

“Detour in Damascus”

Encountering Christ, part 3

Acts 9:1-19

If you have come here today to experience God, to find hope, mercy, grace, peace and love, you are in the right place. If you are looking for an extra-large pepperoni pizza, I can't help you. But if you are looking for a Savior, I can introduce you to someone named Jesus. Look around you for a moment. In this room are people who have found him. And not one of us is perfect. Remember that.

I invite you to pray with me this morning, holding your palms up as a symbol that you are ready to receive what God has for you. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, please open our eyes this morning to see the wonderful things that you do. Each one of us carries enormous potential for your kingdom that you alone know. Help us this morning to hear the prompting of your Holy Spirit and respond with the grace you have given each one of us. Help us to follow you, Jesus. Amen.

Have you ever met a stubborn person? You know whom I'm talking about: their mind is already made up, no matter what the evidence may be. Never talk about politics with this person. Or why Coke is better than Pepsi. We all know someone who is so difficult to talk to, so stubborn and opinionated, we just avoid them. Take my wife for example: I have great sympathy for her, because she is married to one of the most stubborn people I know. (I had you going there for a minute, didn't I?) In all seriousness, I try to be open-minded, but there are times when I am completely blind to the truth. My habit is to dig my heels in, even when I'm wrong.

There are people we meet each and every day who have their minds made up, especially when it comes to faith. I had a conversation once with a man who just couldn't believe in God. He was very gracious at first, listening to me go on about the church and Jesus, but when it was his turn, he refuted everything that I had said. “There is no proof,” he said. Funny enough, I agreed with him, in a way. I cannot prove the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the way that, for example, I can prove that I am married and have three children. I could show you my wedding pictures, our marriage license, and my children's birth certificates. And yet you could still claim that all of it was an elaborate hoax. Similarly, believing in Jesus comes down to faith, and sometimes, people are just too stubborn to believe.

Honestly, though, there are times when we, the church, can be just as stubborn in our evaluation of people. We are serious about extending to everyone the invitation to follow Christ, but some people, we assume, just won't believe us. In the back of our minds, we hear these doubts:

“They're too political.”

“They're too wrapped up in the occult.”

“They're not educated enough to understand.”

“They have already made up their mind on religion.”

“Their background is too different from my own.”

“They belong to another faith.”

“Their parents raised them wrong.”

In other words, we sell them short. We think, “They can't understand or receive God's grace. They are too far out there.”

I confess, I have had these thoughts. And if it was just you and me and the fencepost, I'm guessing, you'd admit it, too. We fall prey to this little philosophy

called “predestination.” Have you heard of it? It’s this sneaky little belief that God already knows and has chosen those who will be saved. This knowledge is not something that humans could ever know, nor is it a doctrine we teach in the United Methodist Church, but sometimes, this arrogance rises to the surface in Christians. In effect, we think, “There are some whom are impossible to save.”

We are never going to argue someone into the kingdom of God. That’s why I am glad we have God’s Word, to teach and correct us and show us the truth, that ANYONE can be saved by Jesus. I present the Apostle Paul as Exhibit “A”. We just read the story of his conversion through his encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. In Acts 9, he is called by his Hebrew name, Saul, but starting in Acts 13 and continuing for the rest of the Bible, he is called by his, Roman name, Paul. If I switch back and forth inadvertently, forgive me, because the scripture we read today uses “Saul” but I usually think of him as Paul. And as I told you, I’m stubborn.

So who was Saul? He had a very religious upbringing. He was a Jew of the Jews, a real believer in God. This is how he describes himself in Ephesians 3:5-6

“[I was] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.”

In Acts 22:3-5, Saul says to the other Jews listening, “I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify.”

I want you to catch this: Saul thought he was right! He was doing what he had learned, what he had been taught. From our perspective, we think that he was a crazy, obsessed murderer, motivated by a bitter past or some traumatic event. But he thought he was normal! And so do other around him.

So, what happened to transform this stubborn Christian-hater into the greatest missionary the world has ever known? Three words: He met Jesus.

Saul was on his way to Damascus to stop the spread of this “false” religion, “The Way.” That is what they used to call those who followed Jesus. You might remember that, in John 14:6, Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Saul wanted all those wayward Christians in prison or dead. Saul believed that he was doing God’s will by trying to stop the spread of heresy. He was going after these Christian infidels. Does that sound familiar? There should have been no hope to change his mind.

Yet we know that’s not what happened. In fact, Christ chose Saul. Jesus met Saul on the road to Damascus, blinding Saul with his presence and speaking directly to him. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

A face to face encounter with Jesus is terrifying. If you say, “God spoke to me,” and you are not trembling, I might have a hard time believing you.

Saul was terrified. Saul said, “Who are you, Lord?” Notice he called Jesus, “Lord.” The power and might of Jesus is undeniable, even by his enemies.

We are not terrified by power or authority much these days. We don’t have a King or Queen, Lord or Lady, Duke or Duchess. In this country, if we don’t like the authorities, we don’t vote for them again. But that’s not how Saul experienced Jesus. Saul knew real power when he saw it. This inescapable,

unfathomable power of Jesus overcomes us and awes us, strikes us with fear, and completely humbles us.

It’s ironic that Saul wanted to bind the Christians and lead them away to prison. Instead, Saul had to be led by the hand into the city. The scripture said he was so overcome, he didn’t eat or drink for three days.

And then Jesus called Ananias to heal him. This part really gets me. Look at verse 13. Ananias basically says, “Lord, are you sure? He wants to kill all of us!” Has God ever called you to serve someone you thought was your enemy? That’s difficult stuff. That’s faith in action.

Ananias was faithful. He found Saul and prayed for him. The scales fell off Saul’s eyes, physically and spiritually. I notice two things here. First, Ananias called Saul “Brother.” After Jesus appeared to Saul, Ananias brought him to the church. Saul came to faith with the help of someone in the church. And second, Saul was baptized before he ate. Faith in Jesus was more important to him than food. I guess what the scripture is saying here is, this was a very real, deep, and serious transformation. The great “Detour in Damascus.”

Saul – later known as the Apostle Paul – became the most amazing missionary the world ever knew. Paul wrote most of the letters in the New Testament. He traveled thousands of miles, before the invention of planes or cars. He was shipwrecked and imprisoned; he had assassins after him. He was persecuted, rejected, and ridiculed. His final words to Timothy were, “I am being poured out like a drink offering...I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race.” (II Timothy 4:6-7)

Paul did amazing things for God. And yet nobody who knew him as the Christian-hater Saul would have ever given him a chance. Even Ananias was skeptical.

Listen to Paul’s own words to Timothy (I Timothy 1:13-14)

“Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

So what? I mean, this is a great story. But why does it matter to us?

I can tell you what it means to me. No matter whom I meet, no matter what I think of them, they are no better or worse than I am in the eyes of God. We have all sinned, we have all messed up. None of us has a leg to stand on before the mighty, holy, awesome God. Saul could have tried to argue his way to heaven and back, but instead he called himself less than the least of God’s people (Ephesians 3:8).

Grace is available to anyone and everyone. We must believe that. It must color every word we say, every thought we think, every action we take. No one is hopeless.

At the end of his life, Paul was martyred in Rome. He could have renounced Jesus, he could have saved his life. But he didn’t. Once you’ve truly met Jesus, you can never look back.

What about you? Have you seen Jesus? Maybe you haven’t had an encounter like Saul, but have you encountered Christ? Has your heart been changed? Has your life been altered dramatically?

The gospel is the same today as it was for Saul. God created us for a relationship. Our sin broke that relationship, separating us from God and bringing evil into the world. We tried everything, but being “good” isn’t good enough, because God is perfect. Instead, the holy, perfect God loved us so much that he sent his own son to die for us: Jesus. God in the flesh. The Creator died to redeem his own creation. And Jesus rose from the grave and now offers life and hope to everyone. All who believe in Jesus and trust in him alone will be saved. An eternity with Jesus in heaven awaits us, and that new life of forgiveness, the new life in the Spirit, begins now.

No one can say that they are too far from God to be redeemed. No one can say it is impossible for someone to be saved and turn their life around. No one can say, “Jesus doesn’t want me.” Saul’s story makes that abundantly clear.

Would you close your eyes for just a second? This isn’t an altar call. No one is going to be asked to raise their hands. I just have some honest questions for you.

Have you seen Jesus? Are you even looking for him?

Do you hear him calling you, right now?

Will you say, “Yes, Lord” to him?

Will you allow him to remove your blindness and restore you to new life?

And finally, is there someone in your life who seems so radical, so far removed from God, that it would take a miracle to save them? And would you pray for that miracle to happen?

You can open your eyes.

Saul’s life was changed. Our lives can be changed, too. Grace is available to all. Let’s pray.

Memory verse

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”
Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)

Reflection questions

1. Have you ever met someone so convinced of their opinion that it seemed nothing would change their mind? What was it like being around them?
2. Saul/Paul was the least likely candidate to become a missionary. What other unlikely people have you known to become disciples of Jesus?
3. What does it mean to you to see Jesus? How does He change your life?
4. What does it mean to acknowledge the power and lordship of Jesus in your life? What decisions do you make as a result? What control do you surrender?
5. Commit to praying for someone whose life Jesus can turn around.