

BLIND SPOT

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Acts 9:1-20

In 1953, the play *The Crucible*, written by Arthur Miller, opened on Broadway. That same year, it won the Tony Award for Best Play. Since then, this play has come to be recognized as one of the greats of American theater.

The Crucible is a fictionalized retelling of the events leading up to the witch trials held in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692 and 1693. On another level, the play is also an allegory for America in the 1950s in the grips of McCarthyism.

McCarthyism was the US government's persecution of people accused of being members of the communist party. The term, McCarthyism, was coined in 1950 and refers to US Senator Joseph McCarthy, who loudly asserted that members of the Communist Party worked within the US State Department and were undermining our democracy. He would go on to "find" communists at every level of society. McCarthyism describes the practice of making accusations of subversion or treason without proper regard for evidence. McCarthyism reached its peak in the 1950s with McCarthy brandishing his lists of suspected communists. In the fervor, innocent lives were destroyed. People were imprisoned on charges that were later dropped. Like the witch trials in Salem, McCarthyism represented a dark moment in American history. The question is, did we, as a nation, learn anything from this experience? Were we, the people, able to change course?

Arthur Miller titled his play *The Crucible*. A crucible is a container used in the process of smelting metals. A crucible must withstand the extreme heat required to melt and purify ore. The crucible is where change takes place. It is where the desired metal is separated from its impurities. It is trial by fire. Anything entering the crucible is transformed.

For us today, the relevant question is this, will this period of COVID-19 be for us a crucible? Is this a time for change? Before I go down that road, I would like to consider the fascinating story that I read a moment ago—the account of Paul's time in the crucible—his conversion to Christ.

The person we know as the Apostle Paul is, without a doubt, one of the towering figures of the early Christian church. His writings comprise a bulk of our Christian scripture. His letter to the Romans is the foundation of Christian theology. In his day, Paul was a tireless worker for the faith traveling from city to city establishing churches and teaching the gospel. He suffered rejection, imprisonment, beatings, and more. He died in service to Jesus Christ.

However, Paul was not always such a staunch proponent of Christianity. In fact, he started out as a zealous persecutor of those who followed Jesus. In his own words, he writes, *You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it* (Galatians 1:13). In the book of Acts, when the disciple Stephen is stoned to death, Paul is not part of the actual rock throwing, but he is there, and he acts as the coat check for those doing the dirty work.

It is easy to dismiss early Paul—persecutor of the church—as a villain. But he wasn't. He was a devout and passionate Jew. He viewed the Christians as following a false Messiah. From his perspective, they were a disease, and like a virus, they needed to be eradicated. Paul saw himself as the vaccine.

In our reading for today, Paul has a plan. He approaches the high priest at the temple in Jerusalem petitioning for the authority to expand his work to Damascus. Paul requests a letter that will grant him the authority to travel to the city of Damascus and root out the followers of Jesus from the synagogues of that city. He also seeks the authority to arrest these people—both women and men—and bring them back to Jerusalem. The priests support his plan.

Paul sets out on this journey and as he nears Damascus, something happens. *A light from heaven flashed all around him*. Paul is knocked to the ground. He hears a voice asking, *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?* (At this time, Paul is still known by his original name, Saul.) Paul inquires as to the identity of the speaker and the reply is, *I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting*. The voice tells him to enter the city and wait for instructions. Paul discovers he is blind. His companions lead him by the hand into the city. For three days he could not see and he neither ate nor drank.

At this same time, living in Damascus, there was a follower of Jesus named Ananias. Jesus speaks to Ananias in a vision telling Ananias to go and find this man Saul who will be expecting him. *You are too lay hands on him so that he may regain his sight*.

Ananias is not comfortable with Jesus' plan. He pushes back against Jesus, saying that he is aware of Paul's reputation. He knows *how much evil [Paul] has done to Jesus' [saints] in Jerusalem*. Ananias knows why Paul is in Damascus and he is aware of Paul's authority to arrest people. Nonetheless, Jesus overrides Ananias' objections saying, *Go. Saul is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before the world*.

Ananias obeys. He locates Saul and lays hands on him. When he does this *something like scales* fall from Saul's eyes and he could see again. Saul is baptized and he remains with the disciples in Damascus for several days. He enters the synagogues and instead of rooting out the believers, he proclaims to everyone, *Jesus is the son of God*.

For Paul, this was a crucible moment, a moment of testing. He had been on what he believed to be a mission in the name of God, endorsed by the power of the government. But then he is blinded and left helpless. He is placed in the fire of transformation. How will he emerge from this crucible? Will he continue persecuting Christ or accept Christ's call?

Today, our nation finds itself in a similar situation. Until very recently, we were deliriously barreling down the road powered by a robust economy. Suddenly, we found ourselves sidelined by a virus we cannot see. We are quarantined in our homes, unable to visit one another, unable to worship together in person, worried about our supply of toilet paper. This is hardly our darkest hour, but we've certainly seen brighter.

I do, however, like how one person describes our social distancing. They said that the coronavirus has turned us all into dogs. We spend all day walking around the house looking for something to eat. We are told "no" when approaching a stranger. And we get really excited about going for a car ride.

As I have reflected on this COVID crisis, what has impacted me most is the way that it has illuminated the weaknesses in our society. For example, the first weakness I recall noticing had to do with homeless children. Yes, I know there are homeless children in our nation, even here in Wilson County. But I remember being surprised that when New York City first started considering shutting down, that the mayor resisted closing the public schools. As in Wilson County, New York City public schools provide a vital safety net for poor children. New York City public schools enroll 1.1 million children. Of these, 80% qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.¹ Of these, roughly 114,000 are homeless.² Let that sink in: in New York City, 114,000 school children are homeless. Nationwide, that number is 1.5 million.³ These children depend on their school for meals, health care, and structure. For some, it is even the place where they can wash dirty clothes. As the pandemic worsened, New York City ultimately was forced to close the schools. What happened to those children? What happened to the children in Wilson County? When this is over, how will we exit the crucible? Will the eradication of childhood homelessness become a priority? Or, will we continue on this same path?

The virus has also highlighted the inequities in the health care system. The data is incomplete, but we are discovering that the COVID virus is disproportionately killing people of color. In Louisiana, for example, African

¹ <https://ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/beyond-meal-status-a-new-measure-for-quantifying-poverty-levels-in-the-city-schools-october-2015.html>

² <https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-york-city-had-114-000-homeless-students-last-year-11572291674>

³ <https://www.foxnews.com/us/coronavirus-nyc-homeless-students-virtual-classrooms-connect>

Americans comprise 32% of the overall population and yet represent 70% of COVID deaths.⁴ When this is over, will we choose to address the inequalities of race?

Here's something I learned recently. In most US hospitals, the emergency room personnel are managed by third-party staffing companies. The ER doctors are not hired by the hospital but are contract employees placed by one of several large staffing companies. These staffing companies are, in turn, owned by private equity firms.⁵ During this COVID crisis, these companies are actually cutting the hours and pay of ER staff. I understand that in the US, running a hospital is a business, but is this model truly in the best interest of the people? Is this how we want to continue?

And then there is the environment. In many places, the environment itself has changed because patterns of human activity have changed. In Italy, in the city of Venice, the canals are clearer. Because of the decrease in boat traffic from taxis and tourists and cruise ships, the canals are less murky. (If you did happen to see that dolphins have been spotted in Venice, that is actually not true. Those photos were from another part of Italy.)

The air quality in many large cities has improved dramatically. The World Health Organization states that an Air Quality Index above 25 is "unsafe." In Delhi, India, they consider it a good day when the Index is around 200. Last year, it frequently exceeded 900. But in just three weeks of lockdown, the Air Quality Index in Delhi now hovers around 20.⁶ The sky is blue. In addition, scientists are concluding that air pollution increases the chance of dying from COVID-19.⁷ So, the question is, when this is over, will we try to figure out how to enjoy both a robust economy and a healthy environment?

And then there is the area of family and relationships. From my conversations with you, while this social distancing is difficult, some of you have noted that the opportunity to spend un-hurried, quality time with family has been a blessing. We've spent more time talking with friends and renewing relationships. Neighbors are caring for neighbor. When this is over, will we choose to slow down for those we love?

I could continue on. I know that you have your own observations to add about how this time of crisis has enabled you to see the world in a different light, how COVID has revealed our blind spots.

⁴ <https://www.wwno.org/post/black-communities-are-hit-hardest-covid-19-louisiana-and-elsewhere>

⁵ <https://www.propublica.org/article/overwhelmed-hospitals-face-a-new-crisis-staffing-firms-are-cutting-their-doctors-hours-and-pay>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/11/positively-alpine-disbelief-air-pollution-falls-lockdown-coronavirus>

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/climate/air-pollution-coronavirus-covid.html>

The Apostle Paul was traveling to Damascus hell-bent on doing his job—a job he believed to be important and right and good. But Christ intervened and through a crisis showed him a new way. He placed Paul into a crucible of faith and Paul was changed. Paul became an *instrument* of Christ.

Paul's experience should be a model for us all. Normally, we are the ones racing down the road as fast as possible, careening toward what we feel is necessary and important—success, wealth, power, influence, being number one, being best, reaching the top. Even our free time is filled with busy-ness. We do this both as individuals and as a nation. When people get hurt in the process, we say it is okay, it is for the greater good. The bodies by the roadside are expendable.

But this crisis has stopped us in our tracks and in our present blindness we can see how our way is out of alignment with God's demand for love and compassion.

Jesus told a story about this. He told about a man traveling on a road. The man is attacked by thieves who beat him, take his stuff, and leave him for dead. Several important people pass by but don't stop to help. They have things to do. Finally, a man does stop—a man with no reason to help—and he acts neighborly caring for the wounded man.

Let us take the time of COVID and make it our crucible. Let us vow to exit transformed with eyes open—no longer blind to the brokenness of society—and be the instruments of change that Jesus can use.