

## Eyes Wide Open

### Confirmation Sunday

There's an old Indian legend, which was printed in a 1988 edition of Guidepost magazine that says: Many years ago, Native American young men would go away in solitude to prepare for manhood. One such youth hiked into a beautiful valley, green with trees, bright with flowers. There he fasted. But on the third day, as he looked up at the surrounding mountains, he noticed one tall rugged peak, capped with dazzling snow. I will test myself against that mountain, he thought. He put on his buffalo-hide shirt, threw his blanket over his shoulders and set off to climb the peak. When he reached the top he stood on the rim of the world. He could see forever, and his heart swelled with pride. Then he heard a rustle at his feet, and looking down, he saw a snake.

Before he could move, the snake spoke. *"I am about to die,"* said the snake. *"It is too cold for me up here and I am freezing. There is no food and I am starving. Put me under your shirt and take me down to the valley."*

*"No,"* said the youth. *"I am forewarned. I know your kind. You are a rattlesnake. If I pick you up, you will bite, and your bite will kill me."*

*"Not so,"* said the snake. *"I will treat you differently. If you do this for me, you will be special. I will not harm you."*

The youth resisted awhile, but this was a very persuasive snake with beautiful markings. At last the youth tucked it under his shirt and carried it down to the valley. There he laid it gently on the grass, when suddenly the snake coiled, rattled, and leapt, biting him on the leg. *"But you promised..."* cried the youth.

*"You knew what I was when you picked me up,"* replied the snake as it slithered away.

Saul was a well-known snake. Saul was headed to Damascus on a mission. He had zeal for catching and punishing followers of Jesus. We know of Saul from earlier in Acts, where he has witnessed the stoning of Stephen. Those who were stoning Stephen (after he delivered a particularly confrontational sermon) *"laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul"* (Acts 7:58), and chapter eight begins by noting Saul's approval of the killing of Stephen. As resistance to and persecution of Jesus' followers heated up, Saul participated enthusiastically:

*"...ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison"* (Acts 8:3).

All of this joy, however, and all of this success, evidently worked Saul up into a frenzy, for chapter nine opens with him *"breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,"* and getting authorization from the authorities in Jerusalem to hunt down the followers of the Way as they spread their message up the road to Damascus, to "bind" them, and drag them back to Jerusalem. This was neither the first nor the last time people have been hurt in the name of religion. Ananias and the disciples were fortunate that Saul had a mishap on the road, and that he became blind and was not eating. This

was good news – perhaps God had intervened to protect the followers of Jesus. You can imagine, then, how dismayed Ananias must have been when God tells him to go and heal Saul. Ananias even tried to talk God out of it, reminding him of Saul's reputation. But God had another plan. There were changes afoot. In verse 15, we hear God pronounce his plan for Saul:

*“Go, for he 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.” Acts 9:15*

Up to this point, there are Jews and there are Christ-followers. God sending Saul to the Gentiles is a whole new ministry – reaching out through evangelism and telling the story far and wide is new and different. The disciples of Christ would have been familiar with cleanliness codes, respect for holy sites and the history of the Hebrew people, and in spite of Jesus' teaching, there appears to be very little effort to convert Gentiles. Walter Brueggemann talks about this message being one of the most radical of messages, which is sometimes missed because of our familiarity with the conversion of Saul. But, the Gentiles are not the only people to whom Saul will preach.

Saul is also called to bring the Gospel message to Kings. Sorry for all of you who would rather keep politics and religion separate. The King of the Jews who rose from the dead on Easter Sunday is really shaking things up, and the ministry that has tended to be more private and quiet becomes a radically public ministry not just for common folks, but the powerful too.

Saul is also called to preach to the people of Israel. One of Paul's main themes is the idea of Jews and Greeks, slave and free, male and female. How do we navigate our differences? Gentiles and Jews alike are being called into relationship with Jesus. Saul was a Jew, in leadership, probably a Pharisaic Jew, and after this conversion, he becomes a Christian Jew. God's message is an inclusive one; open to all persons, regardless of what we may think the boundaries are.

Today's scripture gives us some good images of sight and blindness. Saul is struck blind, and the verse reads: *“though his eyes were open, he could see nothing.”* Yet it was in his blindness, he was able to experience Jesus. Ananias is a follower of “the Way” and yet, he is not sure what God's doing when he gets called to heal Saul. The companions of Saul heard a voice, but did not see Jesus. The one who has persecuted others will be persecuted himself. **Seems like many folks had their eyes wide shut!**

I wonder how good our own sight is. Like the Native American young man in the story who picked up the snake. I wonder how many of us know better, yet eagerly saunter down a path we know is not good for us. We are arrogant enough to think we know what we're doing, but that arrogance can bite you, especially when it's meant being blind to those who are actually out to hurt you. Can you relate to Saul? Very few of us have had blinding experiences with God. Many of us may even have trouble articulating your own faith story, when you first believed in God and when you first started believing in Jesus. Our confirmation students got to have a little bit of one on one time with me this week. I asked them to talk about their experiences of God. None of them mentioned being blindsided by God.

For each of them, Confirmation has helped to open their eyes and minds a little bit more to understanding who God is, what scripture tells us, and how to interpret their own experiences. But, their stories were not ones of doing a complete 180 like Saul. Maybe some of our stories connect better as we are headed on our own path, and **God smacks us upside our heads**. Perhaps we can relate to clinging to the arm of a friend to try and get some guidance and direction on where to go next.

Or perhaps you better relate to Ananias – feeling called to something you're pretty sure isn't a good idea. Maybe it's working with children doing games and activities over the summer, or travelling to Ohio to build twelve homes in 3 hours or maybe being the Chair of a new committee when you thought you already had enough on your plate. Perhaps there's a person or relationship you are being called to tend to who you were pretty sure was a lost cause...I think that's where Ananias was, and yet, God opened his eyes.

Ananias, Saul, and the church were transformed by Jesus. This new church in Acts is a church that is transforming people into a new creation. It's transforming disciples into a community. They all had their eyes opened to a new way. We, too, are invited to see in ways that we haven't seen before. I like the picture portrayed by the words –

*"...Immediately, something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored"*  
*Acts 9:18*

We are invited to allow our encounter with the Almighty to remove the scales from our eyes. Instead of having eyes wide shut, we are invited to allow God to open our eyes fully to God's way of seeing.

Luke's version of Paul's experience "**our high horse**." on that road to Damascus (the first of three accounts of it in Acts) vividly illustrates how God finds a way to reach us, even if we have to be stopped in our tracks and knocked off. It's not so hard, then, to believe that God will find ways to enter quietly into our lives and our hearts, turning our attention away from old angers, prejudices, and loss, old convictions and conclusions written on the stone of our hearts and minds, and will widely open our hearts and our eyes to God's way of seeing things, widely open our hearts and our eyes to God's future of hope, a bright shining light.

As we think about where God may be leading us and leading this church, **I hope that the scales will fall off**. Just a couple weeks ago, this congregation affirmed new leaders to step into new roles. We are still new in our relationship with me as your Senior Minister. I see things differently than you, and you are opening my eyes to new possibilities here. Saul's conversion experience was not a private one that was just for him. His conversion was one that took place in the midst of a community, and he was transformed and sent straight into ministry.

So too are we called to be open to new possibilities and opportunities for ministry to people and places that may seem beyond our reach. May this be a day when our eyes are opened, and we, our church, and our world are transformed by the vision. Amen.