

Eastertide and the Book of Acts.
Message for the Third Sunday of Easter, 2016 *(based on Acts 9. 1-20)*

This is the third Sunday of Easter, and we are well and truly into what the church calls “Eastertide”, the great 50 day period from Easter Saturday Evening, when it is held traditionally that Jesus broke out of the tomb, to the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the church, empowering the disciples. The gold and white altar hangings tell us that we are in a special celebratory mode. We use white with gold for those special celebrations, indicating that we need the presence of Jesus close, at funerals, weddings, Christmas and Easter. The paschal candle, the light of Christ, is lit and at the front of the church for all to see, instead of beside the baptismal font. Eastertide—the time we celebrate the son of God risen from the dead -- celebrating that death does not have the last word, that God wins over the evil forces in the world. It’s the celebration of our very being as Christians – we are an Easter people! After walking with Jesus through the darkness of 40 days of Lent, we need 50 days to walk with the risen Christ in celebration of the Light of Easter. Which is why we say each Sunday in the season of Easter: Alleluia, Christ is risen—the Lord is risen indeed: Alleluia!

But you know what else happens in the season of Easter? We read from the book of Acts, and it’s the only time in the 3 year cycle of readings that we have successive readings from the Acts of the Apostles, right through whole season of Easter. According to biblical tradition, who wrote the Acts of the Apostles? Luke.

It’s kind of a neat book, in that it’s the recording of the beginnings of the Christian church, until the arrival of Paul in Rome. Luke records the stories of how the Christian movement began, and spread; the challenges, trials and tribulations of forming this new movement, and how the people of “The Way”, as it was first called, came to be known as Christians. It’s worth taking the time to read it through completely, beginning til end. In chapter 11 you can read that this new movement of people were called Christians, in the city of Antioch (today called Antakya, in southern Turkey). I rather like that earlier phrase, though, the people of “the Way”. It’s more descriptive—that to be a follower of the way of Jesus was to make change in lifestyle, consciously choosing a different way than the rest of society. And what happens when people behave differently than the mainstream? They’re often persecuted for their differences, their beliefs. You think it’s hard keeping a church up and going now? Well, the early days it was really tough!

We also read stories of the disciples healing people and performing other miracles and wonders, how they share their faith and knowledge with others, of Peter’s and then Paul’s journeys of faith. They were fulfilling the great commission -- as Jesus had told them to; preaching and teaching about the Son of God, risen from the dead, baptizing and bringing more and more people into this new way of living. And that annoys the elders, officers and officials of the Temples -- it doesn’t go over any better after Jesus’ death than it did when he was alive. And so we read also about the persecutions of these followers of Jesus, and the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Our story today from the 9th chapter of Acts begins with the description of the activities of a Pharisee named Saul, who was known to condone, encourage and participate in the persecutions of those “who belonged to the Way, men or women “ (*Acts 9: 1*). The fact that the religious

officials felt it necessary to imprison the women of the movement too is indicative of the importance of women to the early church, and the impact and influence they had on Jewish society.

What happens next is the amazing story of the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus. Saul is blinded by an intense light and he, and his companions hear a voice. Saul seems to be aware that he is having a *theophany*—a personal experience of God, but wanting to be sure he asks: “Who are you Lord?” And the voice says; “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” And Saul is told to get up and continue to the city and wait there until he is told what to do. This story of Saul’s conversion experience is so important, so critical to the early church’s movement that Luke tells it twice more in Acts (chapters 22 & 26) and Paul himself tells the story in Galatians and alludes to it in 1st Corinthians. And it really is quite amazing. Saul goes from one who ‘breathes threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord’ (9:1) to ‘proclaim(ing) Jesus in the synagogues, saying ‘He is the Son of God.’” (9:20) Saul does a complete 180, he is totally turned around. He goes from persecutor to proclaimer almost immediately. And what a persecutor he was! This Saul was the one who held the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen to death, who later described himself as a zealot in his desire to persecute these Jesus people.

So, when the Lord comes to Annanias and tells him to go to Saul of Tarsus and lay hands on him so he can regain his sight, I’m sure Annanias would liked to have said to Jesus “You want me to do what?” But taking the more tactful route, and wanting to be sure that Jesus really knows what he’s asking of him, Annanias essentially says to Jesus: “You do know who this Saul guy is don’t you? This is the same Saul of Tarsus who is locking our people up, on the authority of the chief priests.” And the Lord replies, “Yes, I know, it is my intention to use Saul to bring others to come to know me and believe in me.”

Now, the challenge with some of these old bible stories, is figuring out how they make sense for us in our world, today. Can you identify with either of the characters of this story, with either Saul or Annanias? I don’t know about you, but I have never had an experience of God, as Father, Son or Holy Spirit as intense as Saul’s Damascus road experience. And I think that’s maybe just as well, I’m not sure I’m strong enough to handle something as hard as Paul’s calling brought him to, even though we can read in Paul’s letters that Jesus was with him every step of the way.

And Annanias’ being told to go and lay hands on Saul? He knew Saul as the one responsible for jailing and condoning the killing of the members of the new Jesus movement, and that he felt like he was putting himself at great personal risk to do what Jesus asked. Can you put yourself in Annanias’ shoes for a moment? How do you think you would you have responded to that request?

How do we respond to God’s call to do something that we’re really not sure we want to do, something that makes us quite uncomfortable, or something that felt even potentially threatening?

So, when we need answers to tough questions of faith, that’s when we go to the bible to find examples. Like Annanias’ story. He questioned Jesus, he wanted to be sure that he heard right, wanted to confirm what it was that Jesus wanted him to do. And Jesus doesn’t berate him, doesn’t scold him for questioning his calling. Jesus says: it’s ok, go, I’m going to use this Saul fellow to do my work, and I need you to be my hands & feet—literally in this case -- Annanias had to go to Saul and lay hands on him. Annanias brought to Jesus his fears,

his concerns and worries and Jesus reassured him, told him that what he thought he heard Jesus asking him to do was really true and Annanias got the reassurance he needed to do what Jesus asked of him. And look what came of that! Annanias was instrumental in Saul's conversion, in Saul's calling, in changing the church forever – in Saul becoming Paul, you could say! I'm sure Annanias had no idea what the impact of his laying hands on Saul would have. Easy for us to see that now in retrospect.

Jesus calls us to be a part of the bringing about of God's kingdom. And yes, that's sometimes is intimidating and even scary and we're unsure about what we're doing or even why. Like Annanias, we're called to take a chance, to take the plunge sometimes, to push the envelope and come out of our comfort zones. And like Annanias did, there's nothing wrong with saying to Jesus: You want me, you want us, to do what, Lord? And then, it's by taking that leap of faith, by stepping out into the unknown, by answering the call to be people of The Way, that when we're doing God's work.

Walking an unknown road is uncomfortable and challenges us, we feel vulnerable and weak. But like Annanias discovered, and Paul later tells the Corinthian church (*2Cor 12.10*) when we're at our weakest, we're at our strongest. Now, how does that make sense? There's another paradox of our faith! Because, when we step out in faith, we're not walking alone, Jesus is with us, we're walking with God, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. So, when we're at our weakest, that's when we need to rely on God, and so we're really at our strongest. And we're never sure just where that will lead.

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