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The National Presbyterian Church

A Young Man in Damascus

Acts 9:1-19

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These next weeks, our sermons will take us on a journey through the parts of the Book of Acts where Saint Paul and his friends travel to the great cities of the Mediterranean world of the 1st century. Saint Paul and his friends, the early Christians, and the cities they loved. Paul was a man who loved cities, and he went from city to city, where he shared the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is instructive to see how that Gospel was relevant to these particular cities because we live in the city, too.

Today, we have a great text that you've just heard marvelously narrated. And you are not finished yet because after the sermon, you'll hear another part of that great narration of Paul in Damascus. In the Book of Acts, in three different places, Luke decides to narrate for us from the mouth of Paul his experience on the road to Damascus. Paul participated in the lawless and terrifying mob action in the stoning of Stephen. He stood by, that is when we first meet the name Saul, standing by while Stephen was stoned (Acts, chapter 8). Since the right of the sword only belongs to Rome therefore mob actions, stonings, were illegal, yet it happened.

But what the Romans did provide for was that the Sanhedrin, which was the Jewish court in Jerusalem, could have governance over all the synagogues. And so, Paul has letters from Jerusalem to go to Damascus and to bring back Jewish people that have decided to follow Jesus of Nazareth

and who are saying that he died on the cross but then rose again from the dead. People who were following that way would be brought back to face the court in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin, for that offense. And the Romans did back that up because they authorized the authority of the Sanhedrin in terms of religious matters. They locked the right of the sword but they did have the right of imprisonment for breaking the code of the Sanhedrin. So, that is how we meet Paul on the road to Damascus.

Listen to Acts chapter 26 where Paul once again shares his story with King Agrippa and his wife Bernice when he is a prisoner at the Roman governor's mansion on the Mediterranean at Caesarea. He says,

The manner of my life from my youth spent in the beginning among my own nation in Jerusalem is well-known. I, myself, was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and I did so in Jerusalem. I not only shut up many of the saints in prison by authority of the chief priest but when they were put to death...

And now he admits that terrible moment when he voted for and assented to the stoning of Stephen. He'll never forget this. He will bring this up throughout his life. He brings it up in the letter to the Corinthians, and other times, "I'm the least of the Apostles because I persecuted the Church so I cast my vote against them, and I punished them often in the synagogues, and I tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury." That is about the strongest language Paul could use to describe himself. He is calling himself a religious fanatic and we know a lot about that in our century.

It was Pascal in the 16th century who said men never delight in doing evil as much as if they can do it for religious reasons. And we know a lot about that. Many evil things have been done in the name of religion.

And so, I was raging fury against them. I persecuted them even to foreign cities. Thus, I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priest. At midday, oh King, I saw on the way a light from heaven brighter than the sun shining around me. And those who journeyed with me, and when we had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in

the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.'

By the way, let me explain goads. In 1st century sheep-herding techniques, a goad would be a stick that was sharpened that would not be poked. You would not poke a sheep; that would cause them to panic. But it would be stationary and be used when sheep are kickers. In fact, that same technique is used today in training animals. The stationary goad would be there and when the sheep would kick back they would hit the goad until it would hurt so they would stop doing that. So a goad is the smile that our Lord uses with Saul. He says, "It hurts, doesn't it, to kick against the stationary truth; the stationary goad? You are the one who's being hurt, aren't you? You persecute me and you persecuted Steven and others but you are the one who's being hurt, aren't you, Saul?" Listen to our Lord in this great encounter: "Saul! Saul! It hurts but why do you persecute me? It hurts you to kick against the goads." And I said, "Who are you Lord?" And then the Lord said to him, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. Now, go to Damascus and you'll find out what to do next."

Well, that is the text. That is a great text because it introduces us to this man, Saul, who will later change his name to Paul. This man that has the second largest city in the world named after him, Sao Paulo. This man who has a cathedral named after him, the famous cathedral in London that withstood the bombing raids of the blitz of London throughout World War II and stood through it all, St. Paul's Cathedral; a building designed by Christopher Wren. There is a city in America named after him, St. Paul, Minnesota. And we have named our sons after him, Paul. That is the man. We're going to track him and his friends as they travel around the Mediterranean world.

But here is the encounter where we first meet him, where he meets Jesus Christ. And I want to reflect today in the fact that he made four discoveries on the road to Damascus and in that town of Damascus. These four discoveries changed his life. The first discovery he made is that Jesus Christ, in fact, is alive. See, he had been persecuting the people who had been saying

that the Jesus of Nazareth, who died on the cross is the one who has won victory over death, sin and the power of evil. He had done that on Good Friday and Easter. And that is what they were saying. And Paul, of course, is persecuting them for that, that teaching, the good news they were sharing.

Now, Paul, on the road to Damascus makes his first discovery and it is that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, is in fact, alive. It is a triumphant moment but the interesting thing about the triumph that he experiences and watches happen right in front of his eyes, he doesn't discover it as a humiliation of himself. He doesn't discover it like other triumph moments of his era.

In the first century world, it was traditional and actually started with Alexander the Great, that when Alexander would win a victory, he would stage a triumphal parade through the villages or the cities that he had conquered where the prisoners would be led in sheer humiliation and where prizes that had been stolen from the people would be carried to show that now he, Alexander, and his troops now had those prizes.

We know that happened in Rome. As a matter of fact, after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., we have found archeological evidence that Trajan brought a great parade through Rome where he carried the Menorah from the temple of Jerusalem. The gold Menorah was carried through the city of Rome in mockery. "We have destroyed the city of Jerusalem and here, we have all of their shrines and we carry them, we'll melt them and use them for the treasury of the Roman Empire." Artists in Rome chronicled this triumphal parade.

That is not what Saul experiences from Christ. He doesn't experience a kind of triumphal humiliation. But this is what happens, listen to it. At midday there's a flash of light which temporarily blinds Paul. He falls to the ground and a voice speaks to him. And a voice speaks to him and says, "Saul! Saul!" By the way, in Jewish tradition, when you say someone's name twice, that is a sign of affection. Is that true in your family? Do you say yourself--"Robert! Robert!" When you say it twice, it is a sign of affection. Sometimes you don't feel that way in the family. It means 'I really know you.' I know your name very well. I'm going to say it twice. And he had that experience, "Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?" A question is asked of him. It is not a tri-

umphal parade of humiliation. It is a question and then this interesting line of pathos. "Saul! Saul! It hurts you, doesn't it? What you are doing?" It hurts to kick against the goads. It is almost like in the *Chronicles of Narnia* when Shasta is on the mountain pass and he meets the great golden lion Aslan for the first time and Aslan says to Shasta, "Tell me your sorrows." "Tell me what hurts." Saul, your legs hurt. You hurt. Here, you are persecuting the Christians but you are the one that is hurting, aren't you? "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And so that is his first experience. He discovers the victory of Christ but it is not a victory that destroys him or humiliates him but dialogues with him. I don't want you to miss that.

Then secondly, he discovers that his life has done real harm. It is an important principle that in the Old Testament, wherever you see the judgment of God, the grace of God is always alongside, but the judgment is there, too. The truth reality is there. The goad is there. "Saul, why do you persecute me?" The word "persecute" is one of the most angry words in the Greek language. The word "persecute" literally in Greek means "to run down, to crush." "Why do you persecute me?" It is almost like King David when he discovered that his sin against Uriah was a sin against God. Why do you persecute me and it hurts you doesn't it, to do it?

So he discovers that he has done harm. I think it is important for us to know the harm we have done. Then third, he discovers there is hope for him and that his own story is not over. That is how I interpret the next line that comes from Saul. This is not the line of a crushed man and I want you to notice that. His next line in this text is, "Lord," he recognizes the lordship of the one who is now alive, "what would you have me do? What do you want me to do?" That is not a line of a destroyed man. It is a line of a man who realizes that the story of his own life is not over. "What am I supposed to do now? What should I do?" And then a surprise. Think for a moment, if you are creating a drama about this scene, wouldn't it be better to have it this way: Paul has the great encounter. He falls and he was temporarily blinded, he acknowledges Christ and then Christ the Lord says, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every nation and cathedrals are going to be named after you and cities are going to be named after you and you are going to preach the gospel". But that is not what happens.

Here's the line. I love it. It is such a letdown. "Lord, what do you want me to do?" "Go to Damascus and you'll find out." That is literally what happens. "Go to Damascus and you'll find out." Our Lord holds him back. In fact, he holds him back for quite a while. He'll go to Damascus and that is where he will find out the next step. And then he goes to Jerusalem and then the Christians in Jerusalem will say, "You are too hot to handle here." And they send him home to Tarsus, his hometown and we don't know how long he stays there, maybe a year, two years, we really don't know. Finally, a man named Barnabas will come up and find him and bring him to Antioch. And that will be the beginning of Paul's ministry but not now. Now, he has to wait. Have you ever had that happen to your life? You make a discovery of Christ and then the Lord decides to put you on hold for a while so that you can learn a few things? "Go to Damascus, you'll find out."

Saul is led to Damascus and we hear what happens next. A man named Ananias is chosen by the Lord to come over to Paul and put his hands on this man. And then Paul gets his eyesight back. Interestingly, our Lord could have given his eyesight back. No. It is Ananias who is chosen to play that role. It is Ananias who is called by God to baptize him in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and to assure him of the grace of Christ. Ananias gives him some food and nourishment because he's had a couple of days where he hasn't eaten and then he goes back and starts his life. So he goes to Damascus. Here's a trivia question that you can use in crossword puzzles. Ananias lives in Damascus. Paul is going to Damascus. This is the first city that Paul encounters in his life as far as the changing of his life. Did you know that Damascus is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world? Did you know that? That is a good crossword puzzle trivia question. And the oldest street in the whole world is the street called Straight in Damascus. It is still there. And there is a man that lives in the street called Straight, Judas, and that is where Saul was. And Ananias goes down the street called Straight, to the house of the man named Judas and there is a man there and he is praying, "Put your hands on him and heal him. I'll show him what he's going to experience ahead of him but you do that." And Ananias said "Oh, no, Lord, I can't do this. I'm scared to death." Ananias is totally frightened. If Paul is guilty, Ananias is frightened. Both are sins in a way and he says, "I can't go there." And the Lord says, "Go" and so he does.

He puts his hands on him, he healed Paul. The scales fall away so he can see and then he baptizes him. And then the rest is history. God is so powerful, why does he just not do it all himself? Why waste all this time? Paul could have been out saving the world three years ahead of time if the Lord had simply said on the road to Damascus, "Now go Paul and preach the gospel all over the world." He didn't do it. He used Ananias. He used the church in Damascus; he slows Paul down.

This also happened to Peter, and the conversion of Cornelius who was a Roman centurion. You can read about this earlier in the Book of Acts, Cornelius has an inspirational moment when he says, "I want to trust God" and he is a Gentile. With that kind of openness, why doesn't the Lord Jesus immediately convert him and say, "I hear you, Cornelius, now you are a Christian, go and change the world?" Instead, he says, "Send your servant down to Jaffa and you'll find a man named Peter down there. He's having a bad dream." And so, Cornelius sends his servant down to Jaffa, Peter has had a bad dream where he saw some non-approved food in his dream and the Lord says to him, "Eat what I put in front of you". So after that dream, the servant of Cornelius is at the door and Peter says, "Okay, I'll go with you." And so he goes to Cornelius' house. He can't resist saying, as he enters the house, "You know I shouldn't enter this non-Jewish house," but he does. And he shares the gospel with Cornelius and his whole family is baptized by Peter.

But why does God do this totally inefficient thing? Why not just instantly convert Cornelius? He was open. Why doesn't he instantly convert Paul and turn him into the world missionary that he is going to be? Why does he use Ananias? Why does the Lord use Peter in the life of Cornelius? I think I have figured it out. Because Peter can say something to Cornelius who has probably done a lot of terrible things in his life that our Lord cannot say to him. Have you ever thought of this? Peter can help Cornelius understand what it is like to be forgiven. Jesus cannot share that because our Lord is sinless and never needed to be forgiven. But Peter did. Peter denied the Lord three times. And he can share with Cornelius what it is like to be forgiven. Ananias can share with Paul what it is like to be terrified and have God overrule his terror. Now he can share that.

And so our Lord uses the church. He uses Peter and as a result, the Paul we will meet throughout the Book of Acts is a Paul that can be understood in two ways. Paul is always going to be a man in Christ because the biggest thing in his life was when he met Jesus Christ. And secondly, Paul is always going to be a man of the church, a man of people because ordinary people were used by God to heal him. He will never forget that. He will always love the people. He will always be able to make friends with people. That is why it is appropriate that St. Paul's Cathedral is named after him because he was a man of the church and a man of Christ all his life because that is the way his journey as a Christian began.

Heavenly Father, thank you for Saint Paul, for Peter, for Ananias, thank you for Stephen, that heroic young man whose story was cut short. Lord, bless us. We, each of us, need to have a roadside encounter, too. We need to discover that there is hope for our lives, that our story is not over. We need to discover the harm we've done so that we can confess our sins. And best of all, we need to discover your grace and that you are alive. May we make that discovery today, too. In Christ's name, we pray, Amen.

Lewis, C. S., *Chronicles of Narnia*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.

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