

Acts 9: 1-19
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell
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Moment of Reckoning

I have a secret to tell you. I love this transitional pastor gig because you all haven't heard all my stories. I have already had a former congregant ask me if I've done the Breakfast for Failures sermon and told the Christmas Tree Lane story yet. I told them, yep, third sermon in! We had a good laugh.

Stories humanize, they connect, they bond.

Here's the problem with some stories: they are experiences and humans are threatened by experiences, especially when they disrupt the status quo.

In the words of D.H. Lawrence,

"The world fears a new experience more than it fears anything. The world doesn't fear a new idea. It can pigeon-hole any idea. But it can't pigeon-hole a real new experience".

In my conflicted home growing up, experiences were not believed. In my simple church setting, experiences were not to be trusted. However, the older I get, the more I trust my experiences.

It is all Paul had to go on to defend his entire apostolic vocation. This experience. On the Damascus Road.

When Jesus showed his scars to Thomas he was sharing his experience. He was saying "This is what happened to me" which may be the most powerful words uttered by a person.

Will we believe the disruptive experiences of others?

Women are asking people to believe them when they say they were sexually harassed, assaulted, and abused by men of power and privilege, both inside and outside the church.

Brown and Black skinned images of God are asking people to believe them when they say their relationship to law enforcement is brutalizing their bodies

The Trans community is asking us to believe them when they say it isn't safe for them to walk down the street without fear of physical reprisal. I have a close friend of mine who is trans, and she is terrified living in these United States right now.

Impoverished communities are asking us to believe them when they tell us policies and systems are rigged against them to keep them in their cycles of unemployment, homelessness, and addiction.

Palestinians are asking us to believe them when they say Israel is murdering them and brutalizing them going on 76 years. Gen Z and Millennials are asking us to believe them when they say this economy has set them up for a lifetime of soul killing financial anxiety

Will we believe their lived experiences?

As we look at Saul's experience let's set some context: Saul was on his way to round up people so they could be tried and executed ISIS style. He is engaged in sacred violence. Evil done in the name of God has no bottom. He believed wholeheartedly that God sanctioned and commanded this violence.

I am reminded of something Barbara Brown-Taylor said:

"Jesus was not brought down by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix. Beware those who claim to know the mind of God and are prepared to use force, if necessary, to make others conform. Beware those who cannot tell God's will from their own."

Saul's experience changed all of that, in particular how he read his holy text. Before this moment, Saul had read his Bible and concluded that he should commit violence in God's name. After his encounter with Christ, and his experience of healing and enemy love from Jesus' disciples (Acts 9:11-18), Saul reassessed his hermeneutic. He was now driven by a new hermeneutic that the aim of Scripture is to lead us to love. God, Others, Ourselves. This is how both Jesus and Paul read their holy text.

"Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground"

This is a moment of reckoning. Have you had a moment of reckoning that changed everything?

This is the moment the diagnosis you feared is a reality. This is the moment you realize you were abused earlier in life. This is the moment you admit the first step of 12 that says "I am powerless ... and that your life has become unmanageable." This is the moment you realize that you are in an abusive relationship or an abuser yourself. This is the moment you find out your spouse or a child has been lying to you.

This is the moment of reckoning. Had one? Have you had many? Large or small?

I have found that those who have can be our greatest teachers, **depending on what they did with that moment**. Jesus asks a question that would forever shape young Saul.

“Saul, Saul, why are you hurting ME?” Jesus asks. Jesus is identifying his family of followers as an extension of himself. **The Resurrection empowers all believers after this, to understand that all sacred violence is violence done to Christ.**

A man who was so sure, so certain that he saw everything with crystal clear vision, is now blind. He’s led to Damascus where he sits for 3 days. Doing nothing. Not even eating or drinking. **This is a conversion out of death dealing certitude.**

Another transformation occurs. Saul needs someone else to undergo a shift from violence to love. How did this happen? It wasn't on the Damascus Road. It occurred when Ananias, a courageous, humble, faithful individual working behind the scenes in Damascus, took transformative action.

Ananias had been warned. As had his fellow Jesus followers. Murderous mobs led by their leader, Saul of Tarsus, were on their way, swords swinging. They weren’t standing in the back of pickup trucks with Isis flags but it's the same exact thing. Their ‘fellow Jew’ was coming for their heads, every man, woman, and child. “Lord, I've heard about this man!” You can hear his anxiety go up when God asks him to lay hands on this terrorist.

Would you have gone? After a vision like that I would have said, “Must have been something I ate,” and poured a gin and tonic. Lots of them. Ananias had every reason to write it off, ignore it, blatantly disobey it. But somehow, he had his own conversion. **From fear, to love.** When he found Saul, he laid hands on him, and he calls a man who was a murderous religious zealot: “brother”.

The scales don’t fall off Saul until he is the recipient of this enemy love. This, I believe, is the moment of Saul’s conversion with a capital C. A perfect one word sermon: Brother. Ananias had experienced the risen Christ in his midst, and he therefore believed God can raise the dead, even Saul.

Honest question: Do you want that kind of faith? Do I? The faith that God can raise the the dead and make my fear into love and make brothers out of my enemies?

Honest answer: maybe. I have some justified anger after all! I'm down for Saul’s conversion, I’m not so sure about Ananias’ conversion. Resurrection as the continual conversion into becoming more like Jesus is going to be painful. It will require loving those I am on the opposite side of on politics, social justice, science, Christianity, and what I see as outright bigotry. Saying “here am I Lord” as Ananias did is going to require me, us, living into a larger reality than the pain of our wounds and justified grievances.

How do we possibly muster up this kind of radical notion of reconciliation in our own lives? We can’t. But Jesus says “I’ll go first.” Before he’s even dead on the cross he asks God to forgive those who put him there. And I love how he says it. “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.” There is a certain contagion in mob violence, that will kill someone to make their anxiety go down. Jesus sees their action in a larger frame. Maybe that is instructive in trying to love the most difficult people in our lives. To see their action

in a larger frame of being a deeply wounded person. Jesus recycles the insidious violence of state sanctioned and religiously endorsed murder into grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

Maybe this is what allowed Ananias to lay hands on Saul and call him brother and so many of the earliest Christians to die asking God for the forgiveness of their murderers'. I think it's why we are still talking about Jesus today.

Terrence Malick said it best in *Tree of Life*: The only way to be happy is to love. Unless you love, your life will flash by.

Let us pray.

Lord, we are people of the Damascus Road. Our own lives cry out for the kind of healing exemplified by Ananias. Our country is divided. Our families are fractured. Our relationships need mending. As you did with Ananias, convert our fear into love. Send our enemies to lay hands on us and call us brother, sister, friend, so that we might see again with new eyes. Scavenge what is dead in us and bring it back to life. We know it might hurt. But as your people we will share that pain and share also in the joy until the day in which we gather around your throne with the people we never thought should be there. Amen.