

## Sermon: Invite Him to Coffee Hour

Year C, the Third Sunday of Easter

[Acts 9:1-6 \(7-20\)](#); [Psalm 30](#); [Revelation 5:11-14](#); [John 21:1-19](#)

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Last week we looked at the story of Doubting Thomas. About how Jesus appeared to the disciples while they were all together behind a locked door. Except for Thomas. And when Thomas heard about Jesus' appearance, he said, "Nope. Not until I can see for myself, touch for myself, will I believe it." Then Jesus shows up, just for Thomas, and says, "Go ahead. Look. Touch. Do whatever you need to do to believe." Thomas doesn't *do* anything. He says, "My Lord and my God." (John 20:28). We reflected on that story and together wrote what became the poem in today's bulletin.

I love the Thomas story because doubt is such a part of my faith. I listen to the Thomas story and I think, "well, just keep going and bring your doubts along."

And then there is the Road to Damascus story. I don't really like this story and until this week, I didn't bother to put my finger on why not. I realized that I was a little jealous of Saul. I have never heard God's voice saying, "Catherine" or "Cathy" or "Aunt Cate", I have never had a moment where God said to me "*get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.*" (Acts 9:6). Paul was the greatest apostle of the Christian church. There wouldn't be a Christian church without him. Christian strand of Judaism would have slipped beneath the waves of history if it hadn't been for Paul. So, sure, Jesus would be super clear with the guy who became Paul so that he needed to get on it. I guess God's content that I grope along on my own. But I am a tiny bit envious of Paul, that he got the up close and personal treatment.

Maybe others of you have a similar experience. If I don't hear God's voice loud and clear, with directions I can readily follow, then God isn't speaking to me, probably because I'm not really worth God's time.

So let me share a quote from Flannery O'Connor that completely changed my understanding of this story. She once said of Paul, "I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse."<sup>1</sup>

There's an argument that says Paul didn't have an out-of-the-blue, all-at-once, catastrophic conversion. Look at all he had in place before that moment on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus. He spoke Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic. He moved between the different cultures in the community. He knew the Jewish law inside and out. He knew the struggles of the Jewish people under Roman rule intimately. As a Pharisee, he was dedicated to addressing those struggles by returning his community to a strict and thorough adherence to the laws of the ancestors. Paul had a serious desire to make the most of his life.<sup>2</sup> He was neither a waster nor an idler.<sup>3</sup> He was *breathing threats and murder* (Acts 9:1) as he strode down the road. And in a

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph S. Harvard, "Third Sunday of Easter, Pastoral Perspective, Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 404.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore P. Ferris, "The Acts of the Apostles: Exposition," vol. 9 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1954), 118.

<sup>3</sup> Ferris, 118.

sense, because he had been persecuting Christians, he had to know something about them.<sup>4</sup> He knew what they talked about and how they spoke. That's the argument for why we shouldn't imagine his conversion came out of the blue.

But I want to argue that is precisely why it is so unexpected. He had everything going for him to be a big man in the Jewish hierarchy. Everything I just listed made him a great apostle for Jesus, allowed him to be the greatest apostle of the Christian church. But that same list would have made him an even greater persecutor of the Christian church. He's demonstrated his skills and talents for identifying and rounding up heretics; he's been praised by his community and sent on an even more vital mission. Everything in his background has put him on his trajectory to serve the God of Abraham faithfully by stomping out, once and for all, this nonsense that a bunch of crackpots ne'er-do-wells from Nazareth are trying to peddle.

If you are going to make a Christian out of someone with so many advantages, so many talents, so many assumptions about the best way to serve the God he loves, you are probably going to have to knock him off his horse.

Here's the other thing I realized. I too have advantages and talents and assumptions that are driving me, *breathing threats and murder*, to the point where if Jesus chose to speak to me directly, he would indeed ask, "Catherine, Catherine, *why do you persecute me?*" (Acts 9:4) I think we all do. We welcome those advantages, talents and assumptions, because they lead to an easier life full of approval and support from our community. But they don't lead to loving God and they don't lead to loving our neighbor.

Now, I could have had John stop reading at verse 6, with Saul blind and on his butt in the dust of the Damascus road. But I had John go all the way to verse 20. Because there's another conversion story here that gets lost in the Hollywood blockbuster of Saul becoming Paul. Ananias appears to be a Christian already. And he has definitely heard of Saul. Saul is trouble with a capital "T" and Ananias wants nothing to do with him. Because Saul has been authorized to extradite any Jews guilty of crimes against the Jewish law back to Jerusalem for trial.<sup>5</sup> Ananias knows where that ends, and it is nowhere good.

God says to Ananias, "Yep, everything you said about Saul is true. And I need you to go anyways." Now, let's give Saul/Paul full credit for everything he made possible, including the Brookline Community Church in Brookline, NH some 2,000 years later.

But in his moment, Ananias moved from disciple to apostle. He moved from belief to action. He risked his living, his freedom, his life to do what God asked him. He called Saul, *breathing threats and murder*, "brother." This man who could invoke the death penalty against him, Ananias healed of his blindness and then baptized.

I'm pretty sure I couldn't do what Paul did. I'm pretty sure I couldn't found church after church and deal with the chaos of new believers through the mail. But I'm also not sure if I could do what Ananias did. Call someone whom I fear and who has every reason to hate me, call that person "brother" or "sister." Heal them of something limiting their ability to hurt me. Then

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<sup>4</sup> Ferris, 118.

<sup>5</sup> G. H. C. Macgregor, "The Acts of the Apostles: Exegesis," vol. 9 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1954), 121.

baptize them to new life. Or rather, I'm completely confident I couldn't do that on my own. But I am a part of a community where that could happen.

As I left my annual mammogram this week, a guy got onto the elevator talking a mile a minute. Everyone else in there averted their eyes, did the "not talking to me" body language thing. In my mind's eye, out of the blue, I saw him at coffee hour here in the church, and suddenly I could hear how frightened he was to have just learned that the radiologists had seen something on his lungs. I thought of how you guys would welcome him at coffee hour, and listen to him, and let him know that he was welcome and loved by God. So I walked with him to his next appointment in the hospital, said "good-bye" and wished him well.

I don't dislike the Road to Damascus story so much anymore. I understand that sometimes to make a Christian out of someone God needs to knock them off their horse. I understand that there are times when God need to knock me off my horse, because I am riding those advantages, talents and assumptions as far and as fast away from Jesus as they'll take me. But I also understand that I can invite people to a new life, to the feeling of coffee hour that this church works so hard to foster. Let me ask you to think about what you are riding away from God. And ask you to think about how you could, in your regular daily life this week, invite someone to new life, to coffee hour, to the knowledge that they are welcome and beloved of God. Because apostles get made in all sorts of ways.