

Bible Tuesday for the second Sunday after Easter, 2019

Acts 9:1-20

Meanwhile 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. 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." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." The Lord said to him, "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." So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "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. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

"Meanwhile" – what comes before this section that necessitates a "meanwhile"? Peter and John and some disciples are preaching, teaching, healing in Jerusalem and getting arrested and flogged for it. Philip, the apostle, has gone off to Samaria and preached there. Then he heads south and encounters the Ethiopian eunuch, whom he baptizes. Luke is showing the readers and hearers that the disciples and apostles are hard at work carrying out the great commission, "Go and make disciples of all nations...baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...", but Saul is running right behind them trying to arrest all the new followers of Jesus.

Suddenly Jesus accosts Saul with the truth, the true Light of Christ, and the truth of what Saul was doing. By persecuting followers of Jesus, Saul was persecuting Jesus, himself. Since Saul had blinded himself to the truth of Jesus, Jesus blinded Saul to everything else, allowing Saul his own personal version of being in a grave for three days to contemplate his sins.

How amazingly faithful Ananias was! Jesus asks him to go into a lion's den and heal a sick, wild lion! Ananias still had his warrant to arrest Christians and could nab Ananias as soon as Saul recovered his sight. But God asked this of Ananias and so he obeyed!

In a culture where Latin was the common language, Greek was the language of the educated, Hebrew was the language at the Temple in Jerusalem, Aramaic was the language of common Jews in the Promised Land, and myriad languages were spoken by merchants and conquered peoples throughout the land, most people were called by multiple names. Saul/Paul is a good example of this. Saul is Hebrew and Paul is Greek. Common Christian folklore is that Saul changed his name to Paul once he was converted. But this is not so. When Saul is in traditional Jewish lands, the Promised Land, he is frequently referred to as Saul because it is his name in Hebrew. When Saul is making his trips throughout the Roman Empire, he is frequently called Paul because that is his name in Greek. Same thing with Peter, whose Hebrew name is Simone, but Jesus gives him the name/title Cephas which means rock in Aramaic. Petros is rock in Greek. In the New Testament, the same man is called Simone, Petros (Peter in English), and Cephas.

Once Saul is healed, he was baptized and received the Holy Spirit. Then all the zeal he had for persecuting Jesus and arresting the faithful was turned toward proclaiming Jesus as Messiah/Christ and Lord. His unique position as a well-trained Pharisee who knew the scriptures and Jewish Law far better than the common Jew made him a powerhouse for the gospel of Jesus once baptized. The huge problem was that he was not trusted by most Jews in the Promised Land, where his former reputation preceded him. They were terrified that he was some kind of spy for the high priest and Temple authorities, trying to arrest them and stone them for blaspheme. As a result, Saul/Paul spent much of his time outside Jewish lands, preaching to the little clusters of Hellenistic Jews and then to the Greeks, Romans, and others in those lands.

Psalm 30

I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me.

O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me.

O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name.

For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved."

By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; I was dismayed.

To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication:

"What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?

Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!"

You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

This psalm is ascribed to David and is said to be “a song for the dedication of the House (Temple).” The Temple was constructed after David’s death by Solomon. This psalm may have been written for that time but attributed to David as a way of honoring him. Or the psalm may have been written by David and saved for the dedication of the Temple or merely used at that time.

In early Jewish thought, it is not clear that there was belief in life with God after death. Sheol is the nothingness to where those go whose untimely death is punishment. All early deaths that were not heroic, such as the death of a soldier in battle, were believed to be punish for sins of either the one who died or his/her parents. While those who “lived a long, good life and were laid to rest with their ancestors” were not believed to go to Sheol, it is not clear where they were believed to go. We read in the New Testament that the Pharisees believed in resurrection and life with God in eternity but there are no such statements in the Hebrew Scriptures. This psalm appears to tell the story of someone who was gravely ill and almost died an untimely death. This would have brought shame upon him and his family.

The psalmist believed that his grave illness also came from God. “His anger is but for a moment” refers to the illness which the psalmist believed was inflicted upon him. “What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you?” refers to this grave illness as well. Recovery from the illness, then, is believed to also come from God, whether mercy, grace, or “That’s enough. You have learned your lesson.”

“You have turned my mourning into dancing. You have taken off my sackcloth...” – In this “illness/early death = punishment by God” construct, the ill must mourn and repent of their sins as well as fight off their disease. I cannot imagine the emotional and physical burden of this belief system. When one recovers from illness, then one is not only filled with joy for healing but also for God’s mercy and forgiveness. The one is not banished to death in the nothingness, the utter silence of Sheol, but rather lives to praise God!

Revelation 5:11-14

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

This pericope of Revelation comes from the throne room scene, where John of Patmos has a vision of God's heavenly throne room. In that vision, God is on his throne and a slaughtered lamb with throat slit and bled out is but is now resurrected come gently walking into the room and heavenly creatures and the martyrs from earth who are in heaven break forth into praise.

"Receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing"
"blessing and honor and glory and might" – These lists of wonderful attributes are common in the literature of Roman Empire and its lands. These very words were used when crowning caesars and when the caesars held court or made public appearances. Note that John of Patmos writes "Worthy is the Lamb...to receive power and wealth..." John of Patmos is reclaiming these attributes from the caesars and their empire and giving them to whom they really belong, Jesus.

John 21:1-19

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberius; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon 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. 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. That 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 sea. But 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. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus 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. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

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." A 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." He 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. Very 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.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

“After these things...” – “These things” are the Easter morning appearance in the upper room where “the doors were locked for fear of the Jews, (that is, Annas, Caiaphas, and the Temple authorities. All these are always referred to as “the Jews” in the gospel of John.) Jesus stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’...Then he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’” By this fishing adventure and breakfast on the beach in the gospel of John, the disciples had already received the Holy Spirit and the Keys of the Kingdom.

Jesus called the disciples with the promise of great fishing adventures such as mentioned in the minor prophets. This early morning bumper catch is a reminder of that promise. Whereas in the gospel of Luke, Cleopas and the other unnamed disciple on the road to Emmaus did not recognize Jesus until the breaking of the bread, Peter, Thomas, James, John, Nathanael, and two others don’t recognize Jesus until their nets are overloaded with fish.

“Children, you have no fish, have you?” – The disciples have resumed their old lives before they met Jesus, they went back to fishing. But it was unfruitful for them to do so. After Jesus redirects Peter’s Maundy Thursday courtyard denials of his relationship to Jesus, Jesus commands all seven of the apostles to, “Follow me.” Don’t act as if Jesus never came. You have a new life now. Get on with it.