



Acts 9:1-19a
Acts: The Church On Mission
Didn't See That One Coming!

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Sometimes things happen that we really don't expect – like the doctor saying, “Congratulations, it's twins!”; or, grown children actually moving out of the house...grow children moving back into the house...a job offer, hair loss, weight gain...Stuff happens that we don't see coming. In June of 2006 I had shoulder surgery to repair a torn labrum. I'd never had surgery like that before, and had never taken prescription pain medications. The doctor prescribed Percocet for me. Everything went pretty well in the surgery and my immediate recovery, and I went home on schedule. The one thing they weren't able to do, however, was drain a golf-ball sized cyst that had formed in my shoulder near the tear in my labrum. Every time they poked it with a needle, it just shifted around. So they left it, knowing that usually these things go away on their own once the torn body part is put back together.

Well, when a couple people from our church came by to visit me at home, I started crying about the cyst not being drained. Then I started crying about how I was laid up and couldn't help around the house: I cried that I couldn't help with the kids (3, ages 4 and under at the time). I cried that I couldn't mow the lawn. I cried that I couldn't help in the kitchen. I felt so bad for Gwen with all this on her shoulders...I don't think she'd ever felt so loved and emotionally supported by me as I cried about being laid up...but I'd never felt so emotional. I was a train-wreck...and I never saw that coming. What guy cries because he can't help with the dishes or the laundry? I mean, I have no problem doing that stuff...I do several times a week. But to cry over my inability to help? What guy does that? We quickly got me a different pain medication, and that fixed everything, and I went right back to not caring at all about my helpless state...which probably caused Gwen to start crying. But I felt great. But those tears...that emotional response fueled by a pain medication I'll never take again, was completely out of the blue.

And today's passage is about one of the most unexpected, out of the blue transformations in a person that has ever happened, as Jesus gets Saul on board with the mission Jesus gives his followers: to be his witnesses wherever we go. Saul was a man on a mission to eradicate the people who

continued to proclaim the name of Jesus. He even takes his persecution out beyond Jerusalem as he makes this journey from there to Damascus, which was about 140 miles to the northeast of Jerusalem, and a major gateway in terms of trade and commerce. If the Christian faith took root there in Damascus, it could very easily spread far and wide. **So off to Damascus Saul goes, in a strategic move to rid the world of these people following Jesus.**

And on his way, he has a physical experience that brings about a 180-degree turn in his spiritual condition. He is apparently struck by lightning, though it doesn't explicitly say. But whether there was a storm, or whether it was a bolt of lightning out of nowhere, or whether it was something else, Saul didn't see it coming. And when he gets his wits gathered together around him, he can't see, and he hears this voice calling out to him. "Why are you persecuting me?" Saul's response is "Persecuting you? What do you mean? Who are you?" And the reply back is, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

Now, I know this experience of Saul's is pretty wild – a flash of light, temporary blindness, Jesus speaking to him. We've probably all heard of people who said that God spoke to them, or made his presence known in a really unusual way like this. And to be honest, I'm usually a bit skeptical of these kinds of things when people tell me about them...or especially if I read about them or hear of them second-hand. I did one time ask some people to pray for my back, which I'd injured and wasn't getting better, even a year or more after I hurt it. So they did...and I will tell you, while my back did not get 100% better, it was significantly improved right there in the moment they prayed, and I remember feeling like muscles or ligaments or tendons were moving in my lower back as they prayed. I kid you not. So I know God can move in ways that to us seem odd.

But whatever happened to Saul...and however uncertain or even skeptical any of us might be about what happened: **There is no question about the directional change in Saul's life. He went from being the greatest persecutor of the early church to being *the* pivotal person in the spread of the church.** It's an absolute 180-degree turn-around. No one...I mean, no one...not Saul himself, not any Christian, not any Pharisee, not his mom, not his dad (if they were still alive at that point)...no one saw this change in him

coming. It would be on par with the Mariners winning the World Series this year...or any year, really...or with me liking country music, or onions...No one would see any of those things coming...although the scope of Saul's turn-around is obviously much more significant.

And there are a few things I want to highlight for us that we can learn from Saul's experience.

First, we see that life really begins with a divine encounter with Jesus Christ, and we are either being prepared for that encounter, or we're living in the assurance of it. Probably most of us here this morning are living in assurance of the true and abundant life that Jesus promises and that we receive when we have encountered Jesus and our minds are open to faith in him. Most of us have come to that place of faith. Maybe some had a Saul-like trajectory where we were really against Jesus and then something happened that radically transformed us. Maybe some of us grew up in Christian homes and we've followed Jesus for as long as we can remember. But none-the-less, most of us are probably living in the assurance of our encounter with Jesus.

And, for those of us in that situation, especially if we have been following Jesus for a long time, and especially if we grew up following Jesus and never have had quite such an obvious transformational experience, we can really learn from Ananias. Ananias was probably high up on Saul's list of people to drag back to Jerusalem and have thrown in jail. And yet, he follows the prompting of the Lord, goes to the house where Saul is staying, and he greets him. And does he greet him with tentativeness or fear? Who knows what he was feeling on the inside, but on the outside he greeted him warmly: "Brother Saul..." No matter where someone's past has led them, when their present and future path is to walk with Jesus, we welcome them as a brother or a sister in Christ. What a great model for us to follow.

Now some people are not living in assurance of the promises of Jesus, but instead are being prepared for our encounter with him and to then know him as Lord and Savior. And you never know when God is going to break through and get a hold of us. **God often gets a hold of us when we don't see it**

coming. 20 years ago, I never dreamed I'd be a pastor. I was a ski-bum in Sun Valley, biding time until I put my business degree to work and got a real job. I'd grown up in the church, but didn't really live out my faith, and in fact an awful lot of the time in my teens and early 20's, a casual observer would have thought I was anything but a Christian. I didn't go so far as to persecute the church like Saul...but if you'd seen me 20 years ago when I was 14 years old...I mean 24...and in the 7-8 years prior...you certainly would not have said, "Boy, there's a future pastor." I was not on the lookout for Jesus to send my life in this direction. I was on the lookout for the next powder day.

But here I am! So, I get it: **Oftentimes, God gets a hold of us when we least expect it, when we're not looking for Him, and says, "It's time to follow me."** I have no doubt that he's saying those words to some folks here this morning...That there's some kind of a divine encounter that Jesus is having with some of us here in this hour together, and we did not come here expecting to hear what God is saying to us. So, we're either being prepared for that divine encounter, or are living in affirmation of it, and once we have that encounter and follow Jesus, we begin to really live as God invites us to, and as we were created to.

The second thing to take away from this passage is that: **God has a plan for every single one of us that we only can know when we've met Jesus and begin to follow him.** We see this in general through this passage and the new trajectory that Saul's life goes in. But we see it explicitly in verses 15 and 16 when the Lord says to Ananias: "Go! This man [Saul] is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Saul was uniquely positioned for this. Because he was a Roman citizen by birth and undoubtedly trained by his parents or other mentors in philosophical debate and so forth...but raised in Jerusalem, knew the Hebrew Bible forwards and backwards and was a "Hebrew of Hebrews" as he writes in Philippians 3:5...because of all this: **He was uniquely positioned to be an instrument of Jesus' to share the gospel message and reach people so that the Good News of Jesus Christ would spread across linguistic, cultural, governmental, and philosophical barriers that others may not be able to cross.**

And Jesus wants to work the same way in and through each of us. He has a plan for you to live into his mission to be his witnesses. Each of us is uniquely created, with unique experiences, backgrounds, relationships, skills, talents, and so forth, to be Jesus' witnesses wherever we go. Maybe, like Saul, we need God to really get a hold of us, and shake us up to get us on board with that mission...or maybe we're like Ananias and we're already on board but there's some new direction or new relationship God is calling us to, so his mission would be carried out.

One of my favorite bands is Switchfoot. They've been making music together for 20 years or so. And in one of their most popular songs, they sing the line, **"We were meant to live for so much more/Have we lost ourselves?"** – Switchfoot, **"Meant to Live"** I'd sing it for you, but I don't want you running for the doors. And it's a great line about how Jesus invites us into this plan for life that he has for us...invites us into the mission that He has and gives to us...that there's so much more that we were created for than what we tend to experience...so much more for which we were meant to live. And to get that, we have to lose ourselves first. Saul, who becomes known as Paul soon after his transformation, puts it like this: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). But too often we never get there, we miss out on it, we're so focused on other things in life – things that won't last, things that aren't going to bring about new life or eternal life, or give us a mission with any lasting significance...and we miss the mission that Jesus calls us to. God got through to Saul and it completely turned him around. God got through to Ananias – not as famously or as radically as he did to Saul, but just as necessarily. And they both got on board with Jesus and His mission.

So, all of us here this morning have had the opportunity to encounter Jesus. I believe that he has even met us here in some way, shape, or form. He's calling out to you and making himself known, even if it doesn't include flashes of light, getting knocked down, temporary blindness or hearing his voice audibly. He's still calling out to you – whether through the Scripture passage, the sermon, a song we sang, one of the songs the kids sang, through a prayer, through a word of encouragement or affirmation that someone says

to you. This isn't the only time or place He's doing this either...undoubtedly God has been working on your heart before today...but it's where we are right now. **And like he does with Saul, Jesus is inviting us to get on board with his plan and his mission.** He's saying, "This is the mission for which I gave my life on the cross. This is the mission for which I was resurrected. This is the mission for which you ought to give your life." That invitation might hit us out of the blue like my tears over not being able to fold laundry and mow the lawn. But that's the way God often works: from the resurrection of Jesus to the trajectory of Saul's life, perhaps even to the events that have brought each of us here this morning. And I pray that we'd respond as Saul did...and as Ananias did, too...and live faithfully to Jesus, as He is always good and always faithful to us...and that we would respond to that grace in all that we do so that this all-important mission of Jesus would first transform us, and then be carried out by us each and every day. Let's pray...Amen.