

February 7, 2010
Text: Acts 9:1-19
11:00am Worship

Title: Journeys of Faith: Saul/Paul
Rev. Donald W. Hackett, D. Min.
First Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, PA

Introduction

I want to introduce you to one of the greatest entrepreneurs who ever lived. His name was Saul and it was later changed to Paul. He lived about 2,000 years ago. He was from Tarsus, a Roman city in what is now modern day Turkey. A Roman citizen, Saul studied under some of the top Jewish scholars of his day like Gamaliel. He was part of a group of lay Jewish scholars (called Pharisees) who were ferocious in their protection of Jewish law and culture. They were fearful of being swallowed up by all the pagan cultures, particularly the Romans.

Background

Pharisees were known for their strict devotion to God. They had a “no nonsense” approach to threats to the Jewish faith. As the popularity of the Rabbi Jeshua (or Jesus) grew, many were concerned. He did not quote the ancient Hebrew commentators who came before him. This teacher spoke from his own authority. The movement of this new, fresh approach to God grew so fast and strong that the people were declaring that this Jesus was the long awaited Messiah the ancient scriptures had promised.

This threat to Jewish leadership and religion could not be tolerated any longer.

Through an insidious alliance of the Pharisees, the ruling Sadducees, and the powerful Roman army, Jesus of Nazareth was unfairly tried and publically executed. The persecution then spread to the followers of Jesus. One of the first disciples martyred was Stephen. Saul was there when a mob stoned Stephen. He was watching their cloaks so they could get a better shot at Stephen. Saul was a young man who was consumed with a sense of righteousness. I am sure he thought, “Of course it is right to kill in order to protect our faith.”

This is the context of our passage today. Saul has procured permission from the High Priest to chase down and arrest followers of Jesus who had fled the city. He hunts them down to the Syrian city of Damascus (150 miles to the north). He is out to protect God. Saul has a surprise coming. God is going to meet him in ways he does not expect.

Text: Acts 9:1-19 The Blinding of Saul (from the Message translation) 1-2

All this time Saul was breathing down the necks of the Master's disciples, out for the kill. He went to the Chief Priest and got arrest warrants to take to the meeting places in Damascus so that if he found anyone there belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he could arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem. ³⁻⁴He set off.

When he got to the outskirts of Damascus, he was suddenly dazed by a blinding flash of light. As he fell to the ground, he heard a voice: "Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me?" ⁵⁻⁶He said, "Who are you, Master?"

"I am Jesus, the One you're hunting down. I want you to get up and enter the city. In the city you'll be told what to do next."

⁷⁻⁹His companions stood there dumbstruck—they could hear the sound, but couldn't see anyone—while Saul, picking himself up off the ground, found himself stone-blind. They had to take him by the hand and lead him into Damascus. He continued blind for three days. He ate nothing, drank nothing.

¹⁰*There was a disciple in Damascus by the name of Ananias. The Master spoke to him in a vision: "Ananias." "Yes, Master?" he answered.* ¹¹⁻¹²*"Get up and go over to Straight Avenue. Ask at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus. His name is Saul. He's there praying. He has just had a dream in which he saw a man named Ananias enter the house and lay hands on him so he could see again."*

¹³⁻¹⁴Ananias protested, "Master, you can't be serious. Everybody's talking about this man and the terrible things he's been doing, his reign of terror against your people in Jerusalem! And now he's shown up here with papers from the Chief Priest that give him license to do the same to us."

¹⁵⁻¹⁶But the Master said, "Don't argue. Go! I have picked him as my personal representative to non-Jews and kings and Jews. And now I'm about to show him what he's in for—the hard suffering that goes with this job."

¹⁷⁻¹⁹*So Ananias went and found the house, placed his hands on blind Saul, and said, "Brother Saul, the Master sent me, the same Jesus you saw on your way here. He sent me so you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." No sooner were the words out of his mouth than something like scales fell from Saul's eyes—he could see again! He got to his feet, was baptized, and sat down with them to a hearty meal.*

Ways That God Comes to Us

Some people say “Paul got knocked off his donkey!” I say Paul got yanked into reality. He was running so hard in the wrong direction that God had to grab him by the collar and ask him a very important question. "**Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me?**" I am sure Saul is quite confused. He had been blinded and thrown to the ground. He knows he is in the presence of something or someone who is far superior to himself. The only question he can think of is, "**Who are you, Master?**" In other words, who are you, Lord? I do not recognize your voice but whoever you are I know you are Lord and Master, one who is divine. Here is the surprising answer: "**I am Jesus, the One you're hunting down. I want you to get up and enter the city. In the city you'll be told what to do next.**"

Saul's teacher, Gamaliel, in Acts 5 had warned Saul and others that they should be careful about killing the followers of Jesus... " *I am telling you: Hands off these men! Let them alone. If this program or this work is merely human, it will fall apart, but if it is of God, there is nothing you can do about it—and you better not be found fighting against God!*" Saul could not hear it at the time. He was on a righteous crusade. He was sure he was right. Can you imagine his surprise when the heavenly voice that comes to him is Jesus? I bet he thought, "Whoops! I am been on the wrong side. I have been fighting God!"

God Comes Like a Bolt of Lighting

When was a time you got grabbed by the collar? Wake up calls come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Sometimes it is a hard event in our life like a loss of a job or the end of a close relationship. Let me clarify here, I do not believe that God goes around using car accidents or illness to get our attention. God, however, can and does use these and any situation to invite us to reconnect with him. *The invitation has been there all along.*

In my third year of college, I was busy doing my own thing. I had a busy schedule with lots of important activities. I was even active in a campus Christian fellowship and Bible studies. The problem was with all that activity, I had crowded out listening to God. I was going through a lot of motions, but not really listening to God. That would soon change. At a spring fellowship picnic we were playing soccer and the ball went off the field and down toward a stream. I ran over to get the ball before it in the water only to discover that there was no bank slopping down the water. There was a cliff. I was running so fast I flew right off the edge and onto rock in the stream below. Fortunately, it was not a deep dive. I did cut open my knee, however, and needed stitches. That night I was recovering alone in my apartment. I felt lonely and was in a lot of pain. I said to God I needed his help to heal. I felt he said to me, "I have been here all along. You just need to slow down and experience it."

Hardship has a way of opening our eyes to God's invitation. I do not know what is going on in your life. I do know that God is inviting you and to reach out and take his hand. God is inviting us to stop running, stop ignoring, and stop fighting him. Rather, Jesus is here to walk with us, encourage us, help us, heal us, and set us free. Jesus wants us to do what he asks.

God Comes In Prayer

Jesus instructs Saul to go to the city of Damascus. " *In the city you'll be told what to do next.*" So blind and confused Saul goes to the city and stays at the house of Judas on Straight Street. Jesus has a sense of humor, doesn't he? He sends Saul to Straight Street to set him straight. Note that Saul is blind, goes to the city, has nothing to eat or drink, and waits three day. *Remember, Jesus himself was transformed in three days.* When we

encounter Saul again he is praying. If you sense God is trying to get your attention, stop and listen. Saul did not have much of a choice. Jesus checked him into the waiting room without Saul's consent. To Saul's credit, he did go where Jesus told him to go and entered into a time of prayer and fasting so he would be ready the next time Jesus spoke to him.

How are you and I listening today? Jesus has important instructions for you and me to hear and understand. Like Saul, we need to employ ways to focus and tune into the voice of Jesus. Try listening to Jesus as you go through your day. As you enter a meeting or event, ask God to show you where he is already at work. One of the jobs of the Holy Spirit is to open our eyes to see what is important to God. As you are in this meeting and event, silently lift up prayers for the people you see and the situations you encounter. Someone might be angry, another may be discouraged...offer a quiet prayer for them and ask God to join you in how to respond. As I was helping my neighbors clear their driveways yesterday, one of them invited me in for tea. I still had more work to do, but I sensed I was to stop and go in. We were sipping tea and chatting about light fixtures when one of the men there asked me about how everything began. I mean everything...the whole world. We got into a very interesting conversation about what Hindus and Christians believe about creation. It was a good start to important conversations about faith, something that is often hard to discuss with others. If we are committed to listen to God as we go, Jesus will lead us.

God Comes In a Dream

Meanwhile, Jesus appears to a disciple named, Ananias, in a vision and instructs him to go to Saul and lay hands on him and heal him. Ananias knows all about Saul and wants nothing to do with him. In fact, he tries to convince Jesus that this is a bad idea. How does Jesus respond? He says, "*Don't argue. Go!*"

If God has spoken to you or me in a certain area, we need to stop our arguing and hit the road. Ananias does just that. He finds the house, places his hands on Saul, and prays for him to see again and to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Notice what happens next... "*No sooner were the words out of his mouth than something like scales fell from Saul's eyes—he could see again! He got to his feet, was baptized, and sat down with them to a hearty meal.*"

Invitation to the Lord's Table

If you have been running, I invite you today to stop and come to the table. Allow God to meet you here and take the scales off your eyes. God has important work for you to do. Maybe you have not been running, but have slowly crowded out God with good things like work, family, entertainment, sports, hobbies, and trips. All good, but none of which should be the heart of your life or mine. Jesus wants to be the one at the very

heart of our lives. Jesus is the one who gives us the wisdom and power to love our families and do our work in ways that bless others.

Let us come to the table and meet Jesus. Let us pray...

Prayer

God, we stop and come to you today. Come and change us. We allow you, Jesus, to rearrange our priorities so your work can get done in and through us. Go in us and with us today in everything we do...even to Super Bowl Parties. Give us love for each person and wisdom to know how to serve them. We are ready to serve. We know you that an open, servant's heart is the place you where you love to live and grow. In Jesus' Name. Amen.