

July 5, 2015
Acts 9:1-19

Going out of Our Way to See

Saul was on his way to hunt down the followers of Jesus. He was on his way to Damascus, with the official papers in his pocket, so he could arrest the followers of Jesus and put them in prison in Jerusalem.

As Saul was on his way, walking down the road, maybe he was thinking--like you do when you walk--maybe he was thinking about how much he did not like these followers of the Way. That's what they called themselves. They said they belonged to the Way because Jesus had said, "I am the Way, the truth and the life." Saul knew that that was wrong. What they said about Jesus was wrong. What they said about him being the Son of God was so wrong it made Saul angry. Angry enough that he would do whatever it took to stop them. and put them in prison. These followers of the Way. Humph. Saul would show them THE WAY to prison.

Maybe Saul harrumphed a little like that as he walked down the road. All of this was such nonsense, the Way that these people were always talking about. It had nothing to do with God's word or God's law in the scripture. These little groups were nothing more than outcasts and nobodies with a false Messiah. Sharing their possessions. Eating meals together. Preaching repentance and forgiveness and that you should love your enemies. It might seem harmless. It might seem OK. But these misguided ideas had a way of spreading. And the true Way of God that Saul knew, where would that be, then? What would happen to the real, orthodox Way of God? What would happen if no one stood up and fought for it and defended it?

Saul is on the road to Damascus. And I wonder what he was thinking on the way. I wonder why he would go so far out of his way to Damascus in order to arrest these followers of Jesus. I wonder what I might go that far out of my way for. In college, I remember on a Saturday morning, I went with a group to a factory that was about two hours away. It was a factory that made thermostat equipment. But some of their parts were being sold

to other companies that made landmines. And I suppose landmines are meant to keep people safe. But they also injure children when big people forget where they are. I felt it was worth my time to go out of my way to that factory to let my voice be heard.

Saul was going out of his way to Damascus to find the followers of the Way. He was going to abduct the men and women who were part of it and bring them back to Jerusalem and put them in prison. And he must have felt quite passionately about all of it to go all that way. He must have felt quite certain that this was the right thing to do and that it was what God wanted him to do. This was God's Way. Saul must have been sure of it.

Have you ever felt like that about something? Can you think of a time when you went out of your way to do something because you were sure you had to?

Saul was on his way to Damascus. And he believed his way of solving this problem was the right way. He believed his plan was God's plan.

But he suddenly discovered that God had a different plan. All of a sudden, he discovered that his way was the wrong way. Maybe you've experienced something like that before. You go somewhere with one purpose in mind, and you discover that God has another purpose. You have one thing in mind, but God has another thing in mind. And those two things collide. On the road to Damascus, Saul's way and God's way collide with each other. There is a bright light from heaven and Saul hears a voice, plain as day; "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Can you imagine that collision of your will and God's will? A collision of heaven and earth? The sights, the sounds, the lightning bolts. God's Way gets in Saul's way. Can you imagine?

Saul, of course, was shell-shocked. He was shaken by this collision. He had no idea what had just happened or who was speaking to him. He asks: "Who are you, Lord?" And a voice replies: "It's Jesus, the one you are persecuting." Oh, no. I wonder what that was like for Saul. To hear that the one speaking to him is Jesus, the one whose followers he is persecuting. Maybe Saul thought something like: WHAT?? or OH Boy

am I going to get it! or OH MAN, O MAN, did I get this wrong! Maybe all of the above. God gets in Saul's way. And suddenly Saul understands—he sees everything clearly in an instant about who Jesus is and how he was wrong. And at that moment he sees, he goes blind.

Saul is no longer on his way. He is no longer on his own path. He is no longer on his own mission. He can no longer do things his way. He must do things God's way. He must go to Damascus. But he can't make his way there himself. He needs others to guide him. And I wonder what that was like for Saul. A person so strong and so determined. Someone so certain of things. Now so uncertain. He cannot see like he once did. Now he is blind. Now he is in need.

Ananias was a dedicated and faithful follower of Jesus. He lived in Damascus. And when he heard the Lord speaking to him, he didn't need to say: Who are you, Lord? He knew who it was and he said, "Here I am, Lord." But when he heard what the Lord was asking him, he hesitated. The Lord was telling him to go to a certain house on a certain

street and there he would find Saul of Tarsus, waiting for him to come and heal him. Ananias knew all about Saul. He knew how he was on his way to arrest him and his friends. He says to the Lord: “Now, hold on a minute, Lord. Hold on just a minute. I know this Saul of Tarsus. I know he is not a good person. I know he is not a nice person. In fact, he is downright terrible. He is persecuting people who invoke YOUR name. He is putting people who follow YOUR way in prison.”

Ananias hesitated because he knew Saul. And Saul was an enemy. He was the enemy of all the followers of Jesus. He was an enemy of God. I wonder if Ananias wanted to say no to the Lord. Or if he wanted to ask the Lord to find someone else. Or if he wanted to convince the Lord to find another way to do things. “How could this be right? How could you, Lord, ask me to help my enemy? How could you bring about good through this this evil person?” I wonder how hard it was for Ananias to do what the Lord asked.

I wonder how hard it would be for us. I wonder what we would do if God asked us to do something like that? I wonder, if God asked you or

me to believe that God could use our enemy to do something good, what would we say?

The most amazing thing in this story, I think, is not Saul's vision. It's not Saul being blind and then seeing again. For me, the miracle of this story is Ananias and his trust in God's way of doing things. Ananias trusts God and that God can actually use someone like Saul. That Saul **COULD** actually be the instrument of God's choosing. That Saul, the enemy of Jesus, the enemy of his friends, the enemy of his faith, **COULD** actually be transformed by God into a friend. Ananias has faith that God can do that. And that this just might be the Way that God does things. Instead of destroying enemies, God transforms them. Instead of giving up, God persists in love.

Ananias goes out of **HIS** way to find Saul. This man who persecuted his friends and terrorized his community. He finds Saul helpless and blind. And he goes out of **HIS** way to call Saul his brother. He goes out of **HIS** way to lay his hands on him and pray with him. Ananias goes out of his

way, setting aside his Way for the forgiveness of Jesus. And when Saul receives this grace from the person he would have arrested and harmed, the scales fall from his eyes.

I truly wonder at Ananias, setting aside his own way for the Way of Jesus. Believing that God could make the blind see. That God could do something, even with his enemy. That God's Way was better than his way.

After all of this, Saul is baptized. And I imagine that moment marked a new beginning for him. That's what baptism does. It marks the beginning of a new life. In these waters, we are born anew. In these waters, our mistakes and prejudices are washed away. Our agendas and our plans are washed away. We no longer live our way, we live God's way. We no longer practice judgment and hatred of our enemy. We practice hope and resurrection.

Our craft today is a piece of paper with waves on it. I invite you draw or write things in your life that need to be healed. Things that you do your way that need to be given to God's Way. Write or draw prayers for those who need restoration and grace. Prayers for yourself. Prayers for others. Prayers for your enemies. Prayers for redemption and forgiveness. Let the waters of baptism cleanse you and remake you. Let God's way to be your Way. And let our way together be the Way of Christ.