

And He Showed Himself in This Way
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Acts 9:1-6

¹Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and 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. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ⁵He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’

John 21:1-19

1 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’ They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, ‘Children, you have no fish, have you?’ They answered him, ‘No.’ ⁶He said to them, ‘Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’ So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.’ ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ ¹⁶A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ ¹⁷He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep. ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ ¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’

I’m glad you’re sitting down because I have some difficult news: it’s not about us. None of it. The songs. The flowers. Worship, in general. The Bible. Sure, we have a role to play in all of it but the main point, the main focus, the main actor is God. Often when we hear the reading from Acts, we

call it Saul's conversion story, almost as if Saul had a hand in the conversion. The actions certainly look like a dance between Saul and Jesus but Jesus has the lead. Listen again: "Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.'"

Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him as compared to Saul's going along. A voice speaking to him after he falls to the ground. The reply given to Saul's question. Before we go any further, a refresher on Saul seems appropriate. The significance of this story, of this particular conversion, is that Saul, who was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" and who wished to bring any of Christ's followers to Jerusalem bound, is the very same person who we know as the apostle Paul, the one who penned so many epistles, letters, which make up a significant foundation of our faith. Like Jacob who, after wrestling with the angel whom he understood as God, changed his name to Israel because he had been changed in his encounter with God, so Saul became Paul after his encounter with Jesus. Now I said he was the very same person but, really, how could he be after encountering the risen Christ? Saul's body looked the same on the outside but he was of a new heart and a new mind. *He* did not cause himself to have a new heart and a new mind; if he had had his way, he would've spent the rest of his days persecuting believers, binding them and bringing them for judgment, instead of being bound, judged, and beheaded for being a believer himself.

We move from our reading in Acts to the reading from John, which we remember for Jesus' repeated questioning of Peter. Some scholars look at Peter's three vows of love for Christ as Peter's redemption for having denied Christ three times. Some scholars will focus on Jesus' call for Peter to feed his sheep and to follow as the beginning of Peter's ministry and leadership of the church. But let's step back a bit in the reading. Taking out the dialogue about going fishing, we read, "After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way... Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish." From that catch, and Jesus' own fish, he fed them breakfast on the beach.

We move from the extraordinary lightning flash to the no-closer-to-ordinary catch of one hundred and fifty-three large fish and, again, our reading is not about the disciples but about Jesus. Just as Saul would have been content to go on persecuting believers, Peter was off doing what? "I am going

fishing,” he says. Where did we first meet him? Where did Jesus first meet him? Fishing.¹ Peter had followed Christ for years and, after Christ had died and been risen and appeared to them twice, Peter was still content to do what he knew, content to fish. And then Jesus came, and fed him, and challenged him. Then, then did Peter work on another significant foundation of our faith. While Paul traveled bringing people to Christ, Peter worked with the church in Jerusalem, bringing more to faith and strengthening those who were wavering. Peter, or *Petra*, Greek for rock – Peter, the rock, the foundation of our faith.

Peter was going along with the predictable and familiar. Encountering Christ once more, he drops his nets for good, with new courage and new vision, new courage and new vision not of his own doing. For Saul, his first encounter was enough. For Peter, we cannot count how many times he encountered Christ, including his knowing proclamation of Christ as the Messiah and his presence at the transfiguration, before the encounter we read of today. This isn’t a story, though, of how Peter finally really “saw” Christ. It’s not about him. It’s about Christ. Christ’s giving and nourishing, Christ’s challenging and calling, over and over, Christ’s persistence.

Certainly we can find ourselves in the lessons in the Bible, and we are encouraged to, **but** we must not stop once we find ourselves – we’re not done there or then. The Bible is so much bigger than that; our lives as Christians are so much bigger than that; our worship of God is so much bigger than that; our God is so much bigger than that. What moves you? The times and ways you have reached to Christ? I suspect not – I suspect what moves you, to awe, to tears, to joy, are the times and ways Christ has reached out to you, the times and ways God has showed God’s self to you.

Author and theologian Joseph S. Harvard makes it clear: “It is important to remember that what happened to Saul was noteworthy precisely because it was *not* typical of the way most people become converts. Luke goes out of his way to let us know the significance of this conversion by giving us three accounts of it. Since Luke was a concise writer, this repetition stands out.”² Because you haven’t been physically blinded heading down the wrong path doesn’t mean you are any less important than Paul and certainly not that God is any less powerful. When you think of the ways and times you have been moved by God, can there even be a comparison? God shows God’s self to you in ways as unique as you are, in ways which speak to you, which touch, even yank, at your heart in a way that is unique to you. Praising God is not about how we look. Recognizing, and responding to, God’s revelation is not about the one recognizing but the one being revealed. It’s not about us. With humility we say, praise be to God!

¹ Matthew 4, Mark 1, Luke 5

² *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, p. 404.

Let us pray: Open our eyes, O God, that we might recognize you revealing yourself to us and that we might be forever changed by each encounter with the living Christ, we pray. Amen.