

Sermon Title: Strange Bedfellows  
Text: Acts 9:1-20; John 21:1-19  
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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI  
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There are few stories as familiar to us, I suppose, as the one we heard this morning from Acts. You can forget a lot about the bible that was taught to you in Sunday school, but certain images stick with you: the parting of the Red Sea, baby Moses floating down the Nile, the shooting flames of Pentecost, and if you know little else of his story, these moments along the road to Damascus through which Paul's life was transformed. It's in the very language we breathe, so that someone's "Damascus Road" defines a point in which their lives were so radically altered that the only way to describe it all is with words like "before" and "after."

Saul, "breathing threats and murder" against the small Christian communities that were gathering, almost imperceptibly, in the synagogues and squares of ancient Palestine, was stomping down the road, the faithful of Damascus the next in the crosshairs of his wrath. He had a single-minded dedication to ending the threat that Christianity posed to the structures of his beloved Judaism, and carried letters from Jerusalem that proved he was not alone in his intent.

But you know the story: a flash of light so intense that Saul was blinded; a voice from heaven: "why do you persecute me?" Those of you who joined us this Lent when Jonathan Roberts joined us with his presentation on Paul can probably still see and here his presentation. "Who are you Lord?" "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting..." There's actually some ambiguity in the story, but I suppose in the way this story settles in to most of our minds it is in that moment—in that blinding flash, and the thunder of Jesus' voice—that the transformation is effected. Paul is born, and in this instant, becomes arguably the second most important person in all of Christian history. The Apostle to the Gentiles, and if you haven't noticed, that's precisely the sort of church we are. It's not overstating the case to say we may well not have been here today were it not for that moment on the road.

But this morning, I wonder if we can't keep this story running in our mind past this familiar closing image: Paul stumbling to his feet, friends amazed because they'd heard, but not seen, blinded by God's transforming power. Because as I have let this story steep into my life in these past weeks, it has occurred to me that there is another, perhaps not quite so dramatic, but equally significant conversion story told in these few verses. And it just might be that while few of us will ever be called to such a thing as Saul confronted, with its flashes and voices, this *other* conversion may strike like a laser in our hearts.

It's old Ananias I'm talking about. For the record, everything to be known about him from antiquity is told in the verses we read this morning, and his name is uttered in the New Testament only one more time, when Paul himself is recounting the story of his conversion. What do we know? He was sleeping comfortably one night when disturbed by a vision. I suppose it speaks volumes to who he was that his response was so different from Saul's as he marched down the road. There is no fear, no cowering, but that clear response of prophets throughout the ages...the one we love to sing at things like ordinations and confirmations: "Here I am, Lord." But God's plan is not an easy sell. When asked to go out and pick up Saul at one of the city gates, Ananias is rightfully wary.

If you think about it, what God is proposing would sound, especially if you were wakened to the thought in the middle of the night, like a little game of “Whack A Mole.” Saul’s come breathing threats and murder, he’s carrying letters from the High Priest. The only thing he might not know is exactly where the crowd had gathered. In the face of almost certain persecution, Ananias might have preferred a little vision that *warned* him of Saul’s plans, so that the group could go underground—lay low for a few days, until the heat has passed. But to seek him out, and enter into the house where he was staying sounds to me like the height of folly. But you know this God well, too. God doesn’t ask if God is not serious! “Go, for he is the chosen instrument who will bring my name before Gentile, King, and all the people of Israel.”

Again the text is a bit unclear, but it would seem that the second conversion took place precisely at this moment: Ananias went and entered the house. He did not let his fear or animosity stop him, because it just might be that this infamous persecutor was to be the next life transformed by the risen Christ.

I’d like to pause here for just a moment to ponder how often we may thwart the work of God’s hand, precisely because we simply cannot believe God’s work could be done *that way*? How often is it our own prejudices, visions, desires close our eyes to possibilities that God has set before us? I *relate* to Ananias, because—you probably don’t need to be told this about me after eleven years!—I have a hard time believing God can actually be working in some places. I want God’s chosen to look and act and think like me...at least to be on the same *page* as me, and certainly not to be one of those who challenge my basic assumptions about myself, God, this world. What a *conversion* of heart it must have taken for Ananias to put on his robes, and step out into that night, to go to Judas’ house, and knock on the door, to ask for Saul, who sought to destroy him.

You see, we seem to be living in an age in which “compromise” means finding some way to get someone to do something *your way*. We see it in politics most clearly, with the brinksmanship of funding bills in the Congress, and looming threats of presidential veto, all filled with rhetoric that demonizes the other. It seems clear to me in the machinations of Iraq or Palestine, as the government we would prefer to work with don’t seem to be able to control the situation, but we seem unable to abide by any other possible partner. How absurd this thought that the very one who lives and breathes as your enemy could be the very instrument anointed by God to do God’s work in this world?

But it’s not limited to geopolitics. The nature of news media these days is such that we mostly watch to have our own views confirmed, not to find the truth. You’re *either* CNN or your *Fox News*, but seldom both! I want to pick the people on my team, to screen my kids’ friends, to be on the “a” list. We pass stricter and stricter laws to protect our children from possible harm, and insulate ourselves from those we would rather not have as a part of our society—not within 2,500 feet of *my child*. Because God would never use *them* as an instrument of grace. Yet as Ananias shuffles out the door, it is precisely *these* whom he seeks, because *these* are the ones God has chosen...an instrument to bring God’s name to all the corners of the earth.

And watch what happens as he does: as he embraces the one who would be his destroyer. I’ve tried hard to imagine the strength it must have taken for Ananias to even speak the words:

“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And *immediately*, the text says, something like scales fell from his eyes. Blind rage, become sheer blindness, had been replaced by a blazing Spirit that could come *only* from God. Such is the transforming power of the One who came to Ananias at night.

Lest you think this is an isolated incident in the story of our faith, get into your mind the other reading from this morning from John’s Gospel, as Jesus approached the shoreline where the disciples had gone back to their old ways. It’s Peter who comes to the fore of this story, and if Jesus had reason to give up on any of those in the boats, it was him. The one who seemed so close to getting it, but at the end of the day could not. The one who would draw his sword on moment, but deny Jesus in the next. But Jesus understood that resurrection was not the end of this story. It was only the beginning. He would need followers now as much as he had three years ago beside this very same Sea. And so, he not only provides the catch, but he cooks the breakfast for this group who had so famously let him down.

There are lots of good theological reflections on what happened next, as they sat by that fire, testing it with their sticks, wondering just what might come next. “Peter,” Jesus said, with the weight of the last week hanging all around. They’d seen Jesus come and go twice, but never really sorted out what had happened, but as the embers died it seemed the perfect opportunity. “Peter, do you love me?”

Three times Jesus asks, and you can see Peter’s temper starting to flare. Some say that it is so portrayed as to provide a balance to the three times Peter had betrayed his master, but I think, at least this morning, it had more to do with what Jesus was mulling, as he poked that fire for himself. Would he *really* be able to do this? Could one who had let go just when his master had needed him the most be trusted to guide the flock into this new and amazing world, illumined by the light of the resurrection? Could he feed them, and tend them? Like Ananias, weighing the possibilities of touching Saul’s eyes, it might be safer to just keep him blind.

Then I picture Jesus standing up, throwing his stick into the dying embers: “Amen, I say to you, Peter” you may think you got here by doing what you thought was right, but I want you to know that God’s going to work through you *in spite* of your best insights and guesses. You think it’s been a ride this far, just wait for what comes next.” And then, at the end as at the beginning, Jesus said, “Follow me.”

Follow me, not because it will go as you expect. You will be called upon to heal those who would have you dead, to restore sight to those who would pluck out your eyes, to claim as brother those who are bathed in hate. Follow me, not because your road will be easy, but because it is the way in which God’s victory is won: not by climbing temple steps to make it all your own, but by taking up your cross, allowing yourself to be bound over, to go where you do not want to go. Follow me, because it is only in obedience to my word that you will, in the end, find the life you seek.

Let us pray.