

“Encounters”

May 8, 2022
King City United Church
York United Ministries
Rev. Andrew K. Lee

Prayer for Illumination

O God of light, by the power of your Holy Spirit, restore our sight, that in these words of Scripture and sermon we may see Christ, in whose name we pray. **Amen.**

Scripture Reading: Acts 9:1-20

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² 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. ³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵ He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹ 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, ¹² 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.” ¹³ But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” ¹⁵ 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; ¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” ¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul^{1b} 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.” ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

This is the word of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.

< Children's Time >

Here, look at this man! Who is this? His name is Saul. He seems



really angry. Do you know why? He was a well-known Jewish person who beat and captured Christians in Jesus' time. He is famous for persecuting Christians. Yet, he was so skilled, intelligent, and enthusiastic to find and bind Christians. Did Christians like him? No, Christians didn't like him and always tried to hide from him because he was so scary.

One day he travelled to Damascus. His trip was not for vacation. It was an official business trip. Saul and his colleagues sped up to a synagogue in Damascus because he got information that in Damascus, many Christians gathered. While rushing into the city of Damascus, all of a sudden, he was surrounded by flashing lights from heaven. He was not able to move because of the mysterious light. He lost his strength to stand, so he fell to the ground. And he heard a voice from heaven. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He was so frightened to hear the voice. But he summoned his strength to ask back. "Who ... are you... Lord?" And the voice replied, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Saul's colleagues also heard the voice from heaven. They also were frightened. When the voice disappeared, Saul was not able to see. So his friends helped him walk to Damascus.

Due to his experience, Saul thought over and over again about what happened to him and learned that the resurrection of Jesus was real and the Christians were not lying. Since then, the miracle changed

Saul's life. Later he became an energetic activist and writer for Christians, and many of his activities and writings from the Bible are in the New Testament.

My friends, Jesus' resurrection is real, and it changed his whole life. Our God is the God who gives us a power that is bigger than ourselves that can totally change our life. And we are so blessed to be the children of God who gives us that power to change. May the power be with you always! Bless you, my friends who are young at heart!

<Reflection>

Damascus was an important Syrian city, a leading commercial center of the Roman Empire. Jerusalem and Damascus are apart, about 230 km away. It's not a short trip at all, but Saul aggressively approached Damascus to capture Christians. Although the city was far away from Jerusalem, many Jews in the town had synagogues. Josephus, a famous church historian, reports that the city was home to a large population of Jews.

In today's passage, Saul made his officially authorized travel, convinced that he would capture many Christians. Near the city, however, he met Jesus. A group of people, including Saul, experienced the mysterious sensation. Luke, the writer of Acts, mentions this incident three times in the book.¹ Although the three descriptions have some discrepancies, the core meaning cannot be challenged: That is, Saul met Jesus, he became blind, and he converted from an aggressive persecutor to a zealous advocate of Christianity. This

¹ Acts 9,22, and 26.

encounter with Jesus totally changed him. Saul was an intelligent and passionate person with power and authority issued by the Roman Empire. How could this subversive change be possible just in a moment? We cannot reasonably explain that without the dramatic divine intervention.

The divine intervention for Saul didn't stop. He was confronted with a second encounter; meeting Ananias. For Saul, God prepared Ananias, who lived in Damascus. The passage says he is a disciple. We presumably describe Jesus' twelve disciples as "disciples"; however, there are layers of disciples as I preached before more than several times. And the twelve were central members who surrounded Jesus. Now we read that Ananias was another layer of the disciples, and he seems naturally communicate with Jesus in vision. In verse 10: 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 Saul." Saul was notorious among Christians even the disciple in Damascus knew him, so Ananias initially refused. And yet, God commanded again. "Go, for he is a chosen one." For me, it is mysterious that God chose Saul, but for Ananias, it gave enough explanation. So Ananias found him, and Saul was baptized and his sight was restored.

This second encounter confirms that Saul miraculously met a disciple, had his pain cured, and became a Christian. And then, the passage says he immediately began to proclaim Jesus in synagogues. Of course, there are lots of debates on this verse because it sounds like Saul proclaimed Jesus right after the two encounters. Many

theologians and scholars have dug into this verse and largely agree that the first and the second sentences in verse 19 have about a three-year gap. Galatians 1:17 says that "I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus." So when today's passage reads in verse 19, "For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus," it means that he stayed with the disciples for several days in Damascus after returning from Arabia. The reason for Saul to go to Arabia is known as theological training. Therefore, he didn't proclaim Jesus right after the encounters but had a period to cultivate and practice in Arabia and became an enthusiastic preacher for the resurrected Jesus.

Think about the Apostle Paul, aka Saul. He had such a revolutionary change. Ironically in synagogues, he spoke out for Jesus instead of capturing Christians. What a conversion story! If we make a film of these two encounters, the scale must be marvelous. If you were the film director, who would be the main character? Saul? Ananias? The other disciples? I'm telling you my plan. The main character of the film is ... God. Everyone is in God's plan. Saul was converted by the vision of Jesus; Ananias was informed to meet Saul; everything was being prepared and arranged by God. The story is not so much about Saul or Ananias. Instead, it is about the way God worked to change lives. God did everything, and Saul and Ananias only responded. That's all. The conversion was impossible for Saul. Only God was able to convert Saul from a persecutor to an advocate; seeing Jesus in vision was impossible. Only God was able to give the vision to Saul; losing and restoring his vision were impossible. Only God was able to take and give him his sight. What about Ananias? Visiting Saul

was impossible for Ananias; Only God makes Ananias' visitation possible. Without God, he would've never made a visitation to Saul in his life. Without God, nothing could be changed; nothing could be possible. We know this. We confess this. O God, without you, nothing can be done. This confession of our faith would be amplified in conversion stories.

Sisters and brothers and my friends! God is the main character, and we are the responders. God is preparing for you. God is working for you. And God is accompanying you. Even though you may not specify or recall any Damascus Road experience in your life, God prepares, works, and attends, so God gives you unique turning points to become or convert to a genuine Christian. I, as a church minister, confess that I cannot make you a believer. I cannot make you a Christian; however, I trust the God who prepares your way, who works for you. And I am confident that God is preparing for any type of encounter in that divine plans and grace are embedded. So I respond to God by humbly and gently providing any kinds of opportunities for you to know God more with or without the course of worship service.

For this, today I gently invite you to look into your heart; to look around yourself; to look up at the sky; to look down on the ground. And encounter what God has prepared for you. May the God of mystery inspire you and give you the light that surrounded Saul today. Let us pray silently.