

May 1st, 2022

Acts 9:1-20 “Practicing Authentic Forgiveness”

We are in week three of Eastertide. “He is risen!” I’m happy to hear we’re keeping that enthusiasm. Eastertide is all about encountering the risen Christ, and that’s what we’re all about in the church. We ask, “How does the risen Christ make a difference in our lives, and what do we do in response?” This week we’re going to talk about a man’s experience with the Risen Christ on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus. This week is all about the origin story of the Apostle Paul.

First of all, Paul wasn’t always Paul. Before he met the risen Christ he was known as Saul of Tarsus, a notoriously brutal persecutor of Christians. He was introduced back in Acts 7, as a young man who watched over the coats of an angry mob who stoned the Apostle Stephen to death. In today’s scripture we heard about how Saul was knocked to the ground by a blinding flash of light and as a result became a follower of Jesus. He even gets a new name after his encounter with Christ. He went from being Saul of Tarsus to Paul of Jesus. We’ve been talking a lot about how Luke, the author of Acts, goes out of his way to show us that not all Pharisees are bad. Sometimes we forget that Paul was a Pharisee. Five chapters after the passage Georgeanne read, Paul reminds the Jewish high council that he is a second-generation Pharisee who also happens to be a proud follower of Jesus. This gives you an idea of how Paul sees himself and how he presents himself to others in his ministry. On more than a few occasions, Paul says that he used to be a bad guy but now he’s a good guy. So let’s take a break for a minute and consider how we as modern-day people feel about bad guys who become good guys.

We all struggle when we’re asked to believe that someone who built a reputation on being a bad guy all of a sudden says, “I’ve changed my ways!” The exception is if you’re a fan of professional wrestling. That’s a place where it’s almost expected for a heel to turn into a good guy every now and then. It’s also entertaining when it happens in

fictional literature too like when Ebenezer Scrooge has a change of heart in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. But when it comes to real life, we have doubts about the possibility of someone changing their ways. We're highly suspicious and doubtful when someone who is in prison for some terrible crime says, "I've become a Christian!" We think, "Yeah, I'm sure that's what you want the parole board to believe when they're reviewing your case." We have sayings about people who say they've changed their ways. We'll say, "a leopard never changes its spots," or "a fox may grow grey but never good." We use that old folk tale of the scorpion and the frog to explain our suspicion -- A scorpion wants to cross a river but can't swim, so it asks a frog to carry it across. The frog hesitates, afraid that the scorpion might sting it, but the scorpion promises not to, pointing out that it would drown if it killed the frog in the middle of the river. The frog thinks, "Yeah, that makes sense" and agrees to transport the scorpion across the river. Halfway across the river, the scorpion stings the frog, dooming them both. The dying frog asks the drowning scorpion, "Why did you sting me? Now we're both going to die!" The scorpion says, "Dude, I'm sorry, but I'm a scorpion. I can't help it. It's what I do!"

So yes, we have difficulty imagining someone undergoing a genuine change of heart. But somehow, we make an exception for Paul. We say, "Yeah, but look what Paul *became*! Of course he's legit. He wrote half of the New Testament!" But I want you to put yourself in the shoes of the Christians who lived during that time. They're saying, "Wait a minute. You're telling me that this guy who has caused so much harm to every Christian that ever crossed his path is all of a sudden a 'good guy?'" And then let's not forget the 11 apostles who trudged across the Galilean countryside with Jesus for three years! How hard was it for the ones who followed Jesus into Jerusalem knowing that he was going to face opposition from the Sanhedrin and the Roman authorities? How hard must it have been for the ones who sat at the table when Jesus broke bread and explained how his body would be broken and his blood would be shed? What was it like for the ones who witnessed Jesus' death on the cross? What was it like for the ones who saw the

resurrected Christ and were commissioned to go into the world and proclaim his good news? I can imagine them saying, “Oh, this guy is an apostle now because he had a hallucination on his way to Damascus where he was going to have Christians beaten and thrown in jail? And now all of a sudden he’s an apostle who has been given the same divine authority as we have to teach, preach, baptize and heal?”

But let’s be fair and look at this from Paul’s point of view. Saul of Tarsus was a hot-headed religious fanatic who was zealously trying to stomp out what he believed was a heretical sect of Judaism that threatened the unity and integrity of his religion. And as we saw last week the high priest seemed happy to use whatever means he could to stomp out opposition. For the Jewish High Council, a person like Saul of Tarsus was a dream come true ... a useful tool. History shows us many examples of people in authority manipulating and using angry young men to do terrible things to their enemies. But on the way to Damascus, the risen Christ confronted Saul and asked, “Why do you persecute me?” When Saul asked who was speaking to him, the answer was, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Now ... this was happening to a person who firmly believed that those who were right in the eyes of God were rewarded while sinners and heretics were humiliated, punished and even killed. So how do you think Saul is going to feel in the presence of the Risen Christ who wants to know why Saul is persecuting him? I imagine he was scared. Not just because of the shock of being knocked to the ground and blinded, but because he had his own ideas about how God dealt with God’s enemies. If Jesus was the real deal, which appeared to be the case, then Saul had been working *against* God. Saul knew the rules. If he’s been working against God, he’s going to be punished, and rightfully so. He was frightened by this possibility. Especially when the Risen Christ gave him no assurances that things were going to be all right. He just said, “Go to Damascus.” Go to Damascus for what? To face Jesus’ version of ... him? A hired goon whose job is to punish heretics? Plus he was blind. That sounds to me like the equivalent of being tied up, blind folded and thrown in the back of an unmarked van. No wonder he didn’t eat or drink for three days.

He was bracing himself for what he was sure was going to be punishment. Except there was none. Why? Because this story isn't just a conversion story, it's a redemption story. It's a transformation story. It's one that doesn't just happen at the moment Jesus appears to Paul. Paul isn't even the only person transformed in this story. What we have in front of us this morning is a story about grace and love and authentic forgiveness.

We wouldn't be wrong if we said that this story is about the moment Paul is transformed from a persecutor of the gospel to a proclaimer of the gospel. That is true. But we've also got the story of Ananias. He's someone who is fearful and hesitant about helping someone as notorious as Saul of Tarsus. But he is transformed into one who becomes Paul's healer and teacher. We also need to take into account the seeds that were planted in Saul's heart back when he watched Stephen being stoned to death. During his gruesome and painful death, Stephen asked God to forgive the ones who were stoning him. How much of Saul's transformation was made possible because of Stephen's forgiveness?

Here's something else to consider when we're talking about Paul's transformation. He is transformed from one who has immense privilege to one who gives up everything for the sake of Christ. He was a Pharisee and a Roman citizen which gave him all kinds of privilege that he used to attack and harass the church. Was he angry at Christians because they believed that the Kingdom of God was going to bring down those in authority so as to lift up those who never even had the chance to be in authority in the first place? Whatever the reason, Saul goes from being someone with immense power and privilege to being powerless and completely reliant on those around him. His eyes were opened during a moment of vulnerability. He was taken down from a high place and left completely vulnerable. He's in the hands of those who had every reason to want to eliminate him right on the spot for all the harm he caused others. But what he finds is hospitality. Saul was someone who had stood by and watched the brutal murder of Jesus' followers. Yet Ananias welcomes him and calls him "brother."

Everything is coming full circle in this transformation story. You've got Stephen offering forgiveness, then later you have Ananias putting himself in a vulnerable position by offering incredible hospitality to this person who could still be a potential threat. What you've got here isn't a story about Paul. It's not a story about that moment when Paul is blinded by the light. It goes beyond that moment. If Paul doesn't get taken in and shown hospitality or taught and nurtured, there's no point to this conversion story. None of it takes place in a vacuum. What you've got here is a story about God. God is the one who takes action. God is the one who gives the invitation. God is the one who makes the transformation possible. And God is the one who provides the community in which the transformation can take place. Again, it's a redemption story, and it's not just Paul's redemption story, it's ours. All of ours.

This is what it means to be a community of the resurrection. This is what it means to be bound in name and in the fellowship to the risen Christ. This is why the last act of worship we do in this service is a visible reminder that we are not just one, we are many who are now one in Christ, and in so being, we accept our mission and ministry in this world. He is risen.