



All Things New: A New Vision

Acts 9:1-20

Rev. Jenny M. McDevitt

May 5, 2019

Just this past week, a friend told me a story that her friend had told her, who had heard it from another friend ... You know how that goes. In this story, the protagonist (since I don't know his or her name, we'll just call them that) was attempting to make a dramatic point. As they were speaking to a bunch of pastors, after a few attempts at apparently not achieving the significant response desired, they said: "It was as profound as when Paul was on the road to Damascus, and fell off his horse."

My friend ended the story right there. I waited to understand why she was telling me all this. She correctly interpreted my silence as confusion. "Jenny," she said. "There's absolutely no horse in that story."

And thinking about the image on this morning's bulletin, an image that comes from the Holy Land itself, I offered my own profound response: "Huh."

You see, in the past couple of weeks, as I searched for the right image — the most well-known depictions of this moment ... most of them show Paul, who is technically still Saul at that point, falling off his horse. Which, as my friend pointed out, is one of those details we've internalized but that doesn't actually come from scripture.

"As he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed

around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him..." No horse.

What's fascinating to me is that this story does not lack for drama all on its own. But somehow, we've consistently made it even bigger and more dramatic than it is, this story of Saul's conversion, this moment of seeing the light and changing our ways. But I wonder if, like most of us here in this pews, Saul's conversation was not as instantaneous as we tend to think.

Rachel Held Evans, a tremendously influential Christian theologian and writer, died this weekend after an inexplicable complications from an allergic reaction to antibiotics. She was 37 years old. Her voice quickly found traction among people of faith years ago, however, as she was raised in an extraordinarily fundamentalist tradition, yet in adulthood joined the Episcopal church. She clung to the Jesus of her childhood while believing that Jesus would be one of inclusion and welcome. She became known as a progressive Christian who still believed in actual miracles, a voice for social justice still willing to bet her life on the resurrection. "I am a Christian," she once said, "because the story of Jesus is the story I'm willing to risk being wrong about."¹ And if you asked her about when she was saved, her favorite response was to say, "Just again this morning."² She, perhaps as much as anyone,

¹ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching For Sunday*

² Again, Rachel Held Evans, though I cannot recall which of her books contains this line.

understood that conversion is not a one-time event.

I'd like to suggest this morning's scripture lesson is further evidence of that.

Saul, we are told, was going from town to town arresting his fellow Jews who believed Jesus was the son of God. He was so zealous in this endeavor that the text itself says he was breathing threats and murder. The very air in his lungs was self-righteousness and a drive to purge was impure out of his beloved religion. What's more, he had the full support of the religious authorities in Jerusalem to hunt down other followers of Jesus and take them to Jerusalem where they would stand trial and more than likely find the same fate as their brother Stephen, who, just a few chapters back, was stoned to death for his faith.

The people in Damascus, including Ananias, were warned that Saul was coming. They were, I imagine, absolutely terrified. What I tend to want from Jesus when I am absolutely terrified is comfort and reassurance. I want the angels to come and whisper to me "Do not be afraid." I want promises of safety and security.

How frustrating that Jesus so rarely acts as we think he ought to.

Because Jesus does not say, "Ananias, Saul is coming. So go — protect your family and your loved ones. Avoid him at all costs. Do as I say, and I promise you, everything will be okay."

No, Jesus says, "Ananias, Saul is coming. Here is exactly where you can find him. And not just do you need to find this man, you need to lay hands on him and pray for him and restore his sight to him."

Another preacher says, at this moment, Ananias would be completely justified in "pulling a Jonah."³ In going in the exact opposite direction ... though we all know how that ended up. But Ananias doesn't even try. Ananias does exactly what the Lord asks of him.

It seems to me that Ananias had a conversation of sorts of well, not because it changes his *faith* in Jesus, but because it changes his understanding of what it *means* to have faith in Jesus. Faith in Jesus is about being saved in the afterlife, but it is equally as much as it is about how we live in this life.

Ananias' conversation is the less dramatic account. Ask most people about Paul's conversion, and if they've heard a bit about the bible, they likely can come up with something about the Road to Damascus. (It might even involve a horse.) Ask most people about Ananias and you'll likely get a blank stare.

He only shows up in this fleeting moment, but I suspect that his ongoing conversion allowed for Saul's ongoing conversion. Ananias' fear was converted to love, or at least to obedience, and when he found Saul, just as the Lord said he would, he laid his hands on him and called him Brother. Surely this, too, was a conversion moment for Saul.

Here is the frustrating thing about our faith — when it comes to salvation, "our own salvation is utterly and always tied to the salvation of people we aren't exactly crazy about."⁴ Sometimes even people we might say we "hate," except Jesus wouldn't approve of that language.

Ananias lays hands on the man who had been breathing threats and murder and because Jesus said to, he called him brother.

On Easter we talked about the transformation that can take place when we are called by name. "Brother" was a new name for Saul. It was a name that carried with it forgiveness and reconciliation so powerful that the scales on his eyes could not help but fall off. Having been seen for who he truly was, he was ready to see others for who they truly were, as well. His old, black-and-white, violent ways of seeing quite literally fell away. His story is the

³ Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber uses this phrase.

⁴ Again, phrasing from Bolz Weber.

dramatic one, where scales fall off his eyes, but honestly, I want the faith of Ananias, who learns to see people through God's eyes. I want that kind of vision.

Or if I'm really being honest, I want the faith of Ananias about 80 percent of the time. Because I do believe that God can raise the dead and I want to believe that God can convert my fear into love, too, and give me the strength to make a brother out of my enemy.

But sometimes, at least that remaining 20 percent of the time, I really want to keep thinking the way I already think. I want a transformative faith, but only if everyone else gets transformed, too, because if all the people who challenge me, if they stay the same, and I'm the one who is supposed to change ... well, that seems like a rotten deal to me.

Except it seems to be exactly what Jesus asks of us. Resurrection is the very best thing we know, but resurrection doesn't always feel good. On Easter Day, we hear about the **reality** of resurrection. And that is exactly as it should be. Throughout the season of Easter that follows, though, we hear a bit more about the **process** of resurrection. And it's all good news, but not all of it feels good. Some of it smells like lilies and hydrangeas and some of it smells like decayed earth and fallen scales.

Krista Tippett, most well-known from her NPR broadcast "On Being" recently wrote a book called *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry Into the Mystery and Art of Living*. In it, she writes quite a bit about civility. "The practice of civility is an urgent need," she says, "because we are living in an age where the question of what it means to be human has become inextricable from the question of who we are to each other."

A barrier to civility — and Christian community — is the unsustainable notion that what holds us together are the places around which we agree. Rather, Tippett says, "Civility as something courageous insists there is value in learning to speak together honestly and relate to

each other with dignity, without insisting on a goal of achieving common ground that would leave all the hard questions hanging. Common ground is not the same thing as common life. If we insist that common ground be a prerequisite for common life, we diminish our range of possibility."⁵

Sixteen chapters later in the book of Acts, after Saul becomes Paul he himself ends up arrested for his Christian activities and when he is standing before King Agrippa he recalls his conversion that started on the road to Damascus. And Paul asks, "Why is the thought that God can raise the dead so incredible to you?"

And I cannot help but ask myself: Do I think it so possible that God can raise the dead, that I am willing to see that possibility even in the person who has hurt me or who I have written off so completely? Can I believe it so possible that God can raise the dead that I am willing to see it in even the most despicable parts of myself that I've written off completely?

I mean, look at Saul. He was arrogant and forceful, violent and unwavering, and God says, "I could use someone like you." And God took everything that made people hate Saul and turned into a faithful force for good. Even if all those around him thought that was absolutely crazy.

God insists that salvation can be found in even the strangest, least likely of places. And that salvation, it doesn't always feel good. But it is always good news.

⁵ Notes from a lecture by Krista Tippett, shared with me by the Rev. Pen Peery of First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC.