

“What You Have Seen and Heard”

Acts 22:1-22

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One of the members of our church, Teresa Ferguson, who is incidentally being ordained and installed as a Deacon later in our service, introduced me to a fascinating podcast called “Conversations With People Who Hate Me.” The maker of this podcast is Dylan Marron, and he describes himself this way: “I’m a writer, performer and video maker, and almost all of my work exists online. My videos focus on social justice issues and have gained a lot of support, but also have attracted a good amount of hate.”¹ Dylan’s podcast is an interview series where he has in-depth conversations with some of the strangers who have sent him the most hateful or negative messages online in response to his social justice activism videos. When he is met with aggressive opposition, he turns not away from those spewing hateful vitriol, but towards them.

Our Scripture reading today presents to us the Apostle Paul’s version of “Conversations With People Who Hate Me”. Paul has been sharing about Jesus all over the Mediterranean region and letting Jews and Gentiles mix company. This scared the Jewish community, who were geographically dispersed and terrified of losing the purity of identity, so they formed a mob to come and stop Paul and his dangerous behavior. Let’s tune now to hear what Paul says to this angry mob who has gathered

¹ “Conversations with People Who Hate Me” - Episode 1 transcript, <https://www.dylanmarron.com/podcast/episode-guide/episode-1>

against him... Hear now the Word of God from Acts, chapter 22, beginning at verse 1:

‘Brothers and fathers, listen to the defence that I now make before you.’

2 When they heard him addressing them in Hebrew, they became even more quiet. Then he said: 3 ‘I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today. 4I persecuted this Way up to the point of death by binding both men and women and putting them in prison, 5as the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify about me. From them I also received letters to the brothers in Damascus, and I went there in order to bind those who were there and to bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment.

6 ‘While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. 7I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” 8I answered, “Who are you, Lord?” Then he said to me, “I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.” 9Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me. 10I asked, “What am I to do, Lord?” The Lord said to me, “Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do.” 11Since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, those who were with me took my hand and led me to Damascus.

12 ‘A certain Ananias, who was a devout man according to the law and well spoken of by all the Jews living there, 13came to me; and standing beside me, he said, “Brother Saul, regain your

sight!” In that very hour I regained my sight and saw him. 14Then he said, “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; 15for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard. 16And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.”

17 ‘After I had returned to Jerusalem and while I was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance 18and saw Jesus saying to me, “Hurry and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.” 19And I said, “Lord, they themselves know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. 20And while the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I myself was standing by, approving and keeping the coats of those who killed him.” 21Then he said to me, “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.” ’ 22 Up to this point they listened to him, but then they shouted, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.’

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

I’ve gotten in the bad habit lately of collecting facts and figures from the news I watch like they are sharp ninja throwing stars I’ll be able to whip out in my next argument with that person whose views are abhorrent to me. It always feels like a good idea when I’m doing it. But then the moment comes over dinner with my family or when I see that old high school friend’s political post on Facebook. I start in with those sharp throwing stars I’ve stored up to win the argument and, even if I feel I’ve “out-logged” my opponent, I end up feeling like, somehow, both of us have lost.

Paul’s bold words in our passage to this hushed crowd of people who hate him has something to teach us. Paul does not

respond to their fear-based rage by pulling out the many throwing stars of argument, logic, and reprimand he surely had stored up somewhere inside. Instead, he tells his story, the story of how he was once standing where they stood, except he was the *leader* of violence against these odd Jesus-followers. He paints a picture for them of that moment on the road to Tarsus, when Jesus came to him in blinding light and called him to go to a believer named Ananias, who would show him the next step on the journey. And after Ananias heals Paul of his temporary blindness and baptizes him, I love what Paul recalls Ananias telling him: "...you will be [Christ's] witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard." Indeed, that is exactly what Paul is doing in this conversation with the people who hate him - offering them the gift of his story, what he, Paul, has seen and heard as he has encountered the risen Christ.

Our encounters with the living God do not arm us with weapons to win arguments. Instead, we emerge from our encounters with God with the humble gift of our stories, our personal testimonies of what we have seen and heard in our own experiences with Jesus. And stories are not meant to be weaponized - they are meant to be offered as gifts of vulnerability to the other, especially to the one we have made our enemy. This offering is the opposite of taking control. Telling our stories is total surrender, because we cannot know what the other will do with our story. As author and speaker Brene Brown puts it, "vulnerability is not winning or losing; it's having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome." And if I know one thing about God, it is that Her best work is done in this territory of our surrender.

In the 2nd episode of his podcast, Dylan, who identifies as a cisgender, white, gay man, spoke with a high school senior named Josh. In response to one of Dylan's online posts, Josh had written to Dylan: "You're a moron. You're the reason this country is dividing itself. All of your videos are merely opinion and an awful opinion, I must say. Just stop. Plus being gay is a sin."

One thing I love about Dylan is that he often opens these conversations with lots of questions. There was a lot of back and forth and trading of different political views between him and Josh in the first part of their podcast conversation. But then something happened. Josh mentioned that he was being bullied at his high school - he called it hell. And I loved how Dylan responded in this tender moment: He responded by sharing his own vulnerable story - what he had seen and heard. He shared about how he was harassed and bullied by his best friend's boyfriend in high school. And that moment of surrendering control of what Josh would do with his story changed the direction of the whole conversation. By the end of their time together, when Dylan asked "do you feel like this conversation has been productive?" A formerly closed off and aggressive Josh replied by saying: "I think it has. I know a lot of gay guys at my school who are just like you but they're afraid to come out. And that is what's hurting them, because if they would just be who they are, if they don't let bigots like me keep them in the closet, this world could be hell of a lot better. It could be amazing."²

Who are those members of the human family who have become opponents and enemies to you in this age of increasing division and fear? The call this week is to enter those spaces as

² "Conversations with People Who Hate Me", Episode 2 transcript, <https://www.dylanmarron.com/podcast/episode-guide/episode-2>

those who have laid down our weapons, surrendered our craving for control in those spaces, and instead look for opportunities to offer our own stories of what we have seen and heard of in our encounters with the living God. Maybe in that heated conversation about LGBTQ+ inclusion, we can share not our long list of arguments and Bible verses, but instead our own stories of the many ways we have seen our friends in the LGBTQ+ community filled with the fruit of the Spirit. Instead of fighting hateful words with angry retorts and arguments, we can listen for the fear giving birth to that hate, the fear that is a small child inside of all of us that may simply need the company of someone who can really see and hear them. We can invite the other to share their story with us and then offer our own in a moment of surrender. What might God do in that new kind of space?

It feels important to note that even after Paul shares his vulnerable story in his speech, the crowd responds in persistent anger that Paul should not be allowed to live. We don't need more than the cross in our own sanctuary to remind us that sharing ourselves with this kind of openness will always leave us open to rejection. But even as we follow a God who went to the cross, we follow Him beyond that place to the empty tomb where death has lost its sting and new life has the last word. We don't know what surprising resurrection moments could spring up from the sharing of our stories. That is not for us to know. But we do know that the God who went before us on the ultimate path of vulnerability is the same God who goes with us now as we share our stories with our enemies. May our stories become a tool in God's hands to make even the most broken things new. Amen.