

Sermon, May 1, 2022

Acts 9:1-19

“On the Road to Damascus”

In the 7th chapter of Acts, we are told that a young man named Saul was present at the stoning death of Stephen, who is known as the first Christian martyr. Then in the following chapter we hear that. “Saul was ravishing the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison. Who was this man called Saul, what was his motivation for persecuting people of the early church? Well, Saul was a Pharisee, which would have given him the authority to place the followers of Jesus in prison. As for motivation we have to keep in mind that at that time the majority of Christians were Jews who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah, and, so, as a Pharisee, Saul would have seen them as apostates, i.e., those who had abandoned the Jewish faith. But that would soon change.

But before I go into that I should mention that the early followers of Jesus were not called Christians. That would not happen for a couple of decades. Instead, they called themselves followers of The Way, as referred to in today’s reading. The importance of that is recognizing that the earliest members of the church were not concerned with believing matters of doctrine, but rather with a new way of life; a life guided by the teachings of Jesus. This raises questions concerning the contemporary church. Is being a Christian simply a matter of believing church doctrines, or is it about choosing to live our lives according to those teachings, that is, being followers of The Way?

Now, returning to Saul, we find him on the road to Damascus in order to find more followers of The Way, and to bind them and bring them back to Jerusalem. But along the road he sees a flash of a blinding light that knocks him to the ground, and he hears a voice saying “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul asks, “Who are you, Lord?”, to which the voice replies, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

We have to be aware of all of the symbolism going on here. First, the fact that it is a flash of light that knocks Saul to the ground. There are a number of places throughout the New Testament that refers to Jesus as the light of the world. In the Gospel of John, for example, Jesus himself says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” A little further on in Saul’s story he gets up from the ground, but although his eyes are open, he can see nothing. In other words, he finds himself in the darkness Jesus spoke of, but will soon see things in a new light.

Also, notice that the voice identifies himself as Jesus whom Paul is persecuting. It's interesting that he says that he is being persecuted, when, in fact, it is his followers who are suffering the persecution. This speaks to the strong and deep relationship between Jesus and his followers. Remember in the 25th chapter of Matthew when the disciples ask Jesus when it was that they had failed to see that he was hungry, or thirsty, or sick, and did not take care of him, Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." In that, Jesus identifies himself with those who suffer, and in saying that he is the one being persecuted he is identifying himself with his followers, who are, in fact, the Body of Christ.

We are told next that there is a disciple in Damascus named Ananias that the Lord instructs to go and find a man name Saul of Tarsus where he is to lay his hands upon him so that he may regain his sight. At first Ananias is hesitant, because he knows of Saul's reputation as someone who has persecuted the church; but the Lord insists that it be done because he has chosen Saul to be the one to bring his name - that is, Jesus' name, before the Gentiles, as well as kings and the people of Israel. And so, Ananias does as he was instructed, and scales fall from Saul's eyes, allowing him to see. Of course, this does not mean simply the ability to see with his eyes, but to recognize where he has been wrong about the followers of The Way - and, especially, to recognize Jesus for who he is. With the falling away of the scales, and his new way of seeing, Saul receives the Holy Spirit, which will empower him for his mission ahead.

As we know, Saul will soon be referred to as Paul. This was not actually a change of name. Paul was not just a Jew, but by virtue of his parentage he was also a Roman citizen, and, so, Saul was his Hebrew name, and Paul was his Roman name. It was not uncommon then for people to have more than one name, and it is speculated that he then decided to go by his Roman name, which would make him more accessible to the Gentiles whom he was commissioned to bring the Good News.

And, so, this whole story is not simply about the conversion of one man, but an invitation for us to see the light that is Jesus Christ, to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, and to continue on as followers of The Way! Amen.