

Sermon Notes

February 4-5, 2012

In the section from Acts 8:2—12:23, the Jewish Christ-followers are scattering. It's the "Christian Diaspora," as followers of Christ are experiencing a dramatic and terrifying persecution. Stephen's death in Acts 7:60 seems to be a catalyst for this.

The Apostles, however – those who have seen Christ after his death – are still gathered together in Jerusalem. Saul makes his entry into the narrative in Acts 8:1, approving of Stephen's murder. And Luke, wanting the reader to fully understand how vehemently Saul hunts down followers of Christ, minces no words: "But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, [committing] them to prison" (Acts 8:4).

In the midst of this, however, the followers, dispersed as they are, continue their witness to Christ. Their faithfulness in the face of such dire persecution actually works against the persecution; many people hear the story of Christ and become followers. There is power at work in the story of the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

But no one fought harder against the tide of "the Way" than Saul. Saul was a committed and devout Hellenistic Jew from the tribe of Benjamin. He was born in Tarsus of Cilicia, and was a member of the Pharisees (Acts 22:3). He was trained in theology and philosophy by Gamaliel, a renowned Jewish scholar. But the two disagreed about how the followers of "the Way" (Christians) should be dealt with. Saul saw their religion as heretical and blasphemous for many reasons, not the least of which was that the idea that a crucified Messiah was an impossibility. When Stephen proclaimed that the temple was no longer necessary, this all became too serious to ignore. It had to be stopped. Saul, then, sought the arrest, trial, conviction, and punishment (even death) of these followers.

Saul's career as a persecutor of Christians seems to begin with Stephen, but it quickly spreads to all the Christians in Jerusalem. Saul is not content to punish some and drive the rest from the "holy city." He does not want to merely contain Christianity, or to drive it out of Jerusalem. He wants the complete eradication of Christianity and its followers. We could say that his "missionary zeal" is evident even during this time in his life, as he travels to other cities, arresting Christians and bringing them back to Jerusalem for punishment. Damascus, a city 150 miles northeast of Jerusalem, is one such city.

In Chapter 9, the first word, "meanwhile," is intentional. It indicates that, even in the midst of the Christ-followers' tenacity, Saul's tenacious attack on Christians is as strong as ever. "Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord ..."

Saul's conversion story happens three times in the book of Acts: here in Acts 9, again in 22:3-21, and one last time in 26:12-18. All three accounts point to the powerful work of God against all odds, the presence of Jesus in Paul's life, and the work of the Holy Spirit. In all three accounts, this story is told simply and directly. God used that story – and still does – to impact the lives of others.

This weekend we'll discover that we all have a story to tell about what God has done in and through us, though not all of us believe that our stories carry God's power.

Our lives are the canvas upon which God's story is painted for others to see. This would be a good time to explore our own stories. Some possible directions to take could include: becoming aware of our own story; drawing a timeline or a map of our lives, paying attention to joys, struggles, changes, transitions. How did I see God at work in those times? Who were the people that made an impact on my life? How might God have been working through them to touch my life? What do I already know about God's story? What narratives from the Bible do I already know and resonate with deeply? What is it in those stories that connects so deeply with me? How do I understand God in my life? How would I describe God to someone else? A creator, father, mother, redeemer, helper, friend, etc.? How would I describe the person and work of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit?

Here is Saul's conversion story from Acts 9.

1. The call of Saul on the Damascus Road (9:1-9)

This is witnessed by Saul's companions, who lead him to Damascus. This is a 6-day, 175-mile journey on foot. Saul is in Damascus without food or water for three days. The conversion of Paul takes place about 18 months after the crucifixion of Jesus.

2. Saul's baptism by Ananias (not Sapphira's husband) from Acts 9:10-19a

We usually think of Saul/Paul as the one whom God called to take the gospel across the Greco-Roman world. While that may be true, God calls Ananias to take the gospel across town to his enemy. Ananias is very hesitant to greet Saul because of his reputation. Ananias has no problem conversing with God; God tells Ananias that Saul is a chosen instrument who will preach to the "Gentiles and kings and sons of Israel." Ananias goes to Saul and confirms the Lord's message, and Saul is baptized.

Key Verses: Acts 9:15-16

"But the Lord said to [Ananias], 'Go, for he [Saul] is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.'"

Now let's think about our own faith stories.

Step One: Get comfortable with your story

1. Take some time to do a map or timeline of the recent years in your life. Note both the good times and the bad, the significant events, memorable times, significant relationships, and changes.
2. Reflect on how you perceive that God was present in the events of your timeline.
3. In your eyes, did anyone in your life demonstrate or reflect the love of God to you?
4. How do you see God at work today?

Step Two: Reflect on your relationships

1. Who are the people you regularly interact with?
2. What are your conversations normally about?
3. Do you know the concerns of any of your friends, or have you had occasion to talk about their values or beliefs?
4. What's on your friend's mind?
5. How do your friend's concerns/issues/stories intersect with yours? Where are you on the same page with them? What do you have in common?

Step Three: Think about what you know about God's story, and how you describe the presence of God.

1. What is your favorite Bible story?
2. What do you know about the life of Jesus?
3. What do you recall about the stories of any of the key people in the Bible?

Step Four: Recall any times in your life that a person shared a story about the presence of God.

Step Five: Clarify what you know about God.

1. How do you describe God? (creator, lover, father, spirit, redeemer, mother, etc.)
2. What do you know about Jesus Christ, and what does Jesus do for you?
3. How would you describe Jesus? (forgiver, healer, teacher, savior, Lord etc.)
4. What do you know about God the Holy Spirit?
5. How would you describe the Holy Spirit? (comforter, advocate, living power of God, breath of God etc.)