

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Blinded by the Light”
Psalm 30:1-12
Acts 9:1-9**

**Third Sunday of Easter
May 5, 2019**

Psalm 30:1-12

I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up and have not let my foes rejoice over me. O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. O Lord, you have brought up my soul from Sheol; you restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit. Sing praises to the Lord, O you his saints, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved." By your favor, O Lord, you made my mountain stand strong; you hid your face; I was dismayed.

To you, O Lord, I cry, and to the Lord I plead for mercy: "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? Hear, O Lord, and be merciful to me! O Lord, be my helper!" You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever!

Introduction

I want to give a little background to this morning's passage before we dive into it. Acts 9 begins with three words in the Greek "*Ho de Saulos.*" The grammar here is a conjunction and I think translations like the NRSV, NIV, and others translate it correctly. They open the ninth chapter by saying, "Meanwhile, Saul..." I really like that. The student of the Bible knows that in the previous chapter Saul is introduced as a persecutor of the church. His persecutions create a scattering of the early Christians. And this scattering leads one Apostle, Philip, to Samaria, where he encounters Simon the magician, then to Jerusalem in the company of Peter and John, and ultimately to the road to the Gaza. On that road, Philip encounters the Ethiopian Eunuch. Bible Study folks should know a lot about that encounter. This is the "meanwhile" that Luke is referring to. While persecution is going on. While Apostles are converting magicians and eunuchs, Saul of Tarsus is making his plans, and God is working out his own. I invite you now to listen to the good news of Christ in...

Acts 9:1-9

But 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 belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“Blinded by the Light”

While Philip and John and Peter were spreading the Gospel, back at the ranch, Saul was “breathing threats and murder.” This is the instigation that starts events in motion. God’s people have a nasty habit of persecuting his prophets. Saul certainly wasn’t the first Hebrew of Hebrews to rise up against God’s messengers. He heard Stephen’s accusatory words recorded in Acts 7:51-52, “You *stiff-necked* people, *uncircumcised in heart and ears*, you *always resist* the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, *so do you*. Which of the prophets did your fathers *not* persecute?” There have always been those, even those within the household of God, who attempt to silence his prophets. Prophetic voices such as Esther, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Jesus. And Saul was certainly one of those persecutors. He recounted to the Galatians, “I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it... so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.” As I mentioned last Sunday, Saul clearly did not share the reserved nature of his teacher, Gamaliel, who urged the Sanhedrin to let the movement die out naturally or to be found fighting against God himself.

And fight Saul did. Our passage this morning tells us that he went to Caiaphas, the High Priest, for letters to the synagogues. Likely these were instructions, printed on official church letterhead, stating that any person who spoke of Christ in or around the synagogue was to be handed over to Saul. Luke describes these folks as “belonging to the Way.” This was another designation for the Christians, given that Christ himself said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Not only that, the early church recognized that Christianity is not a sedentary object. It is a movement, it is motion. Today, when I say “the Church” what comes to most of our minds is the image of a church building. Whether this one, or a small country church, or a massive city cathedral. The image of the church in our minds is the brick-and-mortar building. That was not the case in the first century. Christianity was, and still is, a journey. It is a narrow path that leads to the narrow gate. It is the road to Emmaus, the road to Gaza, the road to Damascus. It is the *via dolorosa*, the path of salvation, and a race to run with endurance. These metaphors and analogies are no accident. The accident is that we’ve replaced the image of the church *in motion* with the image of a *motionless* steeple.

Christ said we are to be the light on the lampstand. Light goes out. Light moves forward and beyond. Jesus didn’t say we are to be the cold, dead steeple on the hill. We are to be men and women who are in motion for Christ. And notice that Luke does include both men and women in Saul’s crosshairs. While the Apostle Paul would say, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,” Saul of Tarsus would say, “I don’t care if they’re either Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, if they’re preaching Jesus they must be arrested or killed.”

It is into this situation that the illumination of Christ enters. Damascus is a city in Syria and it’s about 140 miles Northeast of Jerusalem. With the Roman occupation of the Mediterranean and the active persecution of the church, many Jews and Christians found themselves in great cities like Damascus, Alexandria, Ephesus, Athens, and Rome. To get to Damascus is a long five- or

six-day journey. Luke tells us that Saul was approaching Damascus. Later, he says Saul's traveling companions "led him by the hand." These suggest to me that Saul is within sight of Damascus. He's almost there. He's on the last leg of his journey. In his zeal, he's probably already thought of plans for when he enters the city. "Suddenly," Luke says, out of nowhere, all of a sudden, taken by surprise, immediately "a light from heaven shone around him."

The Apostle John, in Revelation 1, starting at verse nine, describes his vision of the Son of Man. He sees golden lampstands surrounding the glorified Christ, who's wearing a golden robe, and his "eyes are like a flame of fire," "his voice like the roar of many waters," and "his face was like the sun shining in full strength." In verse seventeen John says, "When I saw him, I fell at his feet *as though dead*." John fainted. The glory of Christ was so great that he fell to the ground as a dead man! He could not stand before the presence of the Lord on his own two feet, out of his own willpower. In fact, it took Christ reaching down, reviving him, in order that he may stand before the glory of the risen Lord and receive his message. A fraction of that same image now appears before Saul. Luke doesn't say Saul got a glimpse of Christ. I think that's accurate because Saul doesn't faint like John did. He doesn't fall down *as a dead man*, he just falls. The light is so blinding, so overwhelming, that he has to drop to his knees. What a true posture of humility. When Moses approached the burning bush, he had to hide his face because "he was afraid to look at God" (Genesis 3:6). When Isaiah has a vision of the holiness of God, he cries out "Woe is me!" (Isaiah 6:5). Saul catches a peek of the *dimmed* light of Christ, he didn't see the full brightness of him, and he falls to the ground. I want us to linger a while on this blinding light.

Scripture shows us that God reveals his glory in many ways, but one of the most central is as a bright, refulgent light. After receiving the Law on Mount Sinai, it is recorded that when Moses descended his skin shone with such transcendent light that the Israelites were afraid even to approach him. Moses, the man who led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and across the desert is now a frightening sight before them. The Bible says Moses shone "because he had been talking with God." That brightness was just a *reflection* of divine glory. That same glorious light is said by John to be the source of illumination in the new heaven and the new earth. There is an incomparable brightness, a dazzling whiteness that is inherent to our Creator's very being. Never, ever look at the sun. But if you were, it would appear as a dim speck when compared to the brightness of God's glory.

When we think of dazzling light, especially when we think of God's glory, we also think of such concepts as purity, holiness, and truth. We also think about the blindness associated with judgment. This is not surprising because Scripture also associates these concepts or attributes with light. Psalm 43:3, "Send out your light and *your truth*; let them *lead me*; let them bring me to *your holy hill* and to your dwelling!" Holiness and truth. Isaiah 6:6-7, the seraphim picks up a burning coal, it's so hot that he has to use tongs, and he touches that coal onto Isaiah's lips and says, "Behold, this has touched your lips; *your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for*." Cleansing and purity. John 12:40, Jesus quotes Isaiah to unbelievers, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them." Blindness and judgment.

Saul experiences all of these. He experiences the holiness and truth of Christ. The disembodied voice says to him, "Saul, Saul." Now that address indicates two things about Christ's holiness. When words are repeated two or three times in Scripture, that's God's way of denoting to us that this is important. By saying, "Saul, Saul," Christ is essentially saying, "Listen up, Saul. Pay attention to my words." That's one indication. The other is intimacy. To know someone's name, in Hebrew culture, is to know the person, is to know his character. Names are important, which is why God will later change Saul's name. But for now, he repeats his name as a sign of intimacy. This is not just some guy with a powerful flashlight hiding behind a rock. This is someone who knows Saul and truly knows his heart.

Christ asks, "why are you persecuting me?" This shows us one of the deepest truths about Christ. In his high priestly prayer, Jesus prays for us, on our behalf, and he says, "The glory that you have given me *I have given to them*, that they may be one even as we are one, *I in them and you in me*, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and *loved them even as you loved me*." Earlier in that same Gospel, Jesus tells the crowd that he is the bread of life, "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me." Paul will later come to write that just as our bodies have many members, so, too, does the body of Christ. For Saul to persecute the church is the same as persecuting Christ, himself. Because Jesus lives, we live. Just as Jesus suffered, we suffer. And when we are persecuted, he is persecuted. Now, I don't know about you, but I don't want to be found persecuting Christ. I certainly don't want to be that person who stands under God's judgment for persecuting his Son.

Saul recognizes the truth and holiness of Christ because he responds, "Who are you, Lord?". Some scholars say his use of the word "lord" is simply like saying "sir." Indeed, the Greek word *kurios* can be translated as either lord, master, or sir. But I don't think Saul was using mere pleasantries here. This is a man with great zeal, high fervor, and deep dedication. He's got the instructions written on official church letterhead. He's got the authority and backing of the High Priest. There's not a thing or a man who could stop his mission to destroy the church. The blinding light, the disembodied voice, and the Holy Spirit are all at work here and Saul knows it. There is only one person in all of the world with the power to immediately humble Saul. And that person is Christ, to whom the true title of Lord belongs.

This leads to his experience of the cleansing and purity of Christ. Paul would later write in Galatians 1:15-16 "He who had *set me apart before I was born*, and *who called me* by his grace, was *pleased to reveal* his Son to me." God had a purpose and a plan for Saul, from the very beginning, from before he was ever conceived in his mother's womb. In Paul's own words, God foreordained him for a particular service. But first, he needed to be purified. Just like Isaiah, who was a prophet among his people, righteous above all others, he, too, needed to be purified before God could ask, "Whom shall I send?" Just as the burning coal purified Isaiah's lips, the blinding light of Christ's glory cleansed and purified Saul. Jesus says to him, "I AM," *ego eimi*, the divine name translated into Greek. "I am Jesus, *the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel*, whom you are persecuting." At that moment, Christ had every right to strike Saul down. In fact, I imagine death was exactly what was running through his mind. He knew how unworthy he was to stand

before the presence of the Lord. He knew that the only just reward for his actions was immediate destruction.

“But.” That is the most powerful, life-changing conjunction in the Bible. But, rather, on the other hand. In that single word, it’s as if Jesus had said, “You deserve to die, Saul, as you have persecuted my body on earth, so should you be persecuted in hell. BUT, I have a great plan for you.” With that simple conjunction Jesus cleansed and purified Saul. With that one phrase of redemption Saul was made ready for a purpose he never imagined. Just like that, Saul was made a new man. But it wasn’t without consequence.

His final experience on the road to Damascus is of the blindness and judgment of Christ. Luke says, “Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing.” The bright, dazzling whiteness of Jesus’ glory literally and physically blinded Saul. There are also two ways to understand this blindness. First, Christ needed to reveal to Saul his own spiritual blindness. Paul would later recount several times that though he was a Pharisee of all Pharisees, a Jew of all Jews he was blind to the Word of God. He knew the Scriptures inside and out, upside down and rightside up, frontwards and backwards, and yet he was blind to God’s Word. How many Christians today are in the same boat? Perhaps some of you feel that way? Perhaps you feel blind to the Gospel, even though you’ve been raised in the church? Saul’s story is our story. While we may not experience the blinding light and the disembodied voice, we do experience spiritual blindness.

Likewise, the second way to understand his blindness is as Christ’s judgment. Deuteronomy 28:28-29 says that one of the curses for disobedience is “The Lord will strike you with madness and blindness and confusion of mind, and you shall grope at noonday, as the blind grope in darkness, and you shall not prosper in your ways.” Though Saul was set apart for God’s service, his cleansing required punishment. God’s judgment fell upon him and he was blinded to the world. God’s judgment is his discipline. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews says, “It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ...he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but,” the Apostle adds, “later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” God might not strike us with physical blindness, but his judgment is still here. His rod and staff are comforts to us. His chidings and admonishments, while hard to swallow, are there for our benefit. His reproof is for our righteousness. From that moment forward, Saul’s life would never be the same. And neither will ours when we yield ourselves over to God.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we are blind to you. We hear and see but we do not listen or understand. Soften our hearts. Open our eyes. Lead us by the hand. For three days, Saul was without sight. For three days, Jesus lay in the tomb. Thank you, God, for resurrection. Thank you, God, for restoration. Forgive us our blindness. May the light of Christ enlighten us, guide us, and shine forth from us. Until we see him in glory, may we continue to serve and imitate him. In his holy and precious name, we pray. Amen.