



"Resurrection Impact: Be A Name Changer"

Third Sunday of Easter
5:30 pm Saturday, April 9, 2016
8:30 and 10:45 am Sunday, April 10, 2016
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Acts 9:1-20; John 21:1-19

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

In our reading from Acts, we meet a guy named Saul. Well, no, that's not entirely correct. We **first** learn about Saul way back at the end of chapter 7, right at the end of the story of the witness of Stephen. Stephen had been giving a witness of faith to the some of the religious leaders there in Jerusalem, which of course ticked them off, and so we get this cryptic, almost creepy, verse:

Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. (Acts 7:58 NRS)

And then Saul's gone for the entire next chapter, until we're reintroduced to him here, in our reading from chapter 9.

It's easy to start to think bad about the guy, because **we** read Acts from our 21st century, North American, long time Christian point of view. But we need to look at the events Saul goes through from his point of view.

Saul is on his way to Damascus, which is one of the larger cities in that part of the Roman Empire. According to historians of the day, there was a sizable Jewish population there, and Saul wants to wipe out this *virus* of followers of Jesus before it becomes too wide-spread. Because that's what these followers of this Nazareen carpenter were to Saul: A *virus* attacking the faith. Jesus was to the Jewish believers of his day a whole lot like David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, if you remember them from a few years back, would be to us. Or even, to some extent, like Harold Camping and his End Times predictions. **We** look at these folks and see how they do *not* fit in with our theology. We look at their following and think, *Wow, are they way off base*. That would be how Saul looked at these weird followers of Jesus: Good meaning folks (probably) who just got off course, or they allowed themselves to be deceived.

So, with the backing of the religious leaders of his day, Saul was tasked with finding these *cells* of Jesus followers (because Saul would Not refer to Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah). He was to find these cells, and eradicate them. So that's why Saul is on his way to Damascus.

But on his way there, he has an encounter *unlike* anything he has ever had before in his life. Some kind of event happens: Scripture describes it as “a light from heaven flashed around” Saul, and a voice (that as it turns out only Saul could hear) asks Saul alone: **“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”** To which Saul replies “Who are you, Lord?” He receives the answer: **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.** And then he is given some very specific instructions: **“But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”** Saul arises from this, blind. And enters the city, as he is told. Where he waits. In the dark. Neither eating or drinking. For three days. (three days, in the dark, not eating or drinking - sounds kind of familiar, doesn't it? Kind of like, being in a tomb, maybe?)

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Damascus, is a fellow named Ananias. Ananias **is** one of those followers of Jesus. He has heard about this Saul; he knows what Saul is up to: how Saul is persecuting followers of Jesus. And Ananias wants **Nothing** to do with this Saul. Ananias even goes so far as to explain to the Lord God just exactly what kind of fellow Saul **is**, to which the Lord pretty much answers: *Who's the boss here, you or me?* Trusting in the Lord God, Ananias goes to Saul, and says

“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.”

Ananias prays with Saul, and lays his hands on Saul, and something “like scales” falls off of Saul's eyes, and he regains his sight. After being baptized and getting his strength back, Saul begins proclaiming - IN THE SYNAGOGUES – EXACTLY where *he himself* was annoyed that people were doing this - that Jesus is the Son of God.

Now I have, upon occasion, run into folks who don't want to take part in worship, or aren't involved in a congregation, because they feel that they are not worthy to do so. They feel that they have done some *really bad* stuff in their life, and they are not worthy, therefore, to join in worship with a congregation. Maybe growing up they were a wild child to their parents. Or maybe they got involved too heavily in substances that then took over their lives. Sometimes it's that they've had a failed relationship, or they're going through a divorce. Maybe they messed up big time at their job. Something along those lines. Whatever. The thing is, *none* of those are reasons to **not** be involved in a faith community. *None* of those are reasons to believe that God would **not** be able to use you to promote the gospel.

There was a guy a few years back, his name was Martin Luther (you may have heard of him) who wrote once that we are all *Simul Justus et peccator*. That's Latin, and means *We are simultaneously righteous and sinful*. We are both sinner and saint. We don't **have** to achieve some kind of moral perfection before God can **use** us, before God can **work through** us, because we **can't make ourselves perfect**. Instead, God is absolutely capable of doing great and amazing things, even though we are sin-filled beings.

Here's the thing that maybe trips us all up with that thinking: In God's eyes, Sin is sin. ALL sin is bad. There are not, from God's point of view, varying degrees of sins. Sin is NOT quantitative. Lusting after someone is just as evil as mugging an old person, which is just as evil as killing a baby, which is just as evil as lying to the police to get out of a traffic ticket, which is just as evil as stealing stuff to pay for your addiction. In God's eyes, Sin is sin is sin.

That does not mean that God Can't, or Won't, use us to the greater good. Look at Saul. He was *hunting down* believers in Christ. He was *condoning* their deaths. And God tripped him up, literally. After getting a smack down from the Lord God, Saul went on to be the author of three quarters of our New Testament. Like so many other Biblical people, he got a name change: **Saul** the persecutor became **Paul** the Apostle. That change didn't make him perfect. He's still got attitude. Read some of his letters - sometimes it's difficult to hear the message of God through Paul's ego. Saul didn't become perfect when he started going by the name Paul. He was just as imperfect as ever. It was that he quit fighting *against* God, and allowed God to use him as God saw fit.

We don't need a name change to make an impact. God can make an impact on others through us, and usually, *Despite* us. And that's an amazing and extremely cool thing. Don't get caught up in your past. Yes, God would rather that we **not** sin. God would rather that we treat one another with Grace and Love and Forgiveness.

But whether we treat one another like that, or are total and complete jerks to one another, is not important. Because God is greater than that. God is greater than a 57-year-old, balding guy with cardiac issues; God is greater than a short, round, near-sighted apostle and author. God is greater than me. God is greater than Saul. God is greater than you.

More importantly, God loves us, just as we are. God will use us, just as we are. God forgives us, just as we are.

Amen.

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