

“The Road to Damascus”

Easter Three, May 5, 2019

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*May my words be a lamp to our feet,
and a light to our path.*

The air must have been electric in Jerusalem, and the outskirts of the city, in the days following the death and resurrection of Jesus

Many people must have wondered, who was this Jesus, that he had attracted such a following?

Who was he that his disciples left home and family to hear his teaching, to sit in his presence, to risk death

Who was he that he was placed in a tomb, and then arose back to life?

PAUSE

Without Jesus the disciples must have felt lost in Jerusalem: the crowds, the noise, the questions

and so, in today’s Gospel we find them at the sea of Tiberias, doing what they know best: fishing

PAUSE

this is my favorite resurrection appearance

it is a loving scene: Jesus giving his disciples guidance, as he often did

in this case, they have caught no fish all night, and so he tells them to cast their net on the right side of the boat

they obey, trusting his wisdom

and their nets are so heavy with fish that they can barely get to shore

PAUSE

like the Last Supper, the gathering on the shore is a domestic scene:
Jesus preparing a meal for his friends from the fish they have caught

it is a solemn scene: Jesus assuring himself of Peter's love

. . . Jesus warning them of the pain and suffering they will endure in his
name when he is no longer with them to give good counsel

PAUSE

Our readings today begin with the 9th chapter of the Acts of the
Apostles, an account of Saul's dramatic conversion on the road to
Damascus

Our Gospel reading opens a window on a quiet gathering of the disciples
with Jesus at the Sea of Tiberias

Both of these events take place not too long after the resurrection of
Jesus

his followers of Jesus have multiplied and grown more confident,
organizing the tasks that need doing to keep their fellowship strong

When they notice that the widows do not always receive their daily
ration of food, the disciples ordain seven men, "full of wisdom and of
spirit," to see that those in need are taken care of

Among the seven is Stephen, who is "full of grace and power," and who
does "great wonders and signs among the people"

(He is, I might add, the patron saint of deacons)

PAUSE

Before the account of Saul's conversion, we learn from the Acts of the Apostles that the disciples have riled up the authorities, who fear their influence

In a public gathering, Stephen speaks with power of the history of the Jewish people, accusing the leaders of being stiff-necked people" who oppose the Holy Spirit, just as their" ancestors used to do"

"When [the leaders] heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. . . . Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

. . . And Saul approved of their killing him."

PAUSE

N.T. Wright, who wrote a biography of Saul, says this: "When Saul encountered the news about Jesus, his mind was not a blank slate. He had been going full tilt in the opposite direction. As a young man, Saul of Tarsus had become a leading light in a movement whose aim was to urge their fellow Jews into more radical obedience to the ancient codes and to discourage them from any deviation by all means possible, up to and including violence. "

PAUSE

In today's reading from Acts, we see Saul, hot from the stoning of Stephen, "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He is carrying permission from the high priest to bind followers of "the Way" and carry them to Jerusalem

this is the Saul who encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus. . .

. . . who falls to earth in a blinding light that robs him of his sight for three days

This is the Saul whose analytical mind will be a gift to those who follow "the Way," for Saul provides a skill the fledgling church needs: the gift to found new churches and to develop them through his preaching, and through his letter-writing to each congregation as he moves about the known world

PAUSE

Today we would probably find Saul authoritarian: his concept of the role of women is tough for me to swallow

he would find us too liberal in our inclusion of any and all who walk through our doors

But I believe that Jesus—who welcomed to his fold all who wished to hear his word—chose Saul for his ability to organize believers into a cohesive whole

his gift was needed at that time, when the young church was struggling for survival against the Jewish authorities

PAUSE

Many of us have lived through the difficult conversations that led to the doors of the church being opened in our times to everyone without reference to gender, sexuality, or race. . .

. . . that led to liturgies being revised to be inclusive of all of God's children

some of us are here today because those conversations took place

In Saul's world I would not be standing here speaking to you this morning

we are here because Saul was thrown to the ground on the road to Damascus, and taken into the home of Ananias, who conveyed to him the words that our Creator told him to speak:

“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying ‘He is the Son of God.’”

PAUSE

We are here because Jesus spoke to us on our own road to Damascus

We bring gifts, and Jesus calls us to use them in his name

