

THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

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Acts 9:1-20

Jesus and his disciples gathered in Jerusalem so that they might celebrate the week-long festival of the Passover. They were not alone. They were joined by thousands upon thousands of pilgrims who congregated in that great city for this holy feast. It was during that festival week, following the Passover meal on Thursday night, that Jesus was arrested. The next morning, he was put on trial for what can best be described as sedition against the Roman Empire. He was immediately executed by crucifixion—a particularly horrific form of capital punishment designed to deter others from even considering overthrowing the government. On Friday afternoon, before the start of the Jewish Sabbath at sundown, Jesus' lifeless body was removed from the cross and hastily taken to a tomb that was owned by a man named Joseph. The body remained in the tomb all night on Friday and all day and all night Saturday. On Sunday morning, at first light, some women who were compatriots of Jesus went to the tomb in order to properly prepare the body for a permanent burial. They were shocked and distressed to discover that Jesus' body was missing. They assumed it had been stolen or taken away. Eventually, what they (and we) learn is that Jesus had risen. He had died on the cross but through God's power of resurrection, he was alive again. The resurrected Jesus would spend several weeks with his followers before ascending for good into heaven.

For us as Christians, that Easter day changed everything. That morning when the tomb was found to be vacant, that is the point on which history pivots. Previous to the tomb there was the Law; after the tomb there is grace. Before the tomb there was darkness; after the tomb there is light. Before the tomb there was death; after the tomb there is life eternal. Everything changed. As we read in the Gospel of John, *What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it* (1:3b-5). Life and light.

The tomb in which Jesus' body was placed was closed with a large stone. A tomb is a place of darkness; it is sealed shut. But this tomb was now open. The stone had been pushed aside. As we read in scripture, *Where, O death, is your sting?* (1 Cor 15:55). Death was defeated and the darkness replaced by light. The light of life streamed out from this tomb. The tomb became like one of those giant spotlights that announce the opening of a new business. But this light didn't just shine as a beam into the sky, its light spread over the earth, washing across reality. The light of Christ changed the world. Slowly, region by region, it spread from person to person.

The story of the Christian church is the story of how this light changes people. Our reading today tells us of one such person who was changed by this light. We know him now as the apostle Paul. In our reading from the book Acts of the Apostles, Paul is still known as Saul from the city of Tarsus. Saul (or Paul) will become a great missionary of the church and one who will have an immeasurable impact on our Christian theology, our understanding of who Christ is, and what it means to live as a Christian.

Saul was born a Jew. In his own words in his Letter to the Church in Philippi, he tells how he was a righteous Jew born into a Hebrew family, of the tribe of Benjamin. As an adult, he was a zealous persecutor of the Christian church (Phil 3:5). He viewed Jesus' claim to messiah-ship as blasphemous to his faith. Any Jew who followed Jesus needed to be rooted out, exposed, and punished. They were a cancer to the faith.

In another letter, Paul tells this about himself, *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. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors* (Gal 1:13-14).

In the book of Acts, we read of Saul's quest to purge Judaism of those were part of The Way—that is what they called the movement of followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Acts describes Saul as *breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord*. Saul was working in Jerusalem ferreting out believers when he approaches the high priest seeking permission to broaden his jurisdiction and search for Christians among the synagogues in Damascus, about 200 miles north of Jerusalem toward Lebanon. Any Christians he found—men or women—he could shackle and bring back to Jerusalem for punishment.

Saul is given the authority he requests. He heads to Damascus. As he is traveling the road to Damascus something happens. We read, *Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him*, and Saul falls to the ground blinded. He could hear a voice saying to him, *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me*, and Saul asks, *Who are you, Lord?* The voice responds, *I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting*. There were men traveling with Saul and they could hear the voice, too, but could not see anyone speaking, and they had not been blinded. This voice orders Saul to get up, to enter the city, and to await further instructions. Saul complies. His associates lead him by hand into Damascus. For three days he is blind and does not eat or drink. It is almost like he is dead, in the dark, with no sustenance, in a tomb.

Saul was not mistaken about there being followers of The Way in Damascus. One of these was a disciple named Ananias. Jesus comes to Ananias in a vision and tells him about Saul and where to find him. Saul himself also has a vision which informs him to watch a man named Ananias.

Ananias is not very happy about the task given to him. He is well aware of Saul and his mission to Damascus. Ananias knows of Saul's track record of persecution in Jerusalem. Ananias knows that Saul had been deputized by the high priest to arrest the followers of Jesus. He has every right to be wary of Saul. If your enemy is pursuing you and then suddenly is incapacitated why would you want to help them? Nothing good can happen.

Jesus is adamant and says to Ananias, *Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.* As we know, this is what eventually transpires. Saul takes the name Paul and becomes a powerful instrument of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Ananias complies with Jesus' command and he goes to Saul and lays hands on him and tells him, *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.* What happens next for Saul is nothing less than rebirth. It is resurrection from death; it is a new creation. Whatever it was that prevented Saul from seeing fell from his eyes like the scales of a fish, like a snake shedding its skin. Saul's sight is restored. He gets up. As a sign of new life, Saul is baptized. For several days, Saul remains in the company of the disciples in Damascus, presumably learning from them. And then as the first step of his new mission, he goes out to the synagogues to proclaim Jesus saying, *He is the Son of God.*

This is one of the great conversion stories of our faith. In his new life, Paul becomes an influential missionary, an instrument of the gospel. Today, Paul's writings comprise a large portion of our New Testament—among them his letters to the churches in Corinth, Philippi, Ephesus, and to Rome he sends his grand opus of Christian theology.

This story in Acts is clearly about Saul and his conversion to a new life in Christ. But I would like for us to consider someone else today and what we can learn from their story. That person would be Ananias. All we know about Ananias is what we find here. He lived in Damascus and was a disciple of Jesus and member of The Way. Jesus speaks to Ananias in a vision and instructs him to locate Saul. Ananias, however, objects. He argues with the voice of Christ about this assignment. Ananias says, *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.* Ananias is correct. Saul is a danger to the followers of Christ. Wouldn't it be better to just let sleeping dogs lie? But Jesus says, *Go.* Jesus has a plan for Saul and Ananias is needed to implement that plan.

I can identify with Ananias. There are many things that I would rather not do, especially if they pose a clear danger to me or my family or friends. Before he became literally blind, Saul was metaphorically blind to the followers of Christ. He saw them as a threat to his own faith. Ananias, we discover, is equally blind to

those outside The Way. Even when the Lord gives him a direct instruction to go to Saul, he balks. His own blindness prevents him from seeing that Jesus has a plan for Saul.

Ananias is afraid. He is afraid of Saul and what he can do. But Saul is afraid as well. He is afraid of the threat that he believes The Way poses to his own faith. However, Jesus reminds him that faith involves suffering. Ananias represents each of us as believers as we seek to live our Christian lives. We are willing to do what is right as long as it is comfortable and doesn't cause us any inconvenience. When we attempt to circumvent the suffering, we can become blind to God's greater plan.

There is an irony in Ananias' name. Ananias is a Greek version of the Hebrew name Hananiah—a not un-common name at the time. Hananiah means “whom God has graciously given.” Ananias should remember that his very name refers to God's grace—a grace that he is afraid to extend to Saul. Ananias does come around. It takes a little push from the Lord, but he goes to Saul and addresses him as *brother*. In this moment, Ananias also experiences a rebirth. The light of Christ shines on him.

In this season of Easter, with the empty tomb behind us, and the light of God's new creation washing over our world, we need to remember that we also can be blind and unable to see God's plans. We still need to listen for the voice of Christ pushing us to the uncomfortable places. We never know what instruments we will uncover.