

Acts 9:1-22

What's God Up To?

Some of you may remember the Rock Opera, released by The Who in 1969, which is the story of a boy named Tommy. At the time was he was referred to as a “deaf, dumb, and blind boy”. I am not so interested in the back story of the opera, but rather just to say it was the song that came to mind as I pondered once again the story of Saul, later called Paul, as he experienced Jesus on the road to Damascus. Damascus was where Saul was headed to hunt down anyone who belonged to The Way in order to bring them bound back to Jerusalem to face the Jewish authorities there. The Way was the name given to the Jewish communities that believed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The song *See Me, Feel Me*, begins with the repeated words,

See me, feel me, touch me, heal me

In no way is a parallel being drawn between the story of Tommy and Saul, other than to say, it is when we are experiencing something profound many senses may be involved. As Saul was making his way on this road to what he thought was his purpose and mission Jesus stops him, and though he was blinded by the light – yes I know another song reference, sorry for any ear worms that are being caused today – though he was blinded by the light it seems that it is the first time he sees clearly who Jesus is. For the next three days Saul is without sight, and neither ate or drank. He is feeling the full effects of having experienced something that was unexpected and powerful.

It is through the touch of Ananias that Saul regains his sight and in a sense is healed. His healing is restoration of his strength and a renewed sense of purpose and mission, this time in support of those he once meant to harm.

Because Saul/Paul, is such an important writer of much of the New Testament it is helpful to understand a little of who Paul was. Paul's work and life became instrumental to the movement of The Way, or Christianity as it would later be called as it moved into new territories.

Now the Book of Acts, which is fully called the Acts of the Apostles, it not so much about the apostles themselves as it is a powerful story that is really focused on God. It is about what kind of communities God is drawing together in these early days of the church. None of these communities were perfect. Paul's letters throughout the New Testament are about addressing the challenges faced by the various Christian communities that have been established by himself and others in difference locals. These are imperfect people trying to be the church in difficult and trying circumstances.

There are some imbedded imageries in this story that are helpful in unpacking how important this story is to our history as Christians, but also to how we can approach the future. The first is that the story happens on the road to Damascus. The road is not actually mentioned, but it is how they are traveling. They are on a journey, even if it starts out as a journey of persecution. This journey takes Saul from one way of being in the world into a whole new direction or way of being. That segues us into another interesting point, and that is the calling of people who were followers of Jesus The Way. It was their way of living, of witnessing, of thinking differently about how God was working in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit and in people that made this the way of transformation. Jesus also referred to himself as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), and those who believed in his name, came to understand the profound and meaningful ways that following Jesus was so different from what culture at the time was dictating.

We tend to forget how many of the basic human rights that are intrinsic to governments and policies come out of the changes that were affected by this very small contingent of people that over time grew and transformed how many people and countries in the world build relationships and care for one another. This work is still ours today. As Christians we are still called to be living The Way of Christ in our churches and in our homes with our sights on how we continue that work, God's mission of redemption in the world.

Presently there are three different Presbyterian congregations that I am working with. There is my home congregation of St. Andrew's that has already started the preparation work for New Beginnings, a program of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. The goal is to find how we are to be living out our calling in our community in ways that bring hope, light, and life to others while we ourselves are shaped and transformed by the experience.

There is a congregation in Geraldton that nearly two years ago took a leap of faith and became a shared ministry with the Anglican church in the community. There is to be a gold mine coming to the area and part of their future will be to see where God is leading them in the community as it is now and how God's mission will be shaped and transformed by the people and work that is brought to their community in the coming years.

And there is a congregation that has fell on hardship in the last year or more and they are looking at a different kind of transformation, one that may see their legacy of love, compassion, and generosity, live on in the life of a completely different community of faith, but one they had a hand in bringing to Canada in their work to resettle refugees.

Each of these congregations is figuring out, like Paul, how their life as a community of faith might align with what God is doing in the world. It is a call into a new way of life, a new way of being in the world. It is being witnesses to Christ's love for those who need the most care and compassion.

And like Paul, this call to witness, to be transformed, to figure out how our lives might align with what God is doing in the world, to finally see Jesus and share Jesus with others, it will be life -giving!

This is also a story of fear, trepidation, and challenge. Not for a moment I am suggesting that anything that the church may try to do or you may face will be easy. We are not called to easy. The other major character in this story is Ananias. He did not think that the Saul thing was a good idea and protests, basically saying to God, "I think you must have the wrong guy. You know this Saul character is trying to kill us." But God responds with "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen."

Just as we may experience some of what Paul experienced, the determination, the strength, the understanding, the power, the change, we may also find ourselves feeling like Ananias, fearful, approaching the situation with caution and maybe even protest, but God does have the ability to work with whatever we do and however we feel. It is about our hearts, our openness to look at what God might be doing in our midst and with others and saying, "I'm in!"

Once again, we don't have to do it alone, Paul always had companions along the way and we are companions for each other. We discern together, plan together, hope, dream, and work together. No one is excluded in this work as God will find a way to have each one of us participate in what God is doing, which is bringing healing and wholeness, transformation, compassion, hope and love into the world. And God wants to use you, to use us. May we come, ready or not, to be the way others find peace, hope, forgiveness, love, and community. We are imperfect people trying to be the church in difficult and trying circumstances, while trusting God's plan and goodness. In Christ, with Christ and through Christ. Amen.