



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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A sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Blinded by Grace

Acts 9:1-9

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' ⁵He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' ⁷The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

I have enjoyed a pretty charmed life in terms of my health, but there was one time when I was ill and not able to fully function for a period about a month. During that time, I received a number of cards wishing me well, and there was one, in particular, that I still remember. The front of the card had the typical greeting card syrupy, piety and went something like this. "They say that God uses difficult moments, of illness and tragedy to help us grow, and mature in faith." When I opened the card up it read: "Pretty crummy system... huh?" Yet, that period of illness and loss of capacity was for me a time of reflection about my life and what was important and what was not; indeed a time for growth and maturing.

I do not recommend illness or pain to anyone, and yet, I am also aware that God uses such trauma to enable us to grow spiritually. Why? Because we not only experience these traumas, we, as human beings, also attach interpretation and meaning to these events. Trauma often leads to self-reflection.

This morning I want to look at the traumatic conversion of Paul. First, I need to tell you a bit about Saul/Paul and then look at the traumatic event itself and some contemporary interpretations of it. Second, I want to examine how Paul understood his blindness and its meaning. Third, I will speak about the traumatic, often-troubling events in our lives, and how God might be acting through them.

I

Saul, (who would later become Paul and that is how I will refer to him throughout this homily) was a very devout Pharisaic Jew. Prior to his traumatic blindness, he was obsessively concerned with a growing cult within Judaism that centered on a recently executed rabbi named Jesus. He was present when Stephen, the first martyr of Christianity was stoned to death. The reason for his trip to Damascus was to round up a group of Christians there and bring them back to Jerusalem for interrogation and possibly crucifixion. In his own words, "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it." (Gal. 1:13). On the way to Damascus he was blinded by light. He fell to the ground. He heard a voice. Everything changed, including his name. What happened to him?

Modern scholars have given a great deal of thought and conjecture to what might have actually happened to Paul. In 1987, D. Landsborough (a research neurologist) published an article in the *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery, and Psychiatry*, in which he stated that Paul's conversion experience was an attack of temporal lobe epilepsy. He made the case that the bright light, loss of normal bodily posture, the message of strong religious content, and Paul's subsequent blindness, are consistent with this diagnosis.

Others have suggested Paul experienced a schizophrenic episode. Certainly the visions, the phantom voices, and religious content are consistent with hallucinations. Others have suggested Paul might have had a psychotic reaction because he was experiencing some type of "cognitive dissonance" arising from torturing his fellow Jews.

All of this is interesting, but ultimately only conjecture because we weren't there. We didn't observe the "patient", nor can we give him the appropriate scrutiny that such a diagnosis would receive today. These modern interpretations of the conversion of Paul reveal more about our age than about Paul.

We focus on the cause. We want to know:

- How did it happen?
- What was the reason?
- How might we explain this?

But seldom do we direct our attention on the meaning of an event, particularly a traumatic event.

II

Christian faith leads us to probe questions of purpose and meaning, like:

- How did Paul interpret the event on the road to Damascus?
- How did Paul understand the blindness he experienced?
- What were the voices that he heard?
- Were they merely voices inside his head caused by a chemical reaction in his brain?
- What changed in Paul's life and why?
- What was the meaning of this event for his life?
- What does this reveal about the nature of God?

Paul could have said it was the worse day of his life. He could have written about the fear he experienced, perhaps the pain of the moment. He could described it as a moment that he would like to forget... but instead.....

Paul interpreted the traumatic events on the road to Damascus as the grace of God.

- Blinded,
- knocked off of his feet,
- hearing voices,
- unable to function....

This was a moment of grace?

Continually, he wrote that his blindness, this incapacitating trauma, was God entering his life, confronting him, forgiving him and calling him to be an apostle of Christ. He shared this because often this is the way God works in our lives. Sometimes we, like Paul, are so stubborn and pig-headed that God has to hit us over the head with a proverbial two-by-four to get our attention.

We know the story of John Newton, the slave trader, who was shipwrecked and ironically ended up as a slave working in a lime plantation on the coast of Sierra Leone. Rescued from slavery, he understood this trauma as God entering his life, and wrote the words we love to sing, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound... I once was lost, but now am found, blind but now I see.” The grace of God that Newman experienced was not some warm fuzzy! It was traumatic....and it was also life-changing!

III

How do we interpret the events in our lives? How do we interpret and understand those moments of trauma and the tragedies we experience? What is the meaning we give to these moments in our lives?

I do not want to suggest that God causes horrible things to happen to people. I don't want to suggest that God brings illness or suffering. But I do believe that these moments when our lives are traumatized can be grace filled. They can be moments when we are able to hear that still small voice of God, speaking to us, in the same way that God spoke to Saul. These are the moments when we are more open and able to hear and respond to God's call in our lives.

Our lives are not immune from suffering and trauma. Suffering and trauma are not God's wish or intention for life. These moments are often grace-filled. These traumatic events are often the portals through which God's grace and love enters our lives and (to paraphrase the hymn), molds us, shapes us, and remakes us like a potter with clay.

Pastors want to protect their congregations from pain, illness and trauma, just as a parent wishes to protect her child from pain and hurt. We can't. But we can prepare them to listen, observe, and perceive the presence of God, indeed the Grace of God, in these moments. They are real—more real than any other event in our lives. This is the Good News. Amen.