

“Blindsided by the Light”
Acts 9:1-20

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Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² 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 to Jerusalem.³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”⁵ He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.”¹¹ The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying,¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.”¹³ But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem;¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.”¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel;¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “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.”¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus,²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

An atheist was walking through the woods, remarking on the beauty of nature all around, the power of the rivers, the grandeur of the mountains, when he encountered a snarling seven foot grizzly bear. It began to chase the atheist. The man ran and ran, but the bear got closer. Finally, the bear caught up to the man who fell down. The bear lifted his giant paw up to strike the man. The atheist called out, “God!”

Time stopped, a light shown down from the sky and a voice said, “You deny my existence and even teach others I do not exist... and you explain creation as an absurd historical accident, and yet you expect me to treat you as a believer?”

The atheist said, “God, it would be hypocritical to expect you to treat me as a Christian, but could you regard and treat the bear as a Christian bear?”

Suddenly the light went away. The bear, who was ready to strike the man, slowly and gently put his paw down... put it aside the other paw and said, “Thank you, God, for this food I am about to eat...”

The thought of God interceding in everyday life in such a flashy, dramatic way can only be the subject of jokes these days it seems, but to Luke the gospel writer and to the early Christian community, God was seen and experienced in such a way.

Luke uses the word “egeneto” in Greek, which means, “It happens!” It’s one of Luke’s favorite words, and it signals God’s surprising entry into ordinary human events. He used it in Luke 2 to describe Jesus’ birth: “egeneto—it happens!” And then again in Luke 24 to declare that Christ had risen from the dead: “egeneto—it happens!”

And now here, in Acts, the same author, Luke, spins the tale of Saul on the road to Damascus and says, “egeneto”—“*it happens*” that suddenly a blinding light from heaven flashed around Saul, and once again God breaks into ordinary human events in an extraordinary way. [1]

The “ordinary human events” we’re referring to here are, unfortunately, the persecution of Christians in the early, early Church, and our main character, Saul, has been the ringleader of it all.

The first time we heard about Saul, he was a young man who was present when Stephen, an apostle in the faith, was stoned to death for sharing Christ’s message. Saul threw no stones that day, but he watched over the coats of the men who did. By the eighth chapter of Acts, Saul has become a full-fledged persecutor of Christ’s followers. Luke describes Saul “ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, and committing them to prison.”

Our chapter this morning begins with Saul just miles outside of Damascus, and we learn that for him, this business of persecuting Christians is *personal*. He isn’t just arresting them, he’s “*breathing threats and murder against*” them—*binding* them and dragging them to Jerusalem and throwing them in prison.

This week in our Bible study on Wednesday we took a peek at the geography of this story. Did you know that Damascus is close to *150 miles from Jerusalem*? That’s quite a haul when you’re transporting unwilling prisoners, isn’t it? But maybe not so long for Saul, the perpetual “employee of the month” in this business of hunting down and arresting Christians.

In his book, *Drops Like Stars*, Rob Bell describes an ongoing experience in his own life’s healing. “When I’m meeting with my counselor,” writes Bell, “and I use words like ‘mistake’ or ‘failure’ or ‘waste,’ he stops me. He then reaches into his desk drawer and pulls out a sign and holds it up so I can read it—again.”

The sign is simple. It’s in Hebrew and it’s in English and it’s just five words long: “THE GOD WHO WASTES NOTHING.” [2]

In the story of the early Church, Saul’s presence conjures up those words, “mistake” “failure” “waste,” especially if you happen to have been a “Follower of the Way”—a believer in Christ huddled with other believers in Damascus, hiding from Saul and his cronies. “Saul,” you might have muttered, “the human mistake, the failure. What a waste of breath and life.”

But then Luke writes, “Egeneto! It happens!” and in a flash of blindsiding light, we are reminded that this is not just the story of Saul—it is the story of THE GOD WHO WASTES NOTHING. And so Saul *the human mistake*, Saul *the failure*, and Saul *the waste of energy and space*... Saul the one who does *nothing* half-way, Saul the guy who’s willing to travel long distances to get the job done, Saul the man who is so passionate and committed that there is little in this human world that can stop him from pursuing what he knows to be right... Saul meets the living Christ, who obliterates his agenda *but wastes none of his attributes*. Saul will soon become Paul, the relentless sharer of Christ’s message of love and reconciliation and leader of the young Christian Church...

I’ll stop here and confess for a moment that I sometimes find myself wishing that God would work similar miracles today. Granted, I don’t personally know a “Saul” in my own life—someone who so violently and dramatically wreaks havoc on people’s lives. But like you, I realize that there are some people doing some drastically horrific things in our world. I know that there are some out there who operate with little to no regard of others, and who in fact intentionally take advantage of others for their own gain. I know that there are folks out there who are hateful and spiteful and who even revel in causing pain and misery. I can’t imagine what it must be like to live that way, and I also can’t imagine that God’s all that happy with people who cause so much trouble in the world.

So I wonder, “Well God, here’s an idea. Why don’t you just interfere! Like you did with Saul! Stop them! Blind them! Neutralize the threat! Get out there, God, and find the racist Klan member, the xenophobic fascist, the raging sociopath, the maniac drivers, the bad neighbors, the bullies, the abusers, the haters... And I’m not saying you should *hurt* them, God—just *blind* them and send them to some random house on some random street in some city, you know, like you did with Saul in Acts.”

But here’s the thing. That’s not really what happens in Acts. Saul *is* blinded and sent to a random house in Damascus. But then EGENETO—IT HAPPENS! Jesus appears to Ananias in a vision and says to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight... look for a man of Tarsus named Saul.”

Now Ananias is one of the people that Saul was coming to Damascus to arrest and he knows it. Can you imagine? “I’m sorry, Jesus,” Ananias might have said, “but could you repeat this vision please, because it sounded for a second like you wanted me to go and find *Saul*.” Ananias can’t imagine *seeking out* a man so vile and destructive. But God says, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen.”

And as the story unfolds, we encounter a miracle perhaps bigger than the blinding light on the road. Ananias goes to the house. He lays hands on Saul and says, “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.”

You and I—we might be willing to pray that God would prevent all the evildoers in our world from doing whatever evil they’re prone to doing. We might wish that God would simply stop them, pin them down, put them in a holding pattern of some kind, make them *less evil*... We

might find it convenient if God would just blindside them with such power and light that they were somehow incapacitated. We also might not want to be involved beyond that prayer.

But you see, *we forget that Ananias was blindsided too*. We forget that in this story, at least, Christ's power to neutralize Saul as a persecutor was coupled with his power to activate Ananias as a healer. This is a story of two miracles: the blindsiding light of Christ arresting the wayward child and the blindsiding light of Christ calling the faithful child to action and even deeper faith. Such is life for people of the Way of Christ. We pray to God and then lo and behold we become part of God's answers to the prayers we make.

And now here's the strange and splendid truth: we are all broken and misguided and we all carry the capacity to heal. We all do stupid, hurtful things and we are all armed with compassion. Each one of us is given to misery and mistake, and each one of us holds the power to express love and grace.

The darkness of Saul, the light of Ananias—*both are a part of what makes us so undeniably human*. We live in a world where, at least in our North American context, we are able to pleasantly insulate ourselves from God's blindsiding truth that we are creatures capable of both grave evil and abundant goodness.

This is where we come in—the family of faith—the church. For where else in this world do we human beings come together regularly both to confess our wrongdoing and to offer hope and reconciliation? The drama of Saul kneeling before Ananias is one we rehearse as God's Easter people, practicing resurrection in our daily lives, giving and receiving grace, committing ourselves again and again to God's reign of peace in a violent and uncertain world.

May God's blindsiding light meet you wherever you are today. May all in you that is tired, worn broken, or less-than-holy may it come before the healing and forgiving presence of God, and may you be filled with the Holy Spirit and renewed in good strength. Thanks be to God.

1. I received this insight from James Boyce, Emeritus Professor of New Testament and Greek at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, in a commentary he wrote on Acts 9, found in the Working Preacher online journal.

2. Rob Bell, *Drops Like Stars: A Few Thoughts on Creativity and Suffering*, 2010.