

Acts 9: 1-7 “Going to Damascus” Rev. Janet Chapman 5/18/25

We are entering the season of moving and traveling; some folks have or are moving, others are taking vacation trips, some are getting ready to go to church camp (we hope), and still others are, like myself, are just moving the stuff that has accumulated in my garage to the dump. A story is told of 2 Irishmen who were traveling in the Holy Land and came to the Sea of Galilee. They discovered it would cost them almost \$75 to cross the lake by boat. They cried out in protest, “The Lakes of Killarney are the most beautiful lakes in the world and one can cross them for 12 euros.” The guide explained, “Ahhh, but this is the lake Jesus walked on.” The Irishmen quickly responded, “Well, it’s no wonder, at the prices you charge for taking a boat.” We all know that tourist sites overcharge to make up for the rest of the year we aren’t there, which is only a part of the stress of traveling. Whether we are headed to tourist spots or just to the dump with an oversized treadmill on a windy day, it can get stressful.

No doubt, this was the case with our lead character in today’s text. Saul was traveling on the road to Damascus. But why Damascus? Why would anyone want to go to Damascus? Other than being the ancient capital of Syria, there really wasn’t much to attract people. Not gold or silver, not political aspirations nor social events. It is still considered to be the oldest city continuously inhabited in the world, but it wasn’t particularly noteworthy. Word has it they still make some of the finest sword steel in the world, but that wasn’t sufficient reason for Saul to head to Damascus. Saul was a part of the “in crowd,” proud of his family, Roman citizenship, Jewishness, and the fact that he was a Pharisee who had studied with the very best teachers. He didn’t know what it was to admit unworthiness or to suffer failure as he stood on the edge of destiny, discovering where he belonged and how his life would be spent. Prior to our reading, we see Saul hanging out with a rather dubious group who have tried and judged, in their own personal court, a follower of the Way, which was the earliest name for Christians. While Stephen was being stoned to death for naming Jesus as his Savior, Saul stood by holding the cloaks of the attackers. He remained on the

sidelines and watched, not actually participating in the murder, but also not intervening. He valued his connection with those throwing the stones and wanted to be seen as a faithful Jew.

I want to digress a moment because of things that have happened among college fraternities and sororities which may bring a striking parallel here. Just this week, the University of Maryland released a reform plan for Greek life in response to last year's allegations of life-threatening hazing and alcohol abuse. These included people being burned and assaulted with several being taken to hospitals for alcohol poisoning. Anonymous students reported being forced to wall sit for hours on end, intentionally harm themselves, expose themselves in public, and stay out in freezing temperatures with just their underwear on. At one of the hazing events, someone was forced to drink straight vodka, and he passed out. Onlookers did nothing to help him and instead hit him in the face with a plastic bat and poured beer on him until he woke up. The reality was that he could have died which has occurred on other campuses. Somehow the significance of who held the coats, who were among the onlookers and did the cheering, gets lost in the larger question: "What in the world is happening to civilization?" How is it in 21st century America that we can regularly find 15-20 people who will engage in acts like this, who can consent to such things? Is personal gratification or a need to belong or the fear of suffering ourselves so compelling that we forego common decency? Is respect for others so eroded that there is no inhibition left? Ironically, the previous allegations didn't come to light until the fraternities filed a lawsuit against the University saying students' rights were violated because of the consequential ban on all social events involving alcohol and recruitment. Now five chapters are under investigation for unlawful behavior and a new reform plan transforming campus Greek life starts in June. It will involve increased accountability for the well-being of all students and new policies across the board. Weekly meetings will be held to ensure shared responsibility and a collective effort on the part of all those involved. It is hoped that such interventions will steer students away from the

direction they were headed, away from a complete loss of respect for human lives and the law, and towards a greater sense of belonging, awareness, respect, and support.

In any case, Saul was not unlike those students who gave consent to the structures of evil that permeated his time. He liked to be among the avant garde, the next generation of leaders. So he went from being merely a consenter to the death of Stephen, to organizing vigilante groups of his own. It is not a hard leap to such power when you are squarely entrenched in the institution that controls human endeavors. Such institutions are infamous for what Richard Rohr calls institutional blindness, an inability to critique themselves, filled with self-satisfaction and pride, that trickles down to its members. Paul asks the high priest, another one also affected with such blindness, for letters to the Damascus synagogues which would allow him to track down more of Christ's followers, arrest them, and bring them back to Jerusalem. Historically, the Jerusalem temple had no jurisdiction over the synagogues of Damascus but maybe the letters verified Saul's trustworthiness and loyalty to the Jewish faith. So he heads in the direction of Damascus to wreak havoc on Christ's followers. This is where his life stops and starts again as he is hit by a blinding light; something shakes the hell out of him and when he comes to himself, he doesn't know what happened. All he knows is that whatever it was left him subdued and submissive, ready to listen. And listen he does as he and all those around him hear the voice of Jesus say, "Why do you persecute me?"

Have you ever noticed that when someone is headed in the wrong direction, it sometimes takes a blinding light to expose their own blindness. This is how the phrase, "road to Damascus," came to mean being confronted, turning around and starting a new path. God has a way of opening eyes, especially for those who live in structural blindness. Perhaps there are some of us who still need to be asked the question, "Why do you persecute me?" Have there been times when we were so blind to the consequences of our actions, that we dismissed them when they actually had a negative effect on others? We may have had good intentions, but structurally we couldn't see past our own nose. Jesus quotes Isaiah to describe this socially blind

position, “You will hear and hear again, and not understand, see and see again, and not perceive.” It is one thing to lose your physical sight, as Saul did. How could he do anything if he couldn’t see? Not only was he blind, but for the first time in his life, he was helpless. Somebody had to help him to do everything he had always done for himself. He was scared and maybe for the first time had to surrender and trust. The long and the short story is that he had to be led by hand down a street called “straight,” a different way indeed, to a Christian named Ananias who healed his sight and protected him.

From then on, Saul is known as Paul, the greatest promoter of the Christian faith in human history, because he took that road to Damascus, suffered and surrendered, coming to understand what it meant to lose in order to gain. He had to have his confrontation with the reality of personal and institutional blindness. He had to come to terms with himself, his society, his God, and his destiny. It is not unlike the old slave ship captain, John Newton, once wrote, “I once was blind but now I see.” The words still ring out in our hearts today as God calls us to follow the same road. Will you go?