Interactive Bulletin 3.15.26

GATHERING

Welcome

Call to Worship

Awaken from your slumber,
and bring your fears and anxieties
into the presence of the Lord our God.
Hear the call of our Shepherd,
and allow His voice
to lead from selfish ambition
to the feast of grace.
May the light of Christ
shine into the hidden darkness of our lives
and restore us
for the service of the Lord.

All: Come let us worship God.

Rev. MaryAnn Rennie

Gathering Song: Praise to the Lord, the Almighty
Refrain: Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise Him, for He is thy health and salvation!
All ye who hear, now to His temple draw near; sing now in glad adoration. *Refrain*

Praise to the Lord, who o'er all things so wondrously reigneth,
Shelters thee under His wings, yea, so gently sustaineth!
Has thou not seen how thy desires e'er have been granted in what He ordaineth? *Refrain*

Praise to the Lord, O let all that is in me adore Him!
All that has life and breath, come now with praises before Him!
Let the amen sound from His people again; gladly forever adore Him. *Refrain*

PRAISING

Prayer of Adoration

Song of Adoration: Christ is Lower Still
Breathe in, reach out, touch the hem of Your garment now.
Help me, heal me, my mind, my body and soul.

Refrain: Let the King descend, living Word made flesh,
lift this heavy heart to Your throne, O God.
In Your wounds I find room for all of mine.
When from grace I fell, Christ was lower still.

Humbly, lowly, Jesus waits in the valley.
My Savior suffers with me, with Him I'll rise again. *Refrain*

We lift it all up to You Lord. We lift it all up to You Lord.

We lift our heads, we lift our hands, *(we lift it all up to You Lord)*
We lift our dreams, we lift our plans, *(we lift it all up to You Lord)*
We lift our sorrow, and our pain, *(we lift it all up to You Lord)*
We cast our cares on You again, *(we lift it all up to You Lord) Refrain*
Matt Maher, Kate Bluett, Doe Jones**

BELONGING

Kids on the Steps

Call to Confession: How Deep the Father's Love for Us
How deep the Father's love for us,
How fast beyond all measure
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.

How great the pain of searing loss.
The Father turns His face away,
As wounds which mar the Chosen One,
Bring many ones to glory.

Behold the Man upon the cross,
My sins upon His shoulders.
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice,
Call out among the scoffers.

It was my sin that held Him there,
Until it was accomplished;
His dying breath has brought me life,
I know that it is finished.

I will not boast in anything:
No gifts, no power, no wisdom.
But I will boast in Jesus Christ:
His death and resurrection.

What should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer.
But this I know with all my heart:
His wounds have paid my ransom.
Stuart Townend**

Prayer of Confession & Assurance of Forgiveness

STEWARDING

Invitation to Offering

FORMING

Sermon: Acts 9:1-25

Saul's Conversion or
What Paul and Ananias Have to Teach Us About Transformation

Gil and I are retired entrepreneurial arborists; that means our backgrounds are in science with a healthy dose in the the art of life and tree trimming; and we have 2 sons, our younger son, Dustin, a pilot with the Forest Service, who lives here in Missoula, with his wife, a nurse and midwife, and our two grandchildren. Our older son, Garret, who is an artist and physicist, lives in Pittsburgh, PA. and works as a facilities manager for the Girl Scouts of America managing their camps in Western PA. I should also mention that our other daughter in love is a Presbyterian pastor, who also teaches at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Garret has walked through many sermons with her. To keep in touch with Garret, we often find ourselves chatting over the phone while he is traveling from one camp to another or working in his studio.

In December we had a conversation that went something like this:

me: Guess what I am going to do?

Garret: Do tell.

me: I have volunteered to preach at church!

Garret: You SILLY silly girl, why would you ever agree to do that?

me: Well after all those hours in seminary I thought maybe I should have the experience of preaching at least once in my life.

Garret: That's fair.

me: I wish I had a photo of your dad's face when I told him, it was one of abject terror!!

Garret: I can imagine, speaking in front of people is like Dad's worst nightmare!

Both of us laughed at that point, but here I am, laughing no longer, to prove to myself that I could do this if ever given the chance.

So with great thanks to Dan, for his generosity, and to you for your forbearance, I am going to proceed, with the clear understanding that I can't do this alone, so…Can we pray?…

————————————-

Lord as we open your word today, let us be open to your Spirit and help us to hear what it is you want us to hear anew from this very familiar story. -Amen

We will be reading from Acts 9, primarily from the New Living Translation but I will be adding annotations …

Acts: **9 :1**

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NLT- Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest.

(one version I read used the term "murderous threats")

Eugene Peterson's *The Message* renders this sentence: "All this time Saul was breathing down the necks of the Master's disciples, out for the kill"

2 He (Saul) requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.

As we go to the next verse we realize that the high priest was obviously just as hell bent on destroying and killing the followers of Jesus because he

gave Saul all he wanted…we realize that Saul and his associates were entirely convinced that their opinions about the followers of The Way were accurate.

3 *As he (Saul) was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him.*

This is where we get the term "blinding light", I think we can assume it was indeed an otherworldly light. Because…

4 *Saul* fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him,
"Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?"

5 "***Who are you, lord?***" asked Saul.
And the voice replied, "**I am Jesus**, the one you are persecuting! **6** Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

Lest we question the veracity of this account we are given the report of some witnesses. Most assuredly these were the tough guys who worked for the Pharisees to help Saul do his (dare I say) "dirty work". Remember, it was Saul who stood over Stephen, the first Christian martyr, watching, while poor Stephen was stoned to death. Not objecting in the least to the murder he was observing.

7 The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice, but saw no one! **8** Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes ***he was blind***. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. **9…and** He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink.

I suspect , at this point, Saul's companions were harboring a good deal of fear. Was that voice really Jesus of Nazareth? Was it Jesus that blinded Saul and would they be next? Surely they knew who Jesus was, they would have heard about or even possibly been witness to his miracles, his trial and his crucifixion. There was plenty to think about…plenty to be frightened of…for Saul's companions and for Saul.

Now we get the other side of the story, the side we often gloss over because we have focused so intently on our protagonist, Saul.

10 Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. (Just for clarity know that this Ananias was not the same one married to Saphira who was struck dead earlier in Acts. The name Ananias (Hebrew: Hananiah, means "Yahweh is gracious") and was very common in the first century, so many individuals share it.

The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, "Ananias!"

…without a moments hesitation he replied

"Yes, Lord!"

11 The Lord said, "Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now. (I bet Saul was praying!)

12 I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so he can see again.

…pause

13 “But Lord,” exclaimed Ananias, “I’ve heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! **14** And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name.”

Again Eugene Peterson’s the Message renders the above verses this way…

Ananias protested, Master, you can’t be serious. Everybody’s talking about this man and the terrible things he’s been doing, and his reign of terror against your people in Jerusalem! And NOW he’s shown up here with papers from the Chief Priest that give him license to do the same here in Damascus.

Ananias was afraid…I think I would have been really afraid too…

15 But the Lord said, “*Don’t argue (Ananias) just* Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. **16** And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake.”

Jesus acknowledges Ananias but shares with him privileged information about Saul to help Ananias know He’s got his back. To reassure him not to worry. So bolstered by Jesus’ confidence in him we continue with verse 17

17 So Ananias went and found Saul. (i.e. he was obedient without further argument) He laid his hands on *Saul* and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” **18** Instantly something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. **19** Afterward he ate some food and regained his strength. (showing us that Ananias had already accepted Saul as part of the family)

I LOVE THIS STORY, I love story… because…it is not just a story about Saul, our protagonist but about Ananias, the often forgotten one in this plot line.

Story has POWER, and the way we tell our stories about how we came to know Jesus can and does invite others into the same relationship.

I LOVE TO ask people “tell me the story of how *you* got to know Jesus, what drew you to Him?” The best thing about that question is, **it tells us about Jesus’ story**, the more stories we hear, the more we learn about Jesus, and who He is, and how he works in the world. That is because what God tells us in the first book and first chapter of the Bible is we are all, each of us, made in the image of God, and our stories reflect Jesus’ story.

I could spend the rest of our time this morning sharing some of those amazing stories. The thing that captivates me the most about them is their transformative nature. No one ever meets Jesus and goes unchanged by the experience. And like snowflakes no two stories are the same. No two lives are the same. We each have a unique role to play in the kingdom, just like Paul and Ananias.

When we read scripture we are reading both history OR HIStory and the stories of many others who have come to know him. When we learn of the stories of other disciples of The Way we learn about Jesus and his infinite ways of reaching his children. There is never just one way to meet Him, there is never just one way to get to know Him.

As I read this very familiar story over and over, I was at once struck by the power of Ananias’ role in it and the fact that I have found myself more than once in my life, like

Saul, with his murderous heart. Lord have mercy!

i.e. - I have met the enemy and the enemy is me.

As I review the response of Ananias to Jesus' call, versus Saul's response I can't help but think Ananias has as much ***or far more*** to teach me here than our protagonist Saul/Paul.

Ananias recognized Jesus voice immediately and responded in the moment with a desire to serve. Mind you, not without a bit of argument out of fear for all that Saul had done and fear for his own life. But his questioning is not rebellion. He surrenders to Christ's directive and does exactly as he is asked without further doubt that Jesus has him. That Jesus would provide for him and protect him. Ananias' exchange with his Lord was one of a true friend. The beauty of this story to me is the raw truth of Saul's rebellious spirit and his lack of curiosity about the true person of who Jesus was…Saul illustrated that he had no knowledge of Jesus' voice where Ananias knew the voice of his Lord Jesus instantly. The only way that could happen is that Ananias had heard that voice many many times before, where Saul had not.

Remember that Saul was among the elite rulers, a Pharisee of Pharisees. He and his colleagues seem to have lost all curiosity, whether they had any to begin with, about whether or not Jesus ***could*** have been who He said he was! They were so caught up in the culture of their day and were fearful of losing their power and position. When we lose our curiosity, our open spirit (our open hands)…we draw near to Saul's rebellion and inability to hear Jesus' voice. The Pharisees were so caught up in what ***they believed was right*** that they couldn't see what was right in front of them…the true Messiah of Israel. Saul's physical blindness, I think, was a way of showing him and us his spiritual blindness. Saul's world was about to be turned upside down, to be transformed. Saul renamed Paul was about to learn how to listen for and hear the voice of God. That is the job of every believer, to know and obey the voice of God in our lives.

I just finished reading a book titled the Thunder Dog, by Michael Hingson. It is the story of a man who was completely blinded by the oxygen levels in his incubator as a premature baby. He grew up to survive the attack on the World Trade Center on 9-11. He and his guide dog, Roselle, along with hundreds of others found their way down the stair well of tower #1 from the 78th floor before it collapsed. Michael outlines the story of their journey of learning to work together as a handler and guide and then having that bond and relationship save both of their lives while also helping many others. Michael had been paired with a guide dog since he was only 16 y.o. He talks often about that unique bond between him and his dogs *explaining how he had to learn how to trust his dogs and they had to learn to trust him. They knew each others' voices and body language through thousands of practiced experiences together.* Michael goes on to share, it was in large measure, how experiences of living with and working with his dogs is how he learned to trust and recognize Jesus's voice when he heard it.

Ananias, like Michael, knew Jesus' voice because he was deeply practiced in listening for it. He had intentionally carved neural pathways in his brain that were familiar with talking to and listening to God. Have you ever wondered why Jesus called Ananias to this task? I postulate it was because Jesus knew Ananias would know His voice. They were old friends.

I was thrilled to read on day 10 of the Lenten journal compiled by Dan and Tracey's sister in law an entry written by someone I know, Adele Calhoun; I would encourage you to read it or re-read it in its entirety.

She is reminds us that the way God calls us into deeper relationship is to remember all He has done for us. Adele writes that the Exodus song that the Israelites sang was full of remembering. God is always trying to help us deepen our neural pathways with our relationship with Him! She goes on to say it's not just God's people who sing to him. ***God sings*** over His people, and He sings over us as well. She calls it the

duet of delight.
Adele wisely continues…"Remembering God's story in your life is the antidote to dark memories that can metastasize like cancer. God's story is a bigger sweeter story than any story ever told. And we are part of it! Remember…Recount God's presence with you. Let your life be shaped, not by darkness, but by the great deLIGHT."
Adele goes on to say, quite rightly I think, "remembering God's goodness to us personally is not quite enough. We are called to kingdom living through practices of repentance, fairness, integrity, generosity, and contentment. And in this way we are preparing the way for Jesus's future coming in glory, even as we find ways to open to the reality of the kingdom among us now. While we wait for the fullest expression of Christ's kingdom later, we can be those who ease Christ's coming into our world NOW through concrete action in our personal lives, our neighborhoods and our communities."
The point of all of this is for us to remember that we all meet Christ in different ways and we need each other to fully be Christ's body in the world.
Paul writes through his rather miraculously transformed mind or way of thinking in Romans 12:2 —***Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think, then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.***
Paul told us before anyone knew about brain science that we can be transformed. We can utilize our brain's infinite capacity to change, or brain plasticity, by practicing our listening skills, by sitting, by living and co-creating in God's presence. We can know and tell our story, that great duet of delight as it were, and know we are telling His story too.
one of my favorite quotes from CS Lewis is:
Each of the redeemed shall forever know and praise some one aspect of the divine beauty better that any other creature can, why else were individuals created that God loving all infinitely should love each differently.
The Problem of Pain

Song of Response: <u>It Is Well With My Soul</u>
When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll,
whatever my lot, You have taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul!

Refrain: It is well (it is well) with my soul (with my soul).
It is well, it is well with my soul!

Tho' Satan should buffet, tho' trails should come, let this blest assurance control;
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate, and hath shed His own blood for my soul. *Refrain*

My sin, oh the bliss, of this glorious thought! My sin, not in part, but the whole,
is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more: praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul! *Refrain*

O Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight, the clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
the trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend; even so, it is well with my soul. *Refrain*
Horatio Spafford and Philip Paul Bliss***

Prayers of the People

One: Now, let us pray the Lord's prayer together

ALL: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For Yours is the kingdom and the power, and the glory forever.
AMEN

SENDING

Sending Song: Will You Come and Follow Me?

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known?
Will you let my life be grown in you, and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoner free and never be the same?
Will use the faith you've found to reshape the world around
Through my sight and touch and sound in you, and you in me.

Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.
In your company I'll go, where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you, and you in me.

Graham Maule and John L. Bell**

Benediction

Leading in Worship This Morning:
Liturgist: Jeremy Flesch
Kids on the Steps: Maddie Hill
Sermon: Lesley Smith
Musicians: Joselyn Thomsen, Noah Hill, Emma Thackston, Lydia Garrick
Sound and Video Techs: Colter Cravy, Dan McCaffery, Ron Righter

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FPC Ministry Staff:
Pastor: Dan Cravy
Children, Youth and Family Director: Sarah Henning
Music Director: Noah Hill
Worship Coordinator: Allie McAdow
Church Operations Manager: Becky Kress
Program Support Administrator: Jo Ruby
Facilities Manager: Wes Keller
Church Secretary: Lori Wheeler
Bell Choir Director: Tomi Kent
Parish Associates: Rev. Janet Malone and Rev. Bob Schurr
Preaching Pastor, Blackfoot Church of the Potomac: Natalie Mauer