

04/15/18 – Easter 3 NL 4

“Becoming Good News with ... Paul: Seeing the Light” © – Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Acts 9:1-19

Last week, we saw how Jesus binds us and restores us to relationship with God and creation through Thomas’ story. We learned that becoming Good News by Thomas’ example means we *demand a direct relationship* with Jesus, and when telling other people the Good News, our goal should be to create ways for them to have a direct relationship, rather than relying on what I think, or what I tell you about what I and other people think.

This week, we follow Paul, who is still named Saul in our story, on the Damascus Road. A light from heaven strikes Saul, or *‘flashes around him’*. He hears the voice of Jesus speaking to him directly through the light. The voice asks why Saul is persecuting Jesus. Rather than waiting for an answer, the voice of Christ commands Saul to get up and go into the city, where he will be told what to do.

Light from heaven is a powerful theme throughout Scripture. Think of Moses and the burning bush. Think of the flashing lightning on the mountain while Moses is with God receiving the 10 Commandments. Think of Elijah surrounded by light as he is taken up by chariots in front of Elisha. Think of the image of light throughout the New Testament. Jesus’ baptism happens with the voice of God and light. Most particularly, remember the Transfiguration. There, Jesus is surrounded by light as the three disciples gaze upon him. Just like today, once the disciples hear the voice of God, they see only Jesus. Today, Paul’s companions hear the voice, but see no one.

Seeing, vision, and light are the repeating themes in our reading today. Those images are repeated in one way or another at least 7 times in our verses today. The source of light in Scripture is always God.

Psalm 36 says,

*For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light. (36:9)*

And Psalm 119 says,

*Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path. (119:105)*

The great Hasidic writer, Abraham Joshua Heschel, often spoke of the Torah as *a divine light that is refracted through history by the prism of Jewish faith*.

Isn’t that a lovely image? It is a powerful metaphor and it works for us today as well.

Imagine all of Scripture, the teachings of Jesus, the journeys of the disciples with him, and his trial and death as roads leading up to the Prism of the Cross. A prism takes a beam of light and refracts it into all the visible colors.

For many centuries, it was believed that the eyes produced light and we saw because the body somehow produced our ability to see. Scripture was right, though: light is external to us, it comes from the outside in. Isaac Newton understood this and sought to prove that light was its own thing. People used to believe prisms were almost magical instruments that changed light into color. Prisms were like cloud catchers and could mimic the atmosphere to produce rainbows. Newton showed, however, that the light of the sun was comprised of all the colors that we can see, and a prism refracts and disperses light in such a way that we can see those colors. His great experiment was showing that by refracting the light back through a second prism, the colors resolve again into white light.

It is a wonderful metaphor for the light we are speaking of today, because if we imagine the Cross as a prism, it takes in the white light of Scripture and the life and death of Jesus, then focuses the beam of light and refracts that light into the Resurrection and beyond. Mary Magdalene, Thomas, and Paul, today, are all the recipients of the refracted light of God's grace.

The metaphor extends even further, though. One of the problems the Christian tradition has had with this story of Paul's conversion is to try to systematize and formulate the experience of conversion. The Puritans, for instance, demanded a converting event which you could testify publicly to show you had been awakened to the light of the Spirit within. You may have heard of the "Roman Road" process of converting people, which is used by highly evangelical groups. The "Roman Road" process makes Paul's experience into a formula for bringing people into the faith.

The problem, though, with these approaches is that they miss the point. *They confuse the experience for the important thing, and the important thing in our story is the light of God. The drama of the story is not the story.* The light of God and Christ is eternal, and the eternal is not subject to temporary human drama.

The light of God and Christ refracts into many colors, many ways of seeing and experiencing it. That light falls upon each of us differently.

For Paul, the light of the Cross and Resurrection knocks him to the ground and blinds him. The darkness of the persecutor is struck down by the dispersed colors of the persecuted.

Think of Peter, who has the benefit of seeing both sides of the prism that is the Cross. The darkness of denial on one side of the Cross becomes the colors and hues of love on the other side of the Cross.

For Mary Magdalene, the darkness of grief and despair on the side of Jesus' death refracts into the colors of new life, hope and possibility on the side of the Resurrection.

How did the light of God's love, a love refracted and bent by the Cross of Christ, color your life?

How were you struck by the light of God?

Where is the beam of the Spirit's light hitting you now?

This light which falls upon Saul and us not only changes Saul and us, but changes the people around us as well. Saul was not a friend to the new religion called The Way. After witnessing the execution of Stephen, Saul was inspired by Stephen's death to get special permission to be the chief heresy hunter for the Sanhedrin, the high leadership of the Jewish faith. Saul gets what he asks for and Saul is fired up. He is on a mission with letters of permission and a small army of men to carry out the mission. Saul is given the authority to bind the followers of The Way and bring them back for trial. He decides to begin at the outer edges of Jerusalem and work his way in to the city, and so he is going along the Damascus Road, which leads into the same Damascus in Syria of today and is at least 3 days out from Jerusalem by foot.

The light of God immediately changes the course of Saul's mission. The authority from human law to bind the followers of Christ for imprisonment and execution is extinguished in the bright light which binds Saul to God's command that he become a follower of those he sought to persecute. Saul, the persecutor in the name of God's law, is changed by the refracted light of God's love to become an evangelist of God's salvation through Christ.

While this is going on, someone else is receiving God's light. Ananias, a follower of The Way, receives a vision while Saul is brought into the city. God tells Ananias to go find Saul and take care of him and heal him. Ananias, in the great and holy tradition of the prophets, denies the call at first, saying, *"I have heard about this guy. He chases down your followers and brings them in for trial, and now he is here with letters to bind all who invoke your name. This seems like a really bad idea, Lord."*

(As an aside here, I think it is important to reflect on this interchange. How close does your relationship to God have to be to argue with God's command? Very, very close, at least according to the witness of Scripture. Think on this carefully.)

Ananias finally concedes the possibility that God may know what God is doing and goes out to find Saul. Ananias is changed, like Saul and like us, by the refracted light of God. Ananias' refusal of God's call is refracted through the Cross of God's love and the light sends him out to find the murdering, persecuting, infamous soldier of Jerusalem.

Here is why I say Ananias is changed by the light of God. When Ananias meets Saul for the first time, he says to him, *"Brother Saul"*. Ananias presumes God's love and greets Saul with the traditional Christian greeting of someone who knows the family of God has bound another soul to its eternal gathering. Ananias presumes the light of God's love has refracted and shined upon Saul. In this love and expectation, in the soft light of God's love, Ananias lays his hands upon Saul's eyes.

And immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and his sight was restored. (9:18)

Notice that Ananias is called to do one thing – lay on his hands – and two things happen – Saul's sight is restored and Saul is filled with the Holy Spirit. Ananias becomes the prism that disperses God's work into a spiritual and a physical change, for him and for Saul.

Saul gets up and is baptized into The Way. Then Scripture says, *after taking some food, he regained his strength (9:19).*

The prismatic, refracted, dispersed light of Christ strengthens Saul, now Paul, to become the evangelist we know him to be. Like Paul, we are changed by the light of God and Christ. When we think of the light of God, I think it is best to think of that light in the ways that were known in the day and age this was written, rather than how we think of light today.

I like sleeping in a very dark space. We have blackout curtains on the windows. We don't have nightlights in the room, nor is there the soft glow of electronic devices by our beds. It takes a while for my eyes to adjust to the darkness because it is so dark. But if we need light, we can just flick a switch and the entire room goes immediately from pitch black to becoming awash in white light. This would be something like a miraculous event up until about 120 years ago, if that.

For the light of Christ to make sense, we need to engage our imaginations, like with the prism metaphor. The other metaphor that is useful for us today is the image of a lantern. When a lantern is lit, the light at first seems bright. But it is a soft light that illuminates the space around the lantern. The light doesn't change, but your eyes adjust to the light. As they adjust, you begin to see more things at the edges of the light. That diffuse light allows us to see more deeply into the darkness. But it requires time and focus to get used to the light. As the Psalmist says, *Your word is a lamp, a lantern, unto my feet, and a light unto my path.*

As followers of The Way like Ananias and Paul, let us reflect on the light that shines upon us, the light that disperses and refracts through the Cross and the Resurrection, a rainbow of colors that rain down upon us. Be careful to not confuse the drama of seeing the light with the presence of the light itself. Let the light change you in the same way it changes Paul and Ananias. Draw strength from the light, in the same way Paul draws strength from God. And understand deeply that the light of God, no matter the color that has fallen upon you, is constant, steadfast, and eternal. In those things lie the power, joy, and truth of the light of Christ. Be a prism and a lantern of the Truth, Way, and Life.

Amen.

