is that it feels like] everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy,
 and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there.

And for the rest of your life, you will say,

 “Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I had planned.”

And the pain of that will never, ever, ever go away,
because the loss of that dream is a very significant loss.
[However] if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to Italy,
you may never be free to enjoy the very special,
the very lovely things about Holland.”

I add to her essay that I have learned, yes, God knows the way to Vatican City,
yet God also knows the way to Amsterdam and has taken up residence there.

Detours can mess up your best laid plans.
On the way to Jerusalem with Jesus, we think it's a straight shot, non-stop, express.
When Betty and I lived in NYC, we got on a subway that was labelled an express,
meaning it would intentionally skip several stops.
The engineer came on the loudspeaker to say, “This is an express. Next stop
59th Street.”
Suddenly the conductor spoke up on the loudspeaker.
“This is a local. Next stop is 51st Street.”
The engineer said, “This is an express!”
The conductor said, “This is a local!”
We passengers could only look at each other and watch as the subway roared
past the 51st Street station.

Consider the story of Saul, Ananias,
and the detours they discovered on the road to Damascus.

We are most familiar with how the Apostle Paul was on fire for the Gospel,
and how people came out to see him burn with love for Jesus.
To this day we study his story of redemption, read his words and teachings,
and they turn up the heat, setting us ablaze for the one these words point to:
Jesus Christ.

He introduced himself to the Christians in Rome, saying,
“*Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ called to be an apostle,
set apart for the Gospel of God.*”

Almost 50 years ago Clarence Jordan converted the Greek New Testament
into a colloquial modern translation with a Southern accent
setting down Paul's introduction this way:

“*From Paul, a “captive” of Christ Jesus,
an appointed agent assigned to God's great story.*”

Paul was called into “God's great story,”
into being and sharing the Good News,
and the world has not been the same since.

But his story really took shape when he had to take a detour.

Paul's story begins when he was named Saul.

Saul was very bright, learned man who spoke several languages
and was well versed in philosophy and history.

He was very fierce against his opponents;
to be his opponent all one had to do was to believe differently than Saul.
Saul set about persecuting and murdering Christians;
he was present at the stoning of Stephen.
Saul used his authority and power to murder and harm and hurt people of faith,
and would have continued doing so until his last breath
had not the love of God transformed his life.
First God stopped Saul in his tracks on the Road to Damascus
and let him know that the people being persecuted
belonged to God, as did Saul.
The light of God's love blinded Saul, and called him to accountability for his actions.

Enter Ananias.
God sent a Christian named Ananias
to invite Saul into his life and take care of him.
You better believe that Ananias was fearful and unsure of this command from God.
This was a detour he neither asked for nor wanted,
yet he did as the Lord instructed.
Trust and obey, my friends, trust and obey.
We who are called into God's story to serve and love must do so, be so, become so,
for we can do no other.
And when we get to Holland, we discover that God knows the way, as well.

As much criticism gets heaped on the church for past and current wrongs,
sometimes we get it right.
Sometimes we are on the healing, holistic side of history;
sometimes we are servant leaders in the cause of mercy.

Ananias found Saul just as God promised:
vulnerable, alone and blind;
before him sat a mean-spirited soul, broken and blinded by the Light,
one who killed Christians and was suddenly placed by God
into the hands of his victims.

Rather than take revenge or rain down hatred,
Ananias and his fellow disciples ministered to Saul.
Ours is not to use cosmic power to rain down hatred or vengeance;
ours is to use the power of Light and Mercy to bring people together,
to build the Beloved Community.
At the 50th Anniversary of Decatur Cooperative Ministry the other day,
we gave thanks for 50 years of grace and hands-on ministries,
and prayed that in 50 years hence there would be no need
for Decatur Cooperative Ministry,
because together we solved homelessness and hunger.

The courage and grace of Ananias and his friends and disciples of Christ today
gives hope to all who are called into God's story.

We welcome all of you who are blinded by the Light,
who are deaf to the cries of the world,
who are addicted and powerless of whatever has taken over your life,
who are lost and afraid, isolated and lonely,
wondering and wandering and questioning,
angry and sad, hurt and hurting,
who are looking for direction or a destination or a vocation,
who are seeking and searching, happy and joyful,
and we will take you in.

You and yours belong.

You are an important part of this story.

I have been called into God's story.

So have you.

You belong to God.

We are God's people.

Therefore you belong here, with us and we belong to you and yours.

Saul was accepted and welcomed in by Ananias.

Saul accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior,
and then he changed his belief system

and then he started the long, slow, arduous journey
toward changing his life, his behavior.

He changed his name to Paul and changed his ways.

Because he was welcomed in by the same people he persecuted,

Paul came to a new understanding, then he came to faith,
then he came to change his ways and his days.

First, we Belong then we Believe then we start to change Behaviors.

Paul went about the Mediterranean, travelling by land and sea,

sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ and what God had done for him.

He initiated conversations, conversions, and communities of faith.

He wrote sermons, recorded the words of songs, and sent missives and letters.

He was a marvelous theologian and arguably not so great a sociologist.

He shaped and influenced the fledgling church.

He preached with passion,

protested abuses by the principalities and powers,
and taught with reason and faith.

He inspired us with these words in a letter to the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 13: 4-7):

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

He who had been forgiven taught us much about forgiving ourselves and one another.

Paul never forgot his past or the errors of his ways;

he stayed close to the love of Christ and his people in churches across the land.

He anticipated the glory of God,

dealt with a thorn in his side,
and kept his eyes on the prize.

Detours pop up continuously.
Attitude matters.
Trust that God is present, and that you are not alone.
Walk in the pathway of God's Light, even—and especially--when it meanders.

“THE ONION” From *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky

*“Once upon a time there was a woman, wicked as wicked could be, and she died.
And not one good deed was left behind her.
The devils took her and threw her into the lake of fire.
Her guardian angel stood thinking: what good deed of hers can I remember to tell
God? Then he remembered and said to God:
 once she pulled up an onion and gave it to a beggar woman.
God answered: take now that same onion, hold it out to her in the lake,
 let her take hold of it and pull,
 and if you pull her out of the lake, she can come into paradise.
The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her:
 here, he said, take hold of it and I'll pull.
And he began pulling carefully, and had almost pulled her all of the way out,
 when other sinners in the lake saw her being pulled out
 and all began holding on to her so as to be pulled out with her.
But the woman was wicked as wicked could be;
 she began to kick them with her feet:
 ‘It's me who's getting pulled out, not you;
 it's my onion, not yours.’
No sooner did she say it than the onion broke.
And the woman fell back into the lake.
And the angel wept and went away.”*

The Angel observed that the strength of God is present in all the detours of life,
 from Italy to Holland,
 from Damascus to Jerusalem,
 from your expectations to your realities.
The onion, representing her act of mercy,
 was strong enough to save her
 and all her neighbors,
 but not enough to save only her.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!