Disrupting Life

Acts 9:1-20

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Zoom link to [Marcia’s teaching](https://zoom.us/rec/play/uzax1_0E6TNh60AEi2XuZf8a1dVm4cUel11-MG0kRTEb1K_9Z1GAADmD3s_FOWv5lA5vG5civbbxQ6F5.r1HOktr1XDysTB3X?autoplay=true).

**Introduction** This past Wednesday, a group of about 20 gathered on Zoom to reflect on and discuss this scripture from Acts. The time together, listening and speaking, was a gift, further reminding me of the power and learning that can happen by reading, reflecting and sharing in community. I have tried to weave threads of what I heard and learned into my remarks today. And, I want to express my gratitude to Sito for convening us as we move toward Pentecost.

Additionally, since the figure of Saul/Paul is prominent in this scripture, I share that Luke’s gospel was likely written in the earlier 80s. Paul by then had died, possibly in 64 CE. His epistles to the early communities, eg Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, etc, were written throughout the 50s and early 60s. We don’t know if Luke ever met Paul.

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Through this season of Easter, we are journeying in the Hebrew scripture lectionary through the book of Acts, and we are using Willie James Jennings’ commentary on Acts as accompaniment to the lectionary passages.

The theme for Acts 9:1-20 in Jennings’ book is *Disrupting Life*, and for sure disruption has always been a powerful backdrop to life on earth. We live with it, both in small and massive ways. Disruption can be creative as well as profoundly destructive. The definition of disruption is: to break apart; split up; rend asunder; to disturb or interrupt the orderly course of a social affair, meeting, etc. Disruption aptly describes the journey of the main character in today’s scripture, Saul, who as Paul will continue to dominate the story of the Acts of the Apostles. But, Ananais is also worth our deeper and intentional attention.

Jennings prefaces his remarks on Acts 9:1-20 with this introductory statement: *There is no rationale for killing that remains intact in the presence of God.* (Willie James Jennings, ACTS, p. 90)

The opening paragraph then begins by alluding to the previous story of the disciple Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch on the road south of Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip explains a passage from Isaiah to the eunuch and baptizes him. Then the Holy Spirit snatches Philip away, the eunuch goes away rejoicing at what he has learned, and Philip finds himself in Azotus, northeast of Gaza, and continues to proclaim the good news in all the coastal towns until he reaches Caesarea, headquarters of the Roman governor.

With that reference, Jennings then states, “The scene shifts but the Spirit’s action remains the same. God disrupts the old order by interrupting lives.” (p. 90) Many of the stories in both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament feature disruption in some way, shape, form. Today’s story of the disruption of Paul’s life features a life-changing conversion, illumination and calling. But, let’s be clear that the Community of the Way will also be disrupted. So, I think a good starting place for this morning’s scripture is to ask and/or remind ourselves:

Who is Paul?

* Likely born in the first decade of the first century, (about CE 10). He claims to have been born a Roman citizen (Acts 21:39). He and Jesus were roughly contemporary though Paul was perhaps about 10 or a few more years younger. He never mentions ever meeting Jesus in the flesh.
* Paul was born in Tarsus, a significant city in southern Asia Minor; hence, he was a product of the Jewish Diaspora, Jewish communities outside the homeland.
* He was a Hellenistic Jew and could speak and write in Greek.
* He migrated to Jerusalem where he studied at the feet of Gamaliel, a Pharisee in the Sanhedrin, a noted and honored Jewish teacher. Bill mentioned him last week as the voice of moderation, the one who counseled letting the disciples out of prison in Acts 5.
* A devout and strict Pharisaic Jew, “educated strictly according to [Jewish] ancestral law, being zealous for God.” (Acts 22:3) Pharisees believed the “purity laws were the visible and sacramental signs of being zealous for God.” (*The First Paul*, 66)

Why would God call Saul?

He is at least an accessory to murder and a predator, out for more victims: Jesus’ followers and the disciples of The Way.

In Acts, we meet Saul in chapter 7. He is a witness at Stephen’s stoning, and “approved of their [Jewish authorities, priests] killing him.” Paul then goes on to ravage the church/followers of The Way by dragging off men and women to prison. (Acts 8:2-3).

Paul had been well educated in the Hebrew scriptures; had a solid Hellenistic education; had a fine mind; was at home in the urban culture of the Greco-Roman empire; and seemed to be an energetic activist. His gifts were many and promising, but perhaps only a personal encounter, a mystical experience could shake him at his core, break him apart; open-up his heart; call forth his gifts on behalf of God’s ever-widening circle. I wonder what in Paul might have been brewing, troubling his soul, disrupting his being as he opposed the widening of God’s circle to include Gentiles and God-fearers, Samaritans, foreigners, and so on.

Why is Saul persecuting the followers and disciples of Jesus?

This is a question I asked myself. What was so disturbing about the early Jesus movement that Saul launched a “lethal persecution against it?” (*The First Paul*, p. 69) Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book *The First Paul* note the following? “Some Christian Jews claimed that the awaited eschatological era was already present, that in other words, the kingdom of God’s divine transformation of the world from one of violent injustice to one of nonviolent justice had already begun. Therefore, they concluded, Gentiles could now become full members of the people of God without following Jewish conversion requirements, for example, circumcision for males.” (p.69) Saul, being zealous for God and the law, saw threat to his belief system, saw Jesus’ disciples as apostates. They had abandoned the Jewish faith. Saul responded with lethal, deadly action. We see this deadly, lethal action in our world today.

The road to Damascus and Paul’s destiny

Both Luke’s narrative and Paul’s authentic letters connect Damascus to “the inaugural event of Paul’s vocational revelation from God and Christ.” (*The First Paul*, 69) This journey is one of high drama and import. Saul is traveling to Damascus with the goal of taking Jesus’ followers and disciples to prison in Jerusalem.

Saul is suddenly blinded by flashing, heavenly light. He falls to the ground and hears a voice.

The voice says, “Saul, Saul, why do *you* persecute *me*? Jennings translates the question in verse 4 as “Why are you hurting me?” and states that because this is an *intimate* question, it is too massive for Saul to handle. It is a question that “casts light on the currencies of death that we incessantly traffic in and had no good answer.” (Jennings, p. 91) It is God’s eternal question to us. How are we hurting the Holy One, God’s creation, innocent children, women, the most vulnerable, the neighbors/others, ourselves, all that God calls us to love?

Saul must feel that the voice he hears is divinely imperative, so he asks, “Who are ***you***?” The voice responds, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. … Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

Saul’s traveling companions are standing by speechless. They heard the sound of the voice but did not see anyone. When Saul stood up, he was blind. He was vulnerable. He needed help. He needed healing.

**What about Paul’s conversion experience?** In Luke’s narrative, Saul/Paul saw the light, not the Lord; he heard the voice of Jesus but did not see him. Luke will narrate this dramatic episode two more times in Acts (22:3-16 & 26:4-23).

 Paul’s own account in Galatians differs slightly: “The gospel that was proclaimed by me. … I received it through a *revelation of Jesus Christ.* … I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. … But when God … was *pleased* to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, … I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.” (Galatians 1:11-17) Other accounts of Paul’s mystical experiences appear in Phil 3:5-6; 1 Cor 9:1-2; 15:3-8; 2 Cor 12:1-4.

Paul’s accounts of his revelation in his letters to his faith communities stress that he saw Christ. “All of these passages and more … indicate that Paul had mystical experiences of the risen Christ. He experienced the post-Easter Jesus as the light and glory of God, the one who enlightened and transformed him.” (*The First Paul*, p. 26) But keep in mind that Luke’s task is to interpret the theological significance of past events such as Paul’s conversion versus objectively describing them or giving a factual account for us modern readers.

However the epiphany to Saul did happen, it was a revelation, an illumination, and a call to a daunting mission. This seems a personal appeal, the use of names, Saul and Jesus, to draft Saul into the faith, the Jesus movement, and to eventually commission him as the apostle to the Gentiles.

What is breaking apart? Saul’s identity. His old identity was replaced by a new one “in Christ.” As Jennings states,

Saul moves from the abstract Lord to the concrete Jesus, from the Lord he aims to please” [through strict obedience to purity codes] to the One who will direct him according to divine pleasure. Discipleship is principled direction taken flight by the Holy Spirit. It is the “you have heard it said, but I say to you” – the continued speaking of God bound up in disruption and redirection. (p. 92)

Why 3 days of fasting, abstinence?

This seems to symbolize Saul’s readiness and preparation for conversion to the resurrected Jesus. Saul is now hurt, but I think open. He will soon receive a gift with the presence of Ananais, a disciple in the Damascus community. The group that gathered on Wednesday evening to discuss Acts called Ananais out for his courage in accepting the Lord’s command to go to Straight Street, find Saul of Tarsus, place his hands on Saul’s eyes and restore his sight. Ananais questions this directive. Saul, after all, is a known predator and abuser. The Lord then makes the case for why Ananais must do this, letting him know that much suffering will be part of Saul’s new mission. Ananias complies and in a gracious way goes to Saul, places his hands on Saul and says, “*Brother* Saul, the Master sent me, the same Jesus you saw on your way here. He sent me so you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” The scales fell from Saul’s eyes; he could see; he got to his feet, he was baptized and sat down to eat, likely with members of the community.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus and began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. His name changes to Paul.

What do we take away from this particular story at a personal and communal level and at this time in our life here on earth?

# Where, how and why does God’s Spirit call? We never know but we can be expectant and open. Mystical experiences and call are distinctive and personal. Call and conversion are not preformed or universal. The Spirit finds people in many different ways.

In my case the primary vocational call came through a deep yearning to know how I could best be in the world with my gifts and serve. It came first as an uninvited question. Much later as a vision, an image, that flooded my mind out at Dayspring; it told me to “go”. The third time the call came through my mother. It told me to leave a path with no joy set before me. I left.

# Questions matter. In Saul’s case he is asked a personal question by the post-Resurrection Jesus. Why are you persecuting/hurting me? Paul’s confessions in his epistles reveal the answer. His orthodoxy and being a zealot for God threatened his identity. He was fearful

Kathy, Alfred and I were in a small group last Wednesday, and the question of hurting was central. Kathy reminded us that the wounded often hurt others. Had this been Saul’s experience? Some are so wounded and immobilized that they can only wound others. Where we come from matters.

Ananias, a disciple and member of the Damascus Community, received a charge from the Lord: go to Saul. Why should he? He pushed back asking “Why?” He pressed for the community’s safety until he was assured that Saul’s healing was part of God’s plan as was his future suffering. Community, accompaniers, challengers, and helpers are essential; we cannot just work alone. Fortunately, others will join Ananias to support and carry Paul. The folks who show up with courage and commitment; the accompaniers and helpers are needed; we cannot do it alone.

"Indeed, there is no such thing as individual boldness for the followers of Jesus. Of course each disciple can and must be bold, but their boldness is always a together boldness, a joined boldness, a boldness born of intimacy." (Jennings, Acts, p. 49)

But, it’s not always so clear who are the Ananais folks and the Saul folks in a community. We are capable of being both.

# What about forgiveness in the face of harm, betrayal, violence?

In Paul’s letters, he consistently confessed his former persecutions; He knew what he had done, but he remained a devout and committed Jew. *Why was Paul able to move to a relationship with Jesus yet stay a pious Jew?*

*Who are you?* asked Saul after hearing the question “Why are you persecuting me?” Saul knew about the disruptive Jesus movement, and he must have known about Jesus. They had in common their devotion to their Jewish faith. They knew the Hebrew scriptures and stories. They knew the Shema, the great commandment in Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all you soul, and with all your might.” And, from Leviticus 19:18, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Saul did not deviate from his orthodoxy, but he saw Judaism *anew* (in a new light)as had Jesus years before. Love of God, neighbor, and self was now the active center. The spirit of Paul became the Spirit of Christ. And, that Spirit holds the possibility of abundant life for all even in the face of powerful oppression and disruption.

Richard Rohr in a recent meditation shared that

people like Jesus and Paul were not executed for saying “Love one another.” They were killed because their understanding of love meant more than being compassionate toward individuals, although it did include that. It also meant standing against the domination systems that ruled their world and collaborating with the Spirit in the creation of a new way of life that stood in contrast to the normalcy of the wisdom of the world. Love and justice go together. Justice without love can be brutal, and love without justice can be banal--dull, stale. Love is the heart of justice, and justice is the social form of love.”

Holy One, we are called to be people of the Spirit. May the Spirit of the Holy One live and move in us.

Let us know the power of life that is in us, the life-force that is in our senses and the might that is in our heart. Let us know you as the source of such force and be wise to its true streams and false currents. Let us serve love with our strength. In heart, mind and body, let us serve love. (John Philip Newell, Sounds of the Eternal, p. 28)

Resources: *Acts, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, Willie James Jennings *The First Paul*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan New Revised Standard Version of the Bible New Interpreters’Bible, Volume X Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditations: An Identity Transplant, 3/4/24