

Year C, Easter 3
April 10th, 2016
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Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)

We are “People of the Way”

The tension gets set from the beginning. Saul, who later changes his name to Paul, is breathing threats and murder against “the people of the Way”. He requests the high priest authorize him to arrest and return bound to Jerusalem any man or woman he discovers to be a follower of Jesus. Permission is granted.

Before the crucifixion the authorities had expected the death of Jesus to put an end to this new movement but now it seemed to be bursting into life with more energy than before. His followers were speaking with a boldness they had never exhibited while he was alive. The movement was getting out of hand and someone smart enough to see the dangers needed to step forward.

Saul, a brilliant and well educated Pharisee of the most conservative branch of the Pharisees, who had grown up in Tarsus, a city in present day Turkey, had traveled widely and understood both Rome and Jerusalem, stepped forward. He would take responsibility to stamp out this grass fire before it could further endanger their culture and traditions. Already the fire had spread to Damascus.

These followers of Jesus didn’t have a name. They weren’t called Christians. Luke describes them simply as those who belong to “the Way.” “The Way,” what an interesting term! How did people on “the Way” differ from those who weren’t on the way? What is Jesus’ Way? If Jesus is leading them on “the Way” what is he leading away from and toward what is he moving that set them apart?

Today’s text beginning with Saul “breathing threats and murder” and ending with Paul’s baptism, give us a clue. As always “the Way” starts with an awareness of our participation in human violence, in this case Paul breathing threats and murder, and ends with a path of deliverance for the whole world where humans die to their own submersion in violence and find deliverance in baptism. This is the deeper meaning of baptism to which I am coming. You remember in baptism we go under the water as in death and rise through the water to new life. This has become a largely meaningless sacrament to me until I start viewing it as a deliverance from human submersion in violence and a taking on of the capacity for life lived non-violently. Baptism marks that transition though I think the church has largely forgotten that. I’m sure we will be talking more about this in the future.

As Saul moves toward Damascus he travels with certainty that he is doing the right thing. He has authorization from the highest religious authority and he knows Rome won’t care.

The text continues, *“During the Journey, as he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven encircled him. He fell to the ground.”* The light didn’t knock him to the ground. Light doesn’t have that kind of power. His own fear buckled his knees. Being a man who specialized in the administration of fear, he was full of fear when his defenses were breached.

Luke says the light came from heaven. Heaven is that place outside human control and all the pressure we put on ourselves and others. Heaven is run by love and forgiveness not rivalry and fear. It’s where the transcendent comes from; it’s the place of resurrection on this third Sunday after Easter.

“He heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ The voice doesn’t ask, *“Why don’t you believe in me Saul?”* No, it’s why are you violent toward me, Saul? Why do you hunt people down and throw them into prison for following me? Saul has divided the world into those he considers good and those he considers bad. He thinks he is wiping out evil by attacking those he thinks are bad but actually he is persecuting Jesus.

Until now he had seen no evil in himself. The voice challenged all that; his entire understanding of himself as God-fearing falls into doubt.

“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asks. *“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,”* comes the reply. Did you hear that! Can you imagine Saul’s shock? The one he has committed his life to eradicating is speaking to him. Everything Saul believes is being contradicted. His world shatters.

Without a hint of retribution Jesus responds with instruction to guide the now lost Saul. *“Now get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”* With Saul’s guidance system run aground, Jesus provides him with direction. First get up, then enter the city, then you will be told what to do.

“Those traveling with him stood there speechless; they heard the voice but saw no one. After they picked Saul up from the ground, he opened his eyes but he couldn’t see.”

Saul’s world has just fallen apart and his blindness is a dramatic way of telling us this. *“So they led him by the hand into Damascus.”* Saul will need to rethink everything. Later in Paul’s letters, Paul tells us it took him three years to work through and rebuild his world. The new world was built on an utterly different foundation.

Luke’s’ story now picks up another thread.

“In Damascus there was a certain disciple named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, ‘Ananias!’ He answered, ‘Yes, Lord.’ The Lord instructed him, ‘Go to Judas’ house on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias enter and put his hands on him to restore his sight.’

“Ananias countered, ‘Lord, I have heard many reports about this man. People say he has done horrible things to your holy people in Jerusalem. He’s here with authority from the chief priests to arrest everyone who call on your name.’”

The Lord replied, "Go! This man is the agent I have chosen to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

That last phrase *"how much Saul must suffer for the sake of my name"* struck me as never before. Is Luke saying the Lord is going to show Saul; this man so driven by rivalry and so comfortable with violence, how to live in another way? Does it mean Saul must learn to suffer violence rather than inflict it? Could this be "the Way" and how people of "the Way" live?

"Ananias went to the house. He placed his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord sent me—Jesus, who appeared to you on the way as you were coming here. He sent me so that you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

When do you think Paul was converted to "the way?" Was it when he was surrounded by the light and fell to the ground? Was it when Jesus asked him the question about why he persecutes him? Was it while he was blind and being led by the hand toward Damascus?

I think it was when Ananias placed his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord sent me so that you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Ananias called him "Brother Saul". He touched him. Ananias could have extracted revenge on Saul who stood blind and helpless before him. Saul probably expected that. But Ananias acted in forgiveness and gave him the Spirit of Forgiveness that Luke calls the Holy Spirit. That was the moment of Paul's conversion. The community in the name of Jesus forgave Saul and he became Paul.

It's the way of Jesus, it's the way of peace, it's what Luke calls "the Way." Like Saul, we are in the process of being struck blind with light; we are rethinking everything and finding a new path. It's a path illumined by the Holy Spirit, centered in forgiveness, and lived out as suffering violence rather than inflicting it. This new path is the hope of the world. Being on it makes us "people of the Way". Amen.