

McCabe United Methodist Church

Part 11, Ghost Stories: Tales of Holy Visions & Divine Encounters:
2017 Summer Series

In the Cross Hairs

Sermon on Acts 9:1-19 (New Living Translation) (8/26 & 8/27/17)
Pastor Mark Ehrmantraut

Let us Pray: Powerful and merciful God, thank you for your witness in our lives. We pray that you will continue to show up and break through. May the words of my mouth and the meditations on each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

I love this Scripture. As it's read, it tells itself. This is a foundational Scripture to the New Testament. The conversion of Saul to the man we read about, and who wrote letters to the Romans, Corinthians, Philippians, Timothy, and so much more.

If you're a hunter or a photographer, you know what it means for something to be 'caught in the cross hairs.' *Caught in the cross hairs*. Getting a good sight. Locked in on your target.

In this morning's Scripture, we find at least three Holy Visions and Divine Encounters with people, at least for a moment, feeling like they're *caught in the cross hairs*. They're not quite sure how things are going to turn out.

Before we dive into this morning's Scripture, let's quickly explore a few happenings before today's reading.

There was a guy named Saul. He was a hunter of sorts. . .

The first time we meet him, it's Acts Chapter 7. We learned...

- Saul was observed at a stoning
- Saul was at the killing of the first Christian martyr Stephen
- Saul's actions seemed to approve of what was going on

In Acts Chapter 8, we learned Saul continued to make trouble for the early church...

- Saul went from house to house arresting men and women.
- At the core, their only charge was following Jesus.
- Saul was a hunter and his prey was the early Christians.

So, with this in mind, hear how and where the Holy Spirit is showing up and breaking through. See what you think...

Acts Chapter 9 begins with Saul 'locked in on his target'. He has the early Christians *in his cross hairs*. Acts 9, Vs 1-2

¹Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. [Saul was spewing threats. He was a bully in the faith, except, he was more than just a bully. He followed through on his threats. His words of hate matched his vicious actions. Saul was on a hunting trip and his prey was the 'Followers of the Way.' The early Christians were locked in his cross hairs] So Saul went to the high priest.

²He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, [Saul asked the priest because he was persecuting the early Christians under Jewish law and the letters would make his job easier] asking for their [Jewish leaders] cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he [Saul] found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.

This was about Jesus and his followers making the people in power uncomfortable. They were unnerving the status quo.

- ✚ Love your neighbor as yourself?
- ✚ Love your enemies and let them bring out the best in you?
- ✚ The first shall be last and the Last shall be first?
- ✚ Let the little children come?
- ✚ Sure. Go ahead and build bigger barns. Store up things for yourself and ignore God, but be wary because God may just call you a fool.

We continue with verse 3-6 in Acts 9...

³ *As he [Saul] was approaching Damascus on this mission, a [bright light, a] light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. [It's a Holy Vision, a Divine Encounter. Saul found himself sighted. All of a sudden, he found HIMSELF caught in the cross hairs].*

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

- ✚ *[Why are you trying to snuff out my people?*
- ✚ *Why are you hiding behind the law instead of following me?*
- *The tables had turned. Saul had gone from the hunter to the hunted, and at the feet of Jesus, Saul discovered he was defenseless.*
- *Driven to his knees, Saul cried out:]*

⁵ *"Who are you, lord?" Saul asked. [The decisive commander Saul was pleading and off balance. From hunter to sitting squarely in the cross hairs. From Persecuting to feeling exposed and vulnerable].*

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."

Sometimes it takes a major disruption to make us pause and see things from a new perspective. A death, a birth, a marriage or divorce, an illness, a new job, or losing a job, a new experience that creates an opening, a baptism or an invitation.

These experiences can cause us to let our guard down so we can reflect on what Jesus means in our lives.

Have you ever noticed that Jesus never asks:

- ✚ You know, will you do this for me, or
- ✚ When you get a chance, or
- ✚ When you have a moment, or
- ✚ If it's not too much trouble
- ✚ Do you think you might be able to follow me?

No. Jesus doesn't seem to worry about inconveniencing us. Instead, Jesus demands a commitment, sooner rather than at a convenient time we might choose.

In other words, Jesus is saying: I've knocked you down. I've gotten your attention. You're in **MY** cross hairs now, so don't just sit there. Get up and go, THEN you'll be told what to do.

Can you picture this unfolding with Saul? We continue with verses 7-8.

The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice but saw no one! [Their jaws gaping open. It's a second Holy Vision, another Divine Encounter in this morning's Scripture. Finally,] ⁸ Saul picked himself up off the ground, [and Saul is so stunned by what's going on that he hasn't even noticed that he can't see yet], but when he opened his eyes he was blind. [Saul was so focused on death and destruction that he needed to lose focus so he could get it back... Saul needed to be blinded so he could see.]

It's what John Newton wrote about in Amazing Grace, isn't it? John Newton, the self-proclaimed wretch. He wrote that he was once lost, but was then found. Was blind, but now could see.

John Newton was known as a vile, immoral, slave trading sailor. At one point, his life flashed before him during a violent storm at sea. Then, knocked to his knees, he was caught in God's cross hairs. John Newton made a radical U-turn with his life.

When Newton died years later, the stunned, converted Newton, was an Anglican priest. But it wasn't easy. He had changed his life so radically, that people didn't believe him at first. He had to persist through the rejections, so he could become a priest.

Newton actually had a friendship with United Methodist Father John Wesley.

Newton had experienced Amazing Grace and this former slave ship captain did everything he could to help outlaw the slave trade. From hunter to hunted to converted.

In this morning's Scripture Saul had been locked in on a mission. He was set on getting get rid of the early Christians. Then, knocked down and off balance, he found himself caught in the cross hairs. The tables were turned. He'd gone from hunter to hunted.

And caught in the cross hairs, Saul's companions led him by the hand to Damascus.

That was a different arrival than Saul had expected...

Saul had planned to lead the charge into Damascus, and instead, his friends needed to take his hand and guide him, leading the way into the city.

We continue with verses 9-14 in Acts 9...

⁹ He [Saul] remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink. [He was 'fasting', alone with God, not able to do anything, wheels in his head spinning]. [And A third Holy Vision / A third Divine Encounter in this Scripture]

¹⁰ Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord!" [Ananias] he replied. [Jesus didn't need to blind him and drop him to his knees. Ananias was faithful. Ananias was listening to Jesus].

[God spoke to Ananias and Ananias answered: Yes Lord, it's good to hear from you. What can I do for you? How can I help?

And] 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.

[Saul is confused and scared and off balance. He thought he was doing the right thing, but his heart was twisted and hardened. Saul didn't know what to do, so he prayed. He just started talking with God.]

And that's actually a pretty good default setting, isn't it?

Confused, or scared, or lonely, or not knowing what to do...
We can talk to God.

[Ananias. Go find Saul. He is praying right now. Go. Not when you're ready. Not when it's convenient. Just GO!]

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

[Even though he loved Jesus, Ananias was scared. He knew of Saul's reputation].

¹³ "But Lord," exclaimed Ananias, "I've heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! [and it's not just his reputation. He has the paperwork. He followed through.]

¹⁴ And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name." [Ananias is hesitating. Saul has people like me in his crosshairs. I'm not sure I should do this.]

But God isn't looking for delays or excuses or 'when you're ready'

Hear God's response... It's not about the mess and the wrongful ways of Saul's. It's all about the future and his potential and the possibilities. We continue we verses 15-19 of Acts 9.

¹⁵ But the Lord said, "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."

[There's a cost to this thing we call discipleship. And God isn't interested in getting bogged down in the past or in previous problems. God is forward looking. God's isn't looking at Saul's CRUD. God is looking at Saul's potential].

¹⁷ So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him 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.

Friends, most of us aren't as '**LUCKY**' as Saul. Most of us don't literally get knocked down and blinded by the Risen Christ.

Having said that, there's no question that the Risen Christ **IS** active and moving.

- ✚ Have you ever found yourself just shaking your head or asking:
What just happened here?
- ✚ Have you ever found yourself feeling nudged to do something, and then discover it didn't make much sense, but it was the right thing to do?
- ✚ Have you ever found yourself feeling comforted or convicted, and you can't really explain what just happened?
- ✚ Or maybe you might describe it in another way in your own life...

Friends, our words might vary. Our experiences might be different, but I know there's no shortage of Holy Visions and Divine Encounters experienced by people in this room this morning.

The Spirit has been moving And The Spirit **IS** moving.

In this morning's Scripture, there were at least three Holy Visions and Divine Encounters, but God wasn't done and God **ISN'T** done. The Risen Christ is still breaking in and now it's you and me locked in His cross hairs.

God doesn't want to waste time hearing all the reasons we can't or we shouldn't or the mistakes we've made.

God has called you by name...

What this means looks different for each of us, but each of us is locked in the Risen Christ's cross hairs.

What does He have to do to get your attention?

God is asking us, inviting us, to boldly approach him in humility.

God is calling us. Asking us to respond saying: Here I am. Here I am dear God. What do you want from me?

What do you want from me?

So here and now friends, we could take the next step in our faith. We have the chance to offer ourselves wholly and completely at the feet of Jesus.

What's it going to take for you to take the next step, to move forward in living out your God-given potential?

Let's sing our next hymn 2 times through. We can remain seated as we consider who God is, as we think about meeting the Risen Christ, as we pray through the music considering where God is leading us.

May God Open our Eyes so we may truly see.

 Open Our Eyes ¹

Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus,
to reach out and touch him, and say that we love him.
Open our ears, Lord, and help us to listen.
Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus.

¹ *The Faith We Sing*, Pew Edition, ©2000 Abingdon Press, Hymn 2086

Words: Bob Cull (John 12:21; Eph 1:17-18)

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