

Acts 9:1-20

Open Eyes

“Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 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 unto Jerusalem.” (Acts 9:1)

We forget how dangerous Paul was. I say Paul because, though it doesn't happen in the passage we just read, later in Acts chapter 13 we learn that Saul becomes known as Paul and it is this very Paul that has given us the powerful and teaching filled letters to the Romans, the Corinthian, and others in the New Testament. The very Saul/Paul that was still breathing threats and murder...they very one who watched as Stephen was stoned for his faith and teaching, the Saul who approved of such a heinous act (Acts 8:1) ...this is the one in which this scene opens up to tell us about.

This guy was dangerous and he was on a mission, with letters of power to act from temple authorities. Saul was on a mission to destroy anyone who was teaching that Jesus was the Messiah. He was going to put an end to this teaching and to what people were calling “The Way”. Saul was on a mission. Young, determined, and thinking that anything...anyone...that threatened the traditional understanding of the Messiah was to be snuffed out, Saul was going to be the one to bring things right and put an end to this wrong and harmful teaching. Or at least what was in his mind and that of those who gave him the authority to act in such a way, would enable Saul to put an end to this fringe group that was enough of a threat to the status quo to warrant such a deathly plot to eliminate them.

But then every thing changes in a heartbeat. The only person who experienced this life changing transformation in the group that was traveling together was Saul. Others heard the voice, which in itself is pretty crazy, and it may have had an effect on them, but the focus for this story stays on Saul and he not only hears the voice, but see a flash of light and from that moment everything changes. It will take him from being a man with power and authority given to him by human beings, to be a man led by others, deeply humbled because he cannot see and weakened as he neither ate or drank for three days. Mostly however, he was at first vulnerable because he had

encountered the real power of the risen God. We tend to think that Jesus kind of went away at some point, as the risen and ascended one, but this story and countless others, remind us that the risen Lord continued to show up in powerful ways, and still does today. We just need to open our eyes and hearts to those encounters, but we will get back to that.

Right now, we are sitting with a man, Saul, in the process of transformation and the story turns out is not just about him but about another person named Ananias who was having his own crisis as God asks him to be the one to recognize what God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit was doing in this man Saul, *and it is terrifying*. Ananias was well aware of Saul and the murderous and torturous things that Saul was doing to people like him. He had reasons to be afraid. Saul's reputation preceded him and Ananias was fearful. No one really wants to die especially at the hands of someone so intent to put fear and trembling into an entire group of vulnerable people. Yet God says to Ananias, "Go, for he [Saul] is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." (9:15-16).

I have to admit, I wondered whether or not Ananias relished just a little the words that God said about bringing Saul down a notch or two and that Saul might get a taste of his own medicine. Regardless, the fear still would have been real and yet Ananias does as God has asked and because of Ananias' obedience to the request he also gets to witness the transformation of Saul for after Ananias places his hands on Saul, Saul regains his sight, was baptized and then ate something to regain his strength. Saul also spent time with the disciples in Damascus. Those conversations must have been pretty incredible as Saul had been deeply immersed in the teachings of the Torah throughout his life and what he thought he knew has been turned upside down. He understanding of the scriptures of the Messiah doing a 180 degree turn about.

One simply must try to get the depth of this change in thinking of not only Saul, but everyone who had lived in fear of him up until this time. With only days in between, the one who was hunting down others is now going to become a persecuted one. This story of Saul know as Paul will continue throughout much of the New Testament, but this is the moment of change. Still, where this story is placed is also of interest as it is but one of a number of stories of transformation. It sits between the story of Philip and an Ethiopian Eunuch and the work that Peter was doing as he brought the gospel to others. It is important to note, as these stories demonstrate that

God transforms lives in many ways. Sometimes it is with a flash of light that jolts us to an awakening, and sometimes it is through years of faithful service or just hanging in there as small changes occur in who we are and how we interact with the world.

And though there are numerous points to glean from a story such of that of Saul and Ananias, what we are looking at today is how eyes were opened, not just Saul as “something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored” (9:18) but how Ananias saw things differently. How the eyes of hearts were also opened to what God was doing.

And maybe that is the focus...what is seen and to be seen. God was at work in both men. Both believed in God’s love and hope for the world but they were going at it from different perspectives. One thought that violence and power was the way to protect the status quo, reasoning that continues to be used for people to protect institutions that people like to build and defend. Though things change continually, we people like to think we can stop change, but God is in the work of change, of transformation, and that work has not stopped. God is transforming the church, our church and churches around the globe. As much as people want to halt or stall that, because it doesn’t match what they think is God’s way, God continues the work of transformation. Our church and others are going to look different in the future. None of us can predict how that will look or happen, but the church will change...is changing. Every time someone new comes into our midst or leave us our church changes. This can scare us or inspire us.

What is for sure is that God is asking us to be mindful and attentive, opening our hearts and minds to see how God is at work in us, in others, and in the world. Sometimes we will be witnesses to amazing transformations that are hard to grasp, even scary. Many times the stories will be less threatening, stories in which people are transformed a little day by day as we walk together to become image bearing people of God. Stories where people can change, life can be, well, more life-giving, even in times of challenge. One thing is for sure, God is at work in you and in me and we are invited into this relationship of transforming love and bringing that story, that message to our families, friends, community and beyond. We are not alone, we do this together, in community, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, through Christ, and the love of God who goes with us today and everyday. Go and witness, go with eyes wide open, go and be the people of God with open hearts. Amen.