

“Our Roads to Damascus”

Speaking of roads, I found my way to First Congregational Church here in Cannon Falls a year ago today. My first year has gone by quickly and I have enjoyed getting to know everyone and the history of this congregation. As with all churches, we continue on our journey or our road to places yet unknown as God continues to call us as God did in the 1800’s when Rev. Barnes founded this congregation in 1856.

We are often called by God but our personal stories about change and conversion may not be as dramatic as today’s story of Saul, who became the Apostle Paul. Paul, as he was later known further along in the book of Acts lived, somewhere between the years 5 CE to about 64 or 65 CE. This story we hear today about Paul’s conversion took place somewhere between 31 and 36 CE.

Saul of Tarsus , as he is called in today’s reading, was a Pharisee who persecuted the early followers of Jesus and made life for them difficult. In our story, he is traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus after authorizing the stoning of Stephen. In fact, he was such a zealot for his cause that he asked for names of people who were followers of Jesus before he even arrived in Damascus. He wanted to know who he could target. He had a plan.

Well, as many of us know from life experience, not all plans work out the way we want. God sometimes interferes with our plans and we end up with a life that we had not envisioned. Luckily in the case of Saul, his plan did indeed get interrupted and his life did indeed take a dramatic turn.

I can only imagine the fear that Ananias felt when God chose him to tell Saul of the change of his life plans. Here Saul had ordered violence against those followers of Jesus. Why in the world would Ananias want to even be in the same room as Saul? But he listened to God and followed his instructions with the confidence that God would be there for him.

Now the story echoes for me the words of the hymn “Amazing Grace.” Here Saul handed down cruelty to those followers of Jesus with which he disagreed. The

author of “Amazing Grace” was John Newton who handed down his own form of cruelty as the captain of a slave ships from England.

Newton was not a very nice person as some biographers have written. He was rebellious, subordinate to those in command and all around disagreeable. Yet it was this same man that wrote the words “Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound) That sav'd a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.”

John Newton had a conversion experience and was truly repentant to his ways that caused harm. Like Saul, he found his way to God and God found his way to him. And like Newton, Saul was blind but then he could see. He was lost but was then found and found God’s grace to be amazing. Newton’s conversion led him to help found the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 with William Wilberforce, a member of the British parliament.

Now in our everyday lives, I suspect that there are not many of us who had such dramatic conversion experiences. Good chance we were raised quietly in a faithful home or experienced God in our lives as adults and explored the spiritual side of our lives only later. Wherever we are now on our faith journey, it is safe to say that God has been a traveling partner.

God does indeed surprise us like he did Saul and John Newton or any number of other people. God helps us to see, teaches us how to forgive and to love and to trust. It is not easy though to follow God at times. Just like Ananias, there are times in life where I know I have questioned God. “God, you want me to do what!?” We have tons of stories in the bible where people questioned God’s choice in asking them to do something. I think most of the prophets became prophets only after asking if God had made the right choice. Fortunately Saul did not go to extreme measures to avoid God like the prophet Jonah did and enter the belly of a large fish in order to get away.

But Saul must have been pretty scared. Not only did he hear the voice of Jesus, the person he hated, Saul also lost his eye sight and was unable to eat or drink. The loss of sight was both physical and spiritual in this case. Saul had lost sight of God. Here he had been a faithful follower of God but did not see what God was doing in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This story is so well placed after

Easter. How many people, even with the Easter story still doubt, still have disbelief in what God has given us? And sadly, people even in the 21st century still suffer from persecution for being Christian. But then some Christians have had their hand in persecutions in one form or another of those who don't follow in 'the Way' as it is called in today's scripture.

Saul, as we are later told, has his name changed to Paul and he then became the recipient of the persecution for being Christian just as he had done to others. But he persevered and remained a loyal and faithful follower of God until his death. He experienced God's grace, forgiveness and love firsthand and spent the remainder of his life sharing this Good News, as we call it, with thousands of people and over thousands of miles. He spent time in prison where he was beaten and he lived a meager existence in a life of what we would now call life as an itinerant preacher.

This story is one of those stories that make me stop and turn what I learned from his experience inward and to use it as a way of spiritual reflection. What is God trying to show me that I am blind to in my life? On what road am I traveling and will God meet me on only to show me another way? Do I feel truly forgiven? And how do I experience God's amazing grace in my life?

This is what makes the bible truly a treasure-trove and gift. If I were disciplined (and I'm not), it would be interesting to ask these same questions at different periods in my life. I know I would answer them differently at 25 or 35 or 55 or 85 but in doing so, I know that when I dig deeply into a piece of scripture, I feel closer to God each time. I may not always like what I learn or see but life becomes richer from all our experiences – good or bad, difficult or easy.

I know that where I am today is not where I expected to be when I was confirmed in the Episcopal church around 50 years ago. Life has taken me on a journey and, as I look back, God has been my traveling companion and met me on unexpected roads. Some old worldviews I held have moved into the past as I listen to the voices today and why these views need to be placed in my rearview mirror.

And it is just not individuals such as myself that see differently than earlier generations. As we watch the world around us, our society is experiencing conversion experiences in many different ways. What we took for granted in our youth or even 20 or 30 years ago, now seems to up for discussion or at least now

are challenged. We see it in the #MeToo movement in which what was once considered the norm on how to treat women is no longer acceptable. The Black Lives Matter movement reminds all of us that those in our communities whose voices that have long been silenced need to be lifted up, heard and valued. How families now are configured often look very different in some homes in our community from maybe how we were raised. The world keeps changing and God stays with us each step of the way. God calls us to see where we might have lost sight.

So, today as we look at our figurative roads to Damascus and see where our paths have taken us, it is a day to say thank you to God for God's amazing grace in our lives and continued presence. It is a day to open ourselves to God to hear that still small voice calling us to see and to follow the road in which God is the leader. With that, I say amen and God bless.