

The Grace of a New Day John 21:1-19; Acts 9:1-19a

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Saul of Tarshish was not a pleasant man. I want you to see his face. But more than just imagining what he looked like, I want you to also see the expression on his face.

In some references I found his temperament described as “vehement and somber...passionate, disputatious and uncompromising”. In other words, Paul was moody and hard to get along with. Saul’s physical body was also noted for being – by first century standards anyway – rather unattractive. He is reported to have been a man small in size, bowlegged, with meeting eyebrows, a rather large nose, big ears, and flaming red hair. Are you getting a picture?

Saul was probably *not* someone you’d want to exchange pleasantries with on a Sunday after worship. And that would’ve suited him just fine. Saul had very little interest in most other people. He found their interests trivial and monotonous, and, frankly, cared little what others thought of him.

Now it’s not like there was absolutely nothing to admire about the man. Early in his youth he had given his life over completely to God. And he had been found by his teachers in the synagogue to have a keen mind and the ability to not only study the law, but the ability to follow it – a somewhat rare combination considering how comprehensive and demanding the law could be. Some would say his ability was almost too keen, for Saul always seemed to go *beyond* what the law specified as far as pious behavior went.

Saul was sure he knew and understood the mind and heart of God. Absolutely sure. And he modeled himself in exactly that way. Yes – he, Saul, had it *all* figured out. He knew who God was. He knew who he was. And he also knew how trivial and stupid and wrong almost everyone else was. No – Saul of Tarshish was not a pleasant man. He was a man of *conviction and principle* and he lived his life accordingly.

I think that’s why these new rumors of the long-awaited Jewish messiah were particularly offensive to Saul. Rumors had been spreading that the Messiah, the Most Holy One, had already come, but not as everyone had thought he would – not in a blaze of glory and unparalleled power that literally destroyed Rome, but instead born of a simple and common woman. He had grown up in virtual obscurity, had had a rather uninteresting few years of ministry, and had died an utterly humiliating death on a cross. And then, (here was the clincher) the story circulating was that he didn’t stay dead, but was raised up – resurrected – on the third day.

How ridiculous! But to Saul’s consternation, there actually seemed to be some who seemed determined to believe these absurd claims. Some even claimed to be *witnesses* to the man’s resurrection. Saul was outraged! But he also agonized. It literally pained him that such blasphemy should be proclaimed and believed. Such atrocities flew in the face of everything Saul believed in and understood as truth. He simply could not let these rumors get a foothold. Such lies had to be stamped out even if he were the one who had to do it.

Perhaps this job, this need to stop such treachery to the faith, was his *rea*/calling from God. He had been searching for such a long time. A man of moods and disposition and zeal was not so easily placed. Maybe this was it. Maybe God was raising him up to tear down those of the so-called “Way”, the Christians as they liked to be known.

Presbyterian theologian and humorist Frederick Buechner describes best what happens next:

It was about noon when he was knocked flat by a blaze of light that made the sun look like a forty-watt bulb, and out of the light came a voice that called him by his Hebrew name twice. "Saul," it said, and then again "Saul. Why are you out to get me?" and when he pulled himself together enough to ask who it was he had the honor of addressing, what he heard to his horror was, "I'm Jesus of Nazareth, the one you're out to get." We're not told how long he lay there in the dust then, but it must have seemed at least six months. If Jesus of Nazareth had what it took to burst out of the grave like a guided missile, he thought, then he could polish off one bowlegged Christian-baiter without even noticing it, and Saul waited for the axe to fall. Only it wasn't an axe that fell. "Those boys in Damascus," Jesus said. "Don't fight them, join them. I want you on my side," and Saul never in his life forgot the sheer lunatic joy and astonishment of that moment. He was blind as a bat for three days afterwards, but he made it to Damascus anyway...¹

Saul, indeed, had been blinded by the light of God. God must have known that the only way to stop him, to change him, to convert him was to gift him with a divine vision. Saul had never been very good at listening. He was a man of action. So God did what God had to do to get his full attention.

Now this is probably *not* what I would have done. In fact, I don't fully understand why God would be so loving and generous to Saul. It seems to me that God should have said to Saul – light or no light – "Saul, I know who you are; I saw what you did! I do not like it and now I'm going to blast you to kingdom come!"

Obviously God did not follow my line of reasoning. Perhaps in a tight fix it's always better to accept God's judgment rather than someone else's.

Back to our story: So totally did he lose his sight, Saul's travelling companions had to literally lead him by the hand. How ironic – Paul heads for Damascus with authority and purpose, in fact "breathing threats and murder against the disciples" of Jesus, but enters the city blind and helpless. This one-time enemy of the church becomes its great champion. This persecutor of Jesus is then persecuted for proclaiming him.

What would God have to do to get *our* complete and undivided attention?

Now granted, not many of us seem like Saul – arrogant with self assurance, thinking we know God and God's will so completely that we go off half-cocked sometimes doing more harm than good in the name of God.

No, on second thought, that's not how I would describe us. We are more likely to be the opposite. For us, pretty much this whole religion thing is settled. Wouldn't you agree? It's not that we Presbyterians are driven to be out there settling it for anyone else either. No, we tend to just live and let live. God's here and there, all around, but most of the time it really doesn't make too much difference in our day-to-day lives.

I think we are more like geese. But not the wild ones you hear and see in certain parts of the country each autumn as they noisily make their way across gray skies, responding to some unheard call.

We are more like the tame geese you see in the zoo or occasionally on a pond. While they still know they are geese, even know of the call, even hear their fellow geese flying overhead just as you and I do, they do not follow. The honking in the evening might even send little arrows of prompting deep into their wild yesterdays. Their wings may flutter when they hear. They may even have the urge to fly, to take their place in the sky using the wings God made for them. But still, they do not follow.

No, the matter for the tame geese was settled long ago. The corn of the barnyard was just too tempting. And their desire to fly now only makes them uncomfortable. Have they lost the capacity to fly? No – they’ve just traded comfort for adventure. Is it what God intended? Maybe not. Maybe so. Is there hope? Of course there is hope. God stopped Saul in his tracks and turned his life completely around. Sometimes God’s flare for the dramatic simply cannot be contained.

What I think is most important about this story is that Saul *thought he knew!* Just as Peter and the disciples thought *they* knew all they needed to know about Jesus once he’d died, risen, and appeared to them behind locked doors. Here they were fishing, not catching a thing until someone on the beach yells at them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. Now, mind you, these professional fishermen have not caught a single fish since Jesus appeared on the scene without him telling them where and how to fish – and they, the people who knew him and loved him most, *still* did not yet recognize Jesus as the one standing on the beach.

I really don’t think the disciples were just a bunch of dolts. I think they were very human – just like you and me. And I think there’s a good chance that sometimes we will be just as sure that we know all we need to know about Jesus and therefore, be just as slow to recognize Christ’s presence in our midst.

My friends, God is a God of *transformation*, a God who is always creating something new, always redeeming creation, even when we think our world is just fine. But especially, the life-giving power of God *always* has the capacity to work newness where newness seems most impossible.

The Sunday School class I lead is reading together a rather disturbing, perhaps even offensive, book. It’s called *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* by Marcus Borg. It’s disturbing mostly, I think, because of his apparent attack of Christian language. Borg takes words that many of us find satisfyingly full of meaning – words like *divine*, *holy*, and *sacred* – and begins to take them apart – to look at them with the eyes of science and modernity, almost it seems in an attempt to discredit them. For some of us, this is blasphemy. It strikes a deep sense of what is right and true about our faith and threatens to undermine our very faith foundations. Over and over again, though, I call us (me included) to set aside our fear, to trust, and to continue our journey through this book. And because we have been taking our studies seriously, and we pray for the presence and guidance of God, and genuinely attempt to listen to opinions in the group that do not match our own, then I believe that somehow we’ve been led to use this book as a way to see new things about the way we approach God’s Word.

And our texts this morning, both from John and Acts, teach us that feeling like we’ve got it all figured out, feeling so comfortable in our ways of understanding, feeling like we know all that God has in store for us can be *just as blinding* as strident adherence to the law or zealous harassment of those who do not believe as we do.

Many scholars believe that chapter 21 of John’s gospel is an epilogue, an add-on by later writers. Just in case we didn’t get the point well enough (maybe because we’re just as human as the disciples

were), the writers bring up the memory of an earlier text in John – chapter 6. That’s where Jesus blessed five loaves and two fish and fed thousands on the shores of the same lake where we find him now standing, calling out, having built a fire to warm and nourish the disciples. “If we have wrongly concluded that Christ’s abundant generosity belongs to the past and not the present, the epilogue gives witness that the risen Christ continues to bless and feed us... This early morning meal on the shore corrects any misunderstanding that the Last Supper was the final meal Christ ate with his disciples.”² The risen Christ continues to share in the table fellowship of the church – continues to supply the strength and nurture we need for our lives and our callings – continues to startle us with the newness of his creative presence.

The epilog also awakens memories of the darkness – the failure to recognize Jesus – but reminds us that none of this darkness has overcome the light – the grace offered in each and every new day. Amen.

NOTES

1. Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who*, New York: Harper and Row, p. 129-130.
2. Thomas Troeger, John 21:1-19’s “Homiletical Perspective”, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) p. 423.