

Luke 9: 1-9 "Turning Points" Rev. Janet Chapman 5/5/19

I don't know about you but this story in Acts about Saul on the road to Damascus is a bit hard to swallow. Did this really happen to him? Do things like this happen to people in the 21st century or are they only reserved for the first century? Occasionally, we hear people describe some mystical experience in their lives that is so unusual, so pronounced, that it seems nearly unbelievable. So we are left with a choice. If we believe that God truly intervenes in such blinding, definitive ways, then why has it never happened to me or to thousands of others? What's wrong with me that I wasn't given such a sign from God? Was it because I was raised in the church and never knew a time when I wasn't a Christian? Or am I just not spiritual enough? I have heard both. In ancient times, kings believed that God intervened through dreams, speaking boldly about important decisions and directions within their administration. Receiving a direct word from God came through those moments they were asleep in their beds. And if no message came while they were asleep in their beds, they would head for the temple, believing it would work better there. Some say this is where the time-honored tradition of sleeping in church came from. Now you know...

So I go back to the question, does God have favorites or am I just coasting along in such normality that God doesn't need to "turn me around" so graphically? Why do these dramatic events happen so rarely? It is true that not many of us are "breathing threats and murder" against our opponents. However, even I have been on wrong paths before; I have been headstrong and stubborn (I know hard to believe huh?), I have been blinded by ambition, selfish to meet my own needs, oblivious of the true cost to others or self, and even caught in addictive behaviors, not counting my Starbucks fixation. I will never forget the year that our denomination partnered with the United Church of Christ in a combined national Assembly in

Kansas City and I foolishly took on the leadership for the entire children's program, where it was anticipated that over 200 kids would descend for a week of activities and learning. I thought it would look great on a resume. But I tell you now that what looks even better on a resume is "Still Sane and Breathing." Knowing my limitations, discerning when to "be still" has been a constant struggle in my life.

The word "still" isn't just significant for me but it is within our story for today as well. As our story begins, we are told that Saul and the powers of evil are "still" at work and effective. Saul has official letters authorizing wholesale arrests of those who belong to the "Way," with a capital W which was the name given to those early Christians. It is a powerful metaphor for their identity. Rather than being identified by a set of beliefs, these communities were known by their character, their path or active way of living in the world. Ironically, Saul is also "on the way" to Damascus, the text tells us, and all signs point to his success. NT Wright speculates that possibly he was meditating on Elijah that grand chariot taking him up to heaven. Saul is wanting a grand encounter with God just like that. And then "it happens," Luke says. The Greek word is *egeneto*, a favorite of Luke's which is often omitted in translations, and it signals the surprising entry of God into ordinary events. Saul is struck by a heavenly light which speaks with a heavenly voice, the voice of Christ, heard not just by Saul but by his companions. Interestingly though, his companions do not see what is right before their eyes, only hear glimpses of what is said and are confused. Saul set out that morning to stamp out a wayward, religious sect, and by the evening he is surrounded in darkness and on a journey to bring Christ to the Gentile world. His three day blindness becomes a time of reorientation, a turning point, as he makes a dramatic shift in his life mission. Plato states that, "Conversion is not implanting

eyes, for they already exist, but giving them direction, which they have not.” However, I have problems labelling this event a conversion because I think it misses half the story. Saul doesn’t just turn away from a previous way of living; more importantly, he is called and commissioned to walk in a new “Way.” This whole experience is far more than a conversion; it is a calling like Isaiah, Mary or one of the 12 would have experienced.

After that blinding light, Saul is led like a baby to Damascus. There he would face great suspicion and fear from the Christians he had originally planned to kill. Certainly no one could blame them but they were definitely not in the mood to give him the benefit of the doubt. If there had been in those days a media outlet which consistently pedaled fear as a way to influence Damascus Christians, they would have broken into regular programming with breaking news saying, “This is the Straight Street News Network giving straight news, straight to you. We are only ones with the straight up truth that this Saul who has entered our beloved city can’t be trusted! He has committed horrific deeds against the Way and is pure evil. He must be stopped at all costs. After all, Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, ‘a tree is known by its fruit.’ The fruit of Saul’s life clearly reveals he is a terrorist. We need to get him before he gets us. We must protect ourselves and our families. This is Straight Street News reminding you that if it ain’t Straight Street, it just ain’t straight.” And you get the idea. As so often happens in dramatic interventions, they seem unbelievable and untrustworthy not just to the persons experiencing them, but often to everyone else around.

Toward the end of C.S. Lewis’ *The Last Battle* within *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there is a scene where a group of dwarves sit huddled together in a tight little knot thinking that they are in a pitch black, dreary stable when the truth is that they are out in the midst of an endless

grassy countryside as green as central Oregon with the sun shining and blue sky overhead. The huge golden lion, Aslan himself, who in the series is the metaphor for Christ, stands nearby. All the other dwarves are “kneeling in a circle around his forepaws” as Lewis writes, “and burying their hands and faces in his mane as he stoops his great head to touch them with his tongue.” When Aslan offers the dwarves food, they think it is moldy. When he offers them wine, they take it for ditch water. They are unable to see a new path, a new beginning not just for themselves but for all those around them. In the absence of a sudden, earth-shattering event, they miss the Holy in their midst, they cannot see what is right before their eyes.

Best-selling Christian author Frederick Buechner shares in his book, Telling Secrets, that his anorexic daughter nearly starved to death, and without knowing it, so did he. He was not living his own life, because he was so caught up in hers. If on a particular day, his daughter decided to have a slice of toast with her dietetic supper, he was in seventh heaven. If on another day, she decided to have no supper at all, he was in hell. The psychiatrists told him he couldn’t cure her – the best thing he could do was to stop trying to do anything. In his heart, he knew they were right, but that didn’t stop the madness of his desperate meddling, it didn’t stop him from trying. Everything he could think to do or say only stiffened her resolve to be free from, among other things, him. He began to doubt if she would ever heal. Her not eating was a symbolic way of striking out for freedom, and the only way she would ever be well again was if and when she freely chose to be. The turning point for his daughter came when she was hospitalized 3000 miles away from him. There was no one to protect her, to make her decisions, to manipulate events on her behalf, and the result was that she had to face those events on her own. In the form of doctors, nurses, social workers and the judge who

determined she was a danger to her own life and thus could be legally hospitalized against her will, society stepped in. Those men and women were not haggard, compromised or lovesick as he was. They were realistic, tough, conscientious, and therefore, though they would have not put it in such terms themselves, they loved her in a sense that Buechner asserts is closer to what Jesus meant by love than anything else he had been doing. Little by little, the daughter he loved began to get well, emerging out of the shadows finally as strong, sane and wise as anybody he had ever known. As he watched her heal, he began to see how much he was in need of healing himself. Just like C.S. Lewis' dwarves, he had sat huddled in the dark of a stable of his own making. It was only as he came to see a Way before him clearly, that he started to suspect the presence of a green countryside all around him. It was then he both saw and heard that golden lion in whose image and likeness even cowardly lions are made.

Turning points which move us away from destruction and towards healing are not as much earth-shattering as they are earth-stabilizing. After Paul's Damascus experience, he saw clearly the error of his ways and the value of living in the Way that Jesus laid out. Maybe the lesson for all of us is that we shouldn't write anyone off as too far gone. There is no limit to the great variety of strides and rhythms, grand dramas and miniscule whispers that people will encounter on their path. This is because God is still, yes still very active in laying out the Way with a capital W for you and I – do you see it?