

The Acts of an Easter People: Humble Repentance
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Easter 3C
Acts 9:1-20

In these Sundays of the Easter Season the Revised Common Lectionary offers the option of preaching from the Book of Acts. Last Sunday the lectionary focused on Peter, who went from being so cowardly he couldn't stand up to a servant girl, to being so courageous he stood up to the entire Jewish council. What changed him? Easter changed him. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead filled Peter up and overflowed in fearless witness. This week we focus on Paul, who underwent an even more dramatic change. Our first encounter with Paul comes at the end of Acts 7, after Stephen has been brought before the council on charges of heresy. The high priest asks him if the things people are saying about him are true and Stephen responds with one of the longest speeches in the Bible, re-telling the entire history of Israel. The council is with him right up to the point when he calls them a bunch of "stiff-necked people" who betrayed and murdered God's Righteous One and then they drag him out of the city and stone him. "And they laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul," Luke tells us, who approved of the whole thing.

It's that Saul who will later be called Paul, but before we get to that part of the story let me give you some background. In Philippians 3 Paul himself tells us that he came into the world with an impeccable pedigree: "circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5). According to Luke Paul was born in Tarsus, the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia, but was brought up in Jerusalem, where he studied at the feet of the famous Rabbi Gamaliel. In one of his speeches in Acts Paul says to the Jews, "I was

educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are.” (Acts 22:3). I picture him as a young doctoral student, somewhere in his mid-twenties, finishing up his Ph.D. at the Jewish seminary in Jerusalem—earnest, driven, doing whatever it took to please his teacher. And maybe that’s why he was standing there that day, watching the coats of the people who were stoning Stephen to death:

He wanted to make his teacher proud.

Because here’s what these disciples were saying: they were saying that Jesus of Nazareth, some out-of-work carpenter from the hills of Galilee, was God’s anointed one—his Messiah. But that couldn’t be, because he had been brought up before the council on charges of blasphemy, claiming to be the Son of God. They had examined him thoroughly, found him guilty, and condemned him to death. The Romans carried out the sentence, nailing him to a cross, and when they finished Jesus—and the whole messy business—was dead and buried. But now these disciples were going around saying that God had raised Jesus from the dead and blaming the council for killing him. They had to be stopped and Saul was just the one to do it. At the beginning of Acts 8 Luke tells us that he was “ravaging the church, entering house after house; dragging off both men and women and committing them to prison.” At the beginning of chapter 9 he is still at it. Luke says, “Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and 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.” He got what he wanted, and as soon as he could round up a posse he headed north.

Damascus is about 135 miles from Jerusalem, as the crow flies. Saul and his men would have had to go up through Galilee and on into Syria. It would have taken them a week or more to get there, with Saul breathing out threats and murder the whole way, but eventually they would have neared their destination. Listen to the way one writer describes it:

It was late one afternoon when they rounded a bend in the road and saw Damascus in the valley below. If they hurried they could make it by nightfall. A light breeze was blowing up there on the heights. Dark clouds were gathering overhead. The air smelled like electricity. Suddenly a blinding light flashed all around them, and Saul was knocked to the ground. For a second or two he lost consciousness, and when he came to he could feel the pounding in his skull, taste the blood in his mouth. He tried to lift his head to see what had happened but he couldn't see anything, just the afterimage of the flash burned onto his retina, fading from orange, to blue, to black. And then he heard the voice. "Saul? Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" "Who . . . who are you, sir?" he answered. "I'm Jesus, the one you are persecuting."ⁱ

And then imagine what must have gone through Saul's head: If this Jesus really had risen from the dead, if he really was alive and well, then everything his followers had been saying about him could be true. He really could be the Messiah, God's anointed one, because it would have been God, of course, who raised him from the dead. It would have been his way of validating Jesus' life and vindicating Jesus' death. And all of this would mean that Saul had been persecuting people who were following the way God had laid out for them, and that Saul—who thought he was doing God's will by persecuting them—was, in fact, doing just the opposite. The truth would have dawned on him like a clap of thunder, and if it had been up to him he might have just lain there forever in the dust of the road, but Jesus told him to get up and go into the city, and that's what he did. He still couldn't see anything. The men who had come with him had to lead him into the city by the hand—a much different entry than he had imagined.

For three days he sat in the house of a man named Judas on Straight Street, unable to see anything and refusing any kind of food or drink. Truth is, he didn't have any appetite. All he could think was that he had been wrong about this whole thing, *dead wrong*. The irony of it was that nobody had ever tried harder to be right. Following the letter of the law, scrupulously obeying the Scriptures, passionately committed to his cause, ready to die for his beliefs, Saul had been struck down by the revelation that he was wrong, wrong, wrong about all of it.

I'm guessing that's what he thought about during those three days: he thought about how strange it was that you could travel in the deep, reliable ruts of your religious tradition and discover that God had gone off in another direction altogether; that he was not just the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but now, apparently, the God of anyone who was willing to follow; that he was making sudden, startling turns and doing strange and surprising things. A God like that you couldn't follow only by keeping your nose in the book, no matter how good a book it was. You had to have your head up, your eyes open. You had to sniff the wind for the scent of the Holy Spirit. You had to be ready to drop everything and follow a God like that wherever he wanted to go.

While Saul was still thinking those thoughts the Lord came to a disciple in Damascus named Ananias, and said to him in a vision, "Ananias!" He said, "Here I am, Lord." The Lord said, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from

the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:10-16).

So Ananias went and entered the house, and he laid his hands on Saul. He said, “Brother Saul (did you hear that?), *Brother* Saul the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food he regained his strength” (Acts 9:17-19).

For Saul it was **confirmation** that what had happened on the road was real. He might have begun to believe that he had imagined the whole thing. The men who were with him had only seen the bright light—they hadn’t heard the voice. So when Ananias said, “the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me to you,” Paul would have thought, “Aha! Then it did happen!” He would have received confirmation.

And then he received **restoration**: he got his sight back. Ananias laid hands on him the way Jesus had laid hands on the blind and something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes. Have you heard that expression? “The scales fell from my eyes”? It means that you are able to see something in a whole new way. And surely, after this experience, Saul was able to see Jesus in a whole new way.

And finally what Ananias did for Saul was a kind of **ordination**. Jesus had said, “He is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.” So, Ananias baptized him in the name of Jesus, made a

disciple out of him, and gave him something to eat and drink. Luke says that Saul stayed with the disciples in Damascus for several days and then, as soon as he was able, he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues saying, “He is the Son of God!” (Acts 9:20).

Can you believe it?

What we learn from Saul’s story is that one of the acts of an Easter people is humble repentance. That encounter on the road to Damascus changed everything for him. It convinced him that he had been wrong, wrong, *wrong* about Jesus. While not everybody has that kind of experience I believe there is a lesson here for all of us. Because there are Christian people in the world today who are just as convinced as Saul was that their way is the right way. They bury their noses in the Good Book and come out of it as he did, breathing threats and murder. They can tell you who’s going to heaven and who’s going to hell, and they can quote chapter and verse to justify their positions. But is it possible that in spite of all their convictions they are just as wrong as Saul was? The Bible he read, and the conclusions he brought away from it, told him that Jesus couldn’t be the Messiah. And yet there on the road to Damascus he had an encounter that left him blind and helpless and certain of only one thing:

That Jesus was.

What if some of the convictions we hold turn out to be equally mistaken? What if the doctrines on which we have staked our life and faith turn out to be dead wrong? It happened to Peter, you know. In the very next chapter of Acts he has a vision of a sheet being lowered down onto the rooftop where he is napping, a sheet filled with every kind of unclean animal. “Rise, Peter. Kill and eat,” God says. And Peter answers, “God forbid, Lord. I have never eaten anything unclean.” He had read his Bible. He knew

what Leviticus 11 says about eating animals like that. But God replies, “Don’t call unclean what I have called clean.” Only later does Peter understand that God is talking about Gentiles like Cornelius, people who have been considered “unclean” by the Jews, people whom God has now called clean. After Cornelius and his household have received the gift of the Holy Spirit Peter says, almost apologetically, “Do you see any reason we shouldn’t baptize these people?” In other words, “I was wrong about the Gentiles; wrong, wrong, *wrong!*”

Maybe it’s just the book of Acts, but you could get the idea from these two stories that God is moving out in all sorts of new directions, all the time, and that if you want to keep up with him you can’t do it *only* by keeping your nose in the book. You have to put your nose in the air from time to time. You have to sniff the wind for the scent of the Holy Spirit and follow wherever it leads. If nothing else you might learn some humility, knowing that if Saul, who later became the great apostle Paul, was wrong; and if Peter, the rock on which the church would be built, was wrong; then you or I could be wrong, too.

None of us here is old enough to remember it but in 1845 a group of Baptists in the south left the Triennial Baptist Convention over the issue of slavery. They didn’t like it that missionaries weren’t allowed to own slaves, so they started their own convention. They called it the Southern Baptist Convention. I’m sure that passionate speeches were made and chapter and verse were quoted to defend their position on slavery. I’m sure they mentioned what Paul says about how Christians should treat their slaves (Eph. 6:9, Col. 4:1). But in 1995—150 years later—the messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention in Atlanta passed a resolution that read: “We lament and repudiate historic

acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest . . . We apologize to all African-Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime; and we genuinely repent of racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously or unconsciously.” It was another way of saying, “We were wrong, wrong, *wrong!*”

We were wrong about slavery. We’ve been wrong about some other things since then. We are probably wrong about some things now. So, before we stand up to make a long, impassioned speech defending our position on something, we might want to ask the Lord if he’s doing something new, and if he needs any help. Because the only thing worse than saying “I was wrong,” is to hear Jesus say,

“You were wrong.”

—*Jim Somerville* © 2016

ⁱ Jim Somerville, “Getting in the Way,” a sermon preached at First Baptist Church, Washington, DC, April 25, 2004.