

Acts 9:1-20

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Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." ⁷The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. ¹⁰In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. ¹¹The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul..., for he is praying. ¹²In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." ¹³"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." ¹⁵But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." ¹⁷Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

Isaiah 43:16-21

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This is what the Lord says— he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: ¹⁸ "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. ¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. ²⁰ The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, ²¹ the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.

“The Scales Fell from His Eyes”

Two weeks ago, what we concluded when we affirmed again that the stone was rolled away, the tomb empty, that Jesus was not dead but risen, risen indeed, was that nothing was now the same. Everything was changed. Everything. Well, today, with Saul of Tarsus as our witness, we will come to affirm that “everything” includes US. Easter changes us!

The first time we hear about Saul is in the 7th chapter of Acts. Luke tells us that Saul was standing guard over the coats of those who would stone Stephen, and he was not doing it passively. No, Saul “approved of the killing of Stephen”. Moreover, as we move to chapter 8, Saul is portrayed as enemy #1 of the Church, a most feared persecutor of the people of “the Way”. He was famous as one who “ravaged the church...binding and dragging off both men and women.” Now, Saul was a very faithful person, a devout and zealous Jew, one who was driven to uphold God’s Law, having studied under the great teacher, Gamaliel. He was a product of his environment and his intense training as one of the chosen people of Israel. And he did whatever was needed to eliminate these “heretics” who not only had called Jesus the Messiah, but now were claiming that he was alive again! He would not hesitate to travel great distances to hunt them down. In fact, he was on the road to Damascus with his posse to retrieve more objects of his religious zeal when IT happened.

Listen to the way one writer imagines IT...*It was late one afternoon as they rounded the bend. If they hurried, they could make it before nightfall. A light breeze was blowing on the heights, dark clouds were gathering overhead, and the air smelled like electricity. Suddenly, a blinding light flashed, and Saul was knocked to the ground. For a second or two, he lost consciousness, and when he came to, he could feel the pounding in his head, taste the blood in his mouth. He tried to lift his head, but he couldn’t see anything, just the afterimage of the flash burned onto his retina, fading from orange to blue to black. Then he heard the voice, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” “Who, who are you, sir?”, he asked. “I am Jesus., the one you are persecuting.”¹*

¹Jim Somerville. “C20: The Third Sunday of Easter, Year C.” <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/sermons/c20-the-third-sunday-of-easter-year-c/> (Accessed 5/3/19).

Imagine what went through Saul's mind. If this one who spoke to him was really Jesus, and if he HAD risen from the dead, if he really was alive, then it would have been God who did the raising. Everything that his followers had said about him would have then been true too. He really was the Messiah. And this, this would have meant that Saul, who thought he was doing God's will by persecuting these people, was doing just the opposite! Saul had not been doing God's will. He'd been wrong, so wrong, dead wrong. "The truth would have dawned on him like of clap of thunder. If it had been up to him, he might have just laid there on the road, but Jesus told him to get up from the dust and go into the city."²

His men had to lead him by the hand, men who had been taking their orders from him just minutes before. They led him like a little child, humbled and blind. For 3 days, Saul sat in a house without seeing, eating, or drinking. Barbara Brown Taylor wonders if possibly Saul's conversion actually happened during these long days when he had nothing to do but think, when he was in the dark, physically and metaphorically. She points out that *"dark places can feel really small. Even if you're on the floor of the Grand Canyon at night, you might as well be in a closet, because when it's dark, the space you're in is pressed right up against your face. It's only as wide as the length of your arms. That's how high it is too."* She goes on, *"when you're in the dark, some other things can happen too. Your hearing can improve. Sounds that you didn't even notice before can suddenly stand out like they're being broadcast through speakers. Sometimes it's a night bird. Cahoo, cahoo. Cahoo. Sometimes it's the sound of your own heart. ba-BAM, ba-BAM, ba-BAM. Sometimes, if you're really quiet, you can even hear things your heart of hearts is saying, like "who are you?" or "why are you here?"*³ or... *"what are you doing?". (pause)*

Meanwhile, the Lord asked a man name Ananias to go to Saul, to ordain him, and restore his sight. The Lord told Ananias that the divine plan was that Saul was going to be a tool for God's use. The nature of Saul's call would be to bring the gospel to Israelites and Gentiles alike. *(repeat)* Of course, Ananias was understandably resistant. He knew Saul's reputation as a

² Jim Somerville.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor. "The Conversion of St. Paul" <https://www.sps.edu/news-detail?pk=779576>. (accessed 5-3-19).

murderer. It was, as R. Kent Hughes puts it, “*Peter Rabbit was asked to go care for Mr.*

McGregor”.⁴ But in the end, Ananias went to Saul and placed his hands upon him, and uttered what have been called the two sweetest words in all of scripture, “*Brother Saul*”. And in doing so, Ananias play a part in ordaining one of the greatest witnesses for the Lord to have ever lived. Then, then something like “scales fell from Saul’s eyes”. And he was baptized and began to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God. (*repeat*)

“*Scales fell from his eyes*”? Think on that phrase. So descriptive....It means that Saul, later to be called Paul, could now see things in a whole new way. Meeting the risen Lord, truly meeting him, knowing him, in his heart of hearts, caused him to look at himself and the world differently. In fact, the first person who Saul probably saw, Ananias, was precisely the kind of person whom he had previously wanted to KILL Now, however, he was not an enemy but a Christian brother. Easter has that effect on people. It’s one of the acts of Easter. Easter gives us a new view on things, a Godly view, and causes a humble repentance. It changes us.

So, today we need consider if we are allowing ourselves to experience Easter fully?

- Are scales falling from our eyes? Are we seeing things differently and being moved to a humble repentance? If so, brothers and sisters the angels in heaven are singing Hallelujah! I think I agree with Baptist preacher Jim Somerville who says that the thing that’s harder than hearing our own words, “*I was wrong*”, is hearing Jesus’ words, “*You were wrong*”.⁵
- If Paul, who was a very religious person, had to realize the error of his way and change, so might we. He prided himself in what he was taught, but yet he had not imagined God to be doing a new thing. Have WE taken the time to “*sniff the wind of the Holy Spirit to discover God doing something new, something different from what we we’ve always known?*” *What is God doing now? Ah, that wind smells so sweet.*
- Paul was able to quote every dot and tittle of God’s Law, but yet he had not been able to step back and see God’s heart. Are we like him, Christians who can quote chapter and verse, but yet we miss out on the character of God? Do we miss the nature of God’s plan (to gather

⁴ Peter Marty. “*Two of the Sweetest Words Ever Spoken*”. Day1.org/7156-two_of_the_sweetest_words_ever_spoken. (accessed 5-3-19)

⁵ Somerville.

all the various and beautiful kinds of people unto himself, Israelites and Gentiles alike)?

Everyone?

- And do we understand that this is to be done by US? You and me? “*Get up and go,*” not maybe...or think about it when you feel like it.. No, This “gathering unto himself” plan that Jesus has is to be done by us. “*Get up and go*”, Jesus said.

I am very appreciative of the example set by the PCUSA during the GA in 2017 when the wrongs done by the Church against America’s native peoples were formally recognized. The current and previous stated clerks, Rev J. Herbert Nelson, and the Rev Gradye Parsons, traveled to the northernmost US city, Barrow, Alaska—on behalf of the GA from a 2015 referendum-- to apologize to Native Americans, Alaska natives, and native Hawaiians. The apology was made to those who were and are part of ‘stolen generations’ during the Indian-assimilation movement, namely former students of Indian boarding schools, their families, and their communities”.⁶ The words of remorse and repentance offered came more than a century after the Rev Sheldon Jackson and the Rev A. L. Lindsley convinced the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Board of Home Missions to assume responsibility for the new territory of Alaska. In 1878, Jackson recruited workers and raised funds to open a mission school that existed until 2007 in the form of a junior college. The boarding schools and other programs that came out of this agreement acted as vehicles through which a philosophy of “civilization” was carried out. Indigenous languages were banned from schools. Children were taken from their families into the schools to be made “as Europeans”. The people were told not to dance their native dance or sing their native songs. Their form of getting a living from the sea was condemned. Various abuses took place. Rev. Parsons stated that the Church was in contempt of its own faith, judged when it should have listened, declared traditions to be sinful without trying to understand them, named ignorance without learning the native wisdom. Before receiving a reconciling handshake and grateful cheers from the huge crowd in attendance, he closed with a prayer

⁶Minutes, 2016, Part I, p. 711 of the 2017 General Assembly electronic file

“May God have mercy on us. May Christ have mercy on us. May God have mercy on us and may a new chapter now begin.”

Friends, meeting the living Christ has a way of humbling us, and it challenges us to examine *“who we are?”*, *“why are we here?”*, and.... *“what are we doing?”* Maybe today you will leave challenged. Maybe today you will leave convicted and changed. Maybe today you will leave affirmed. Regardless, we all need go remembering this...we are not left in our sin. No, we are forgiven. Already that has been accomplished. On the cross, revealed in the garden at the empty tomb. We need only receive the offered pardon from the crucified and risen Lord, and then...and then we need rise up from the dust, open our eyes and go.

Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength ...and he began to preach that Jesus is the Son of God. Amen.