

Acts 9:1-20
John 21:1-19
April 18, 2010

Rip Snorting Reprobate

What if it was illegal for you to be here this morning? Suppose that by driving up the driveway past the Azaleas and entering this building to worship we would be putting our lives in danger? What if some crazy man had warrants for our arrest – and our arrest would most likely lead to our execution? What if being Christian meant that we might be sold into slavery, especially the women among us? What if churches in our nation were bombed by terrorists? The church has and does experience times like this.

Paul of Tarsus was a minister who lived in the first century, traveled widely and started many new churches in Greece, Turkey and Italy. He was a passionate complex and compelling pioneering missionary figure who felt an intense vocation to be the apostle of Christ to the gentiles. Paul wrote many of our New Testament Epistles and had others dedicated to his style and teaching. Paul was highly influential on the development of Christianity and his letters to his churches were all written before the Gospels.

Paul also was a murderer of Christians. Paul plain old, hated Christians and tried with all his might, to snuff them out; until the day that Christ knocked him on his side and blinded him with a flash of light. God is described in the Bible as being fond of using unlikely sources or people to accomplish God's purposes. This man Paul was as unlikely a hero as God could possibly call.

Paul created nothing less than despair and dread when he would go from town to town and synagogue to synagogue hunting down a new kind of Jew known as "people of the Way." He was a superhero of destruction and demise. At this dark time in his life Paul was known as Saul. This man Saul had the permission of the high Priest of Israel to arrest imprison and execute members of the way. "The Way" was an intriguing group of Jews who no longer looked for the coming of the messiah. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah and that he had brought new life to humanity through his amazing resurrection. The people of the Way were Jews who were Christians. The Way was us and this man Saul nearly crucified the Jerusalem church.

Now this may not make sense to you at first (Jews who were Christians) but Saul was chasing after Christians in the late thirties and early forties of the first century. In those first twenty years after the death

and resurrection of Christ - Christians still were Jews and they still went to synagogue. Not yet separated from Judaism, they basically thought of themselves as a reform movement. Saul however saw them as apostates, criminals, and dangerous fools and he had permission to deal with them as he saw fit.

Saul was a Pharisee, a Jewish religious leader, who sat on the Sanhedrin, which was the council of Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and on top of that he was also a Roman citizen. There was no recourse against this young zealot of Judaism - he had the protection of Rome and the Jewish High Priest. Smart and very determined, he even had one of the first deacons of the church, Stephen, stoned to death. Saul was a dynamic death squad without a thought that what he was doing might be off target.

In Nigeria recently 500 Christians were slaughtered by Islamic Folk. In Egypt, Coptic Christians Face isolation, harassment, sever government control and acts of violence. In Iran, Christians are constantly harassed. In China and Laos, church leaders are imprisoned. In Sudan Black Southern Christians are persecuted by brown northern Muslims. In Cuba, Christian churches are closely monitored and infiltrated by government agents. A quick study of the Website of the United States State Department, lists scores of situations around the world where Christians

are subject to control, harassment, violence and repression. There are modern day Sauls all over our globe and religious persecution is by no means limited to Christians.

We discover Saul this morning on his way to Damascus Syria. Appreciating the new life in flower blooms is not on his mind - He had in his briefcase warrants for the arrest and execution of any Jews he found who also belonged to "The Way". Saul was hell bent ready to perform a little ethnic cleansing for the good Jews of Damascus. Saul was a bloodthirsty rip-snorting snake, who was heading north to snuff out a few more suspects. Luke says he was breathing threats and murder against disciples. He was like Darth Vader rasping out violence; when he got knocked on his butt. It wasn't a squad of Christian vigilantes who intercepted Dr. Death; it was the risen Christ Almighty. While many would simply write Saul off as a bad apple or call for his demise, God breaks into human history to turn the situation around. Flash of light, rumble of thunder, voice from the clouds, Saul was on the ground crawling like a child. No spinal cord injuries, but he was dazed and disoriented, sand in his mouth, horse maybe runs away, Saul hears a very scary sound from heaven. Jesus is calling him by name. What if we were to hear this sound?

Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me? Who are you Lord? Asks Saul. "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." When Saul stands up he realizes that he is blind. Flare of lightening, call of God from above, who can say? Formerly riding high, our ferocious Pharisee suddenly finds himself felled like a tree and in need of helping hands simply to find his way into the city. Merciless murderer humbly discovers himself mercy-dependent on others to survive. As he stumbles into the city struggling with his blindness, Saul is beginning to realize how blind he has been. We are told by Luke who wrote the book of Acts, that Saul was blind for three days - the same number of days that Jesus was in the tomb. The same number of times John says Jesus told Peter to "feed my sheep." For three days he neither ate nor drank. He could very well have been sick to his stomach; discovering that his zeal for God, his passion for purity, his chivalrous cause had been totally misplaced. Worse than that, he had taken his crusade to the extreme of executing the opposition. Saul was reeling with regret and remorse. He was having one of those periods of time in his life that none of us truly welcome, in fact we dread, but later come to realize as absolutely pivotal in our journey.

It was after three days then, that he was visited by a mistrusting and reluctant Ananias. Ananias had heard about this Saul of Tarsus, this

executioner and zealot. He was not all that wild about the call from God to go on up and Baptize the beast; but he did. He did, because he felt like God was truly calling him to touch Saul. Ananias reached out to someone he really didn't want to and normally wouldn't have. But he heard God calling. (This by the way is one definition of Church - being stretched by God to reach out and touch and live in community with people you normally wouldn't even approach) And when Ananias laid hands on Saul, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. Not only could he see his hands in front of him. He could see that both Judaism and Christianity were acceptable to God. He could see that he was being called to live out his "Jewishness" by teaching and preaching about the Rabbi Son of God Jesus.

In a few years Saul changed his name to Paul. Not only did he become Christian, but he became a powerful and effective church leader. The Apostle Paul went all over the Mediterranean world starting new churches. His preaching was compelling. His ministry was prolific. His influence on Christianity is hard to underestimate.

Saul's own life would demonstrate not only leadership in the church, but he would also end up suffering at the hand of others like himself. Church tradition holds that he ultimately would give his life, in a manner like

the lives he took. God chose Saul for a purpose --to serve in leadership and to die in courage for a faith he once saw heretical. God works that way, choosing unlikely sources – unlikely sources like us. This Christ that called and changed Saul to Paul is also calling us, not to be super heroes, just to be disciples.

One Saturday in the 90's I was leading a New Members Inquirers seminar for our church. We had studied the people of the Bible, the ones that God holds up as examples for each of us; a grand list of reprobates, criminals, killers, murderers and sinners. We had reviewed in a cursory fashion the many ways they had screwed up. I said to the class; you know if God can call people like Saul/Paul , David, Moses and the woman at the Well, God can call us. A woman in our class broke out in tears and told us the story of how one day after many physical attacks, while defending herself against her husband, she ended up killing him. She was not found guilty of murder, but she carried so much guilt in her heart, she was scared to come to church. When she heard that God could choose to use Saul and make him Paul; she knew she could come back to church.

Not many of us are breathing threats and murder against our opponents; but most of us have been on wrongs paths that have been injurious to ourselves and others. We all have been headstrong, stubborn

and blind to our own ambition, selfish to meet our own need and caught in addictive behaviors. We fall victim to cultural bias and blindness. We fail to critically reflect and we get comfortable with our spiritual status quo. God is in the business of changing lives and if God can use Saul God can use us. Most of us don't get knocked blind and hear the voice of Jesus so audibly; change is not all that easy. We are not called to snort anger or threats in the world. We are called by Christ to breathe life and invitation on the world. And so now we are invited by Christ to his table, to receive his grace, to open us to the possibility of change and ministry in our own lives.