

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

February 18, 2018
1st Sunday in Lent
Acts 9:1-19

Called to See Anew

As has been noted, today is the first Sunday in the Lenten season that began last Wednesday. It is this season, perhaps more than others, that we often use the metaphor of a journey to describe what is our focus during these 6 weeks leading up to Easter Sunday. Sometimes we talk about the “journey to the cross,” or our “journey with Jesus.” It is certainly an apt way in which to consider what we do in this period of preparation, this period of reflection and self-examination.

In our mobile society, most all of us have experiences with journeying or traveling. For some, such forays are part of one’s profession or vocation. For others, touring and venturing are part of annual vacation leave. For still others, such as retired folks early in their retirement years, life on the road or on the way has become the norm rather than the exception. And for still others, journeying that at one time was done through travel, is now done from the comfort of an easy chair where other places are discovered and explored via books and audio-visual media.

One only need to begin to read the Bible before the discovery or observation is made that journeying has been part of the story of God’s people as far back as Abraham and Sarah in the Hebrew scriptures. While the journeys then, most often on foot, were much slower going than our jet-setting around the world today, the movement from one place to the next, with intermediate stops along the way, are a big part of the stories of the people of God.

So it’s not hard for us to make connections with many of the events that happen along the way and with the people who were on those Biblical journeys.

There is at least one exception though, at least for many of us reserved Presbyterians and the like. And that is the story of the conversion of Saul who was traveling on the road to Damascus. It is such a dramatic story and it has such a dramatic conclusion that many of us find it hard to relate to. The story of how Saul, a zealous and pious Jew who was intent on persecuting those Jews who were joining the newly emerging Christian church of those who believed Jesus was the fulfillment of God’s promise of a messiah, in a flash of blinding light became one of the most prominent and effective promoters of just that understanding of Jesus, is just too much to compare to what seems to many to be much more mundane lives that we live. The dramatic shift is further emphasized in the name change that resulted—Saul who became Paul.

In the evangelistic parlance of the Christian church, we sometimes hear talk of “Damascus Road” experiences of conversion to Christianity. And most often those who share accounts of having a conversion experience similar to Saul’s are seen as distant and far off from many of our own experiences. We often hear, or perhaps have even said ourselves, that I didn’t have a Damascus road experience as I think about how I became a Christian.

Now, let me be quick to say that there are indeed people who have had such experiences. There is no doubt about that. But it is really important to emphasize that Saul’s conversion experience is not normative nor should it be seen as normative. In other words, faithful and pious Christians who cannot point to a Damascus Road experience are in no way second-class Christians when compared to those who have had such an experience. Don’t ever let anyone convince you otherwise.

Today, I want to challenge the assumption though that just because we may not have had a dramatic conversion experience like Saul, does not mean that we should discount or dismiss this story

as having no relevance for our lives. I'd like to suggest that for many people here today, you have indeed had a Damascus Road experience after all. Let me explain.

Saul was, by his own admission, one of the most zealous persecutors of the early Christians. It was, he felt, his duty as a devout and learned Jew to rout out those who were going in this new direction as a way of deterring others from following. He fervently believed that what he was doing was the righteous thing to do. So zealous was his focus that he had with him letters that he had obtained in Jerusalem with names of people in Damascus who might be, or were suspected of being, associated with the Christian community. He was determined to find these traitors to the Jews and expose them for their disloyalty and denouncing of their Jewishness.

It was on this day that Saul, with a laser-focus on what he was to do in Damascus, was stopped in his tracks as he approached the city. A flashing brightness from above enveloped him that caused him to fall to the ground. As a learned Jew Saul knew the stories of holy encounters between God and humans, encounters known as theophanies, where the only appropriate posture before God is on the ground, face-down. And sure enough, he hears a voice calling to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" to which he replies, "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus, who you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what to do."

The miraculous result is that Saul, who has now encountered Jesus himself, is now set on a new journey. Ironically his journey still takes him to Damascus where he encounters the Christians not to confront them but to be cared for and nurtured by them. And then upon his recovery from this encounter, Saul, who will soon be renamed Paul, set out on a missionary endeavor that will serve to transform the fledgling Christian community into what will become the church of Jesus Christ around the world. He will go on to become second only to Jesus himself as far as influencing the development and nurture of Christianity, as a prolific writer of many of the letters making up the texts of the New Testament.

While many have called this story Paul's conversion from Judaism to Christianity, Paul himself would likely disagree with that characterization. Rather he would more likely describe it as the moment when he saw the light of the truth that Jesus is indeed the fulfillment of God's promise of a messiah. In his case then it was coming to understand the clear connection between who Jesus is with his own deep understanding of Judaism.

So yes, there is a lot of drama to this Damascus road experience. There is the brilliant and blinding light, the sounds of voices, temporary blindness with which Saul is afflicted, the caring for him and the recovery of his sight, all that lead to the beginning of his preaching ministry. It all adds to the associations that we have with the Damascus Road experiences I referenced earlier.

The transformation of Saul's life is a testimony to the power of God to make a fundamental change in the direction of our lives for the better. Stephen D. Jones, a Baptist pastor, writes, "Not many of us are 'breathing threats and murder' against our opponents. However, we have all been on wrong paths that have been injurious to ourselves and others. We have all been headstrong, stubborn, blinded to our own ambition, selfish to meet our own need, caught in addictive behaviors, and oblivious of the true cost to others or to ourselves." (*Feasting on the Word: preaching the revised common lectionary* / David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, gen. eds., © 2009 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 403)

So much of what we celebrate in the life of faith for ourselves as well as for Christian companions on the journey are the ways that we experience the power and influence of the Holy Spirit

in guiding us along the path. Sometimes this is something we observe in others when we witness the reconciliation between those who have been estranged for far too long.

On a larger scale this can happen when political leaders who were once opposed to one another discover the mutual benefit of working together leading to a lessening of armaments aimed at one another through the discovery that each other's welfare is wrapped up in the welfare of the other.

My friends, that you and I view the world around us through the lens of our faith, calls us to always be open to the redemptive and restorative power and influence that comes from our faith. This calls us to renew our openness to discovering new and deeper insights to even those principles and ideas that we hold dear. It also calls us to see the possibility for change and transformation in others.

In our day and age so much of the world around us is factionalized, meaning that divisions and demarcations are deeper and more intransigent than ever. The unwillingness of those we disagree with to be open to changing their minds, can cause us to similarly dig in our heels and adopt an ironclad hold on what we consider dear and to be the truth.

After the tragic school shooting in Florida on Valentines Day resulting in the deaths of 17 more people, I am distressed and I am discouraged—as I know that many of you are as well. In the aftermath of this horrific event the people of our nation, along with our legislative leaders are once again lining up behind various divergent perspectives and hunkering down for a battle of wills that results in less communication and less dialog and less chance of any meaningful and measurable progress toward a solution to this epidemic.

The role that we can play as Christian members of our society today is to see anew the light that is shining from God leading us to not confront those with whom we disagree, but rather to engage and enter into dialog. So much could happen in the way of positive change if we endeavor to take down the barriers and enter into conversation—genuine conversation—where we are listening at least as hard as we are speaking.

As we recall the dramatic change that happened in the life of Saul, we are reminded anew of our foundational assertion that God brings about dramatic changes in our lives as we seek to be God's people.

I'm not suggesting that we're all of one mind or of the same perspective on those issues that divide. What I am suggesting, and even advocating is that we resist those forces to divide and conquer. What I am suggesting is that we can take leadership in our communities and model another way. When we do that it could be, and dare I say, will be like the blinding light that confronted Saul and changed his life and changed the course of history.

Do I know what that will look like with any specificity for us? No, I don't. But what I do know is that our journey will have been affected and changed for the better as we continue to seek to follow where our God leads.