

J.D. Ousley
Sermon—5May19
Acts9
“Striking”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

“Why are you doing that?”

Sometimes, people ask us troubling questions about our actions, and we don’t know how to answer them.

For instance, I might have been complaining to someone about a mutual friend of ours. It turned out that I was being unfairly critical of the mutual friend behind his back; so the friend I was with called me on it.

Why was I doing that? Well, there was no good answer that would justify my behavior. I had no excuse for my cutting remarks.

This is what happened to St. Paul. Paul, though, was called to account on a far more serious level and in a far more spectacular way.

As we heard in today’s lesson from the Acts of the Apostles, Paul—who was then called, “Saul”—was on his way to the city of Damascus. He was part of a group of fanatical Jews who were trying to break up the new groups of former Jews who now called themselves, “Christians.”

As he was riding along, Paul suddenly saw a blinding light. He then heard the words, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

There was no doubt who was speaking to him. Saul—that is, Paul—was hearing the words of Christ, risen from the dead. After this sudden experience of Jesus being alive, Paul was struck blind.

The lesson reports that he remained unable to see for three days. Then Ananias, a Christian from the Church in Damascus, was led to Paul by the Holy Spirit. Ananias put his hands on Paul’s head, and Paul then recovered his sight.

From that moment on, Paul was a new man. He renounced his past campaign to try to wipe out the gatherings of Christians. Instead of destroying churches, he began to establish new ones.

In a final ironic touch, Paul himself came to be persecuted. In the end, he was taken into custody by the Roman authorities, and he gave his own life for Christ’s sake.

I have always loved this story. As it happens, when I was serving the Episcopal church of St. Paul’s Within-the-Walls in Rome, Italy, I became friends with a son of the American artist, Norman Rockwell. And when I left Rome, this son, Peter Rockwell gave me a copy of a little sculpture he had done that showed St. Paul being struck by that blinding vision.

In the story, Paul’s physical blindness reflects his spiritual blindness. He couldn’t see that he was wrongly going after the followers of the true Messiah. At the same time that his sight was restored, his inner sight was also restored--and he chose to adopt the faith that he had once scorned.

But there is one problem with this story. The story can make us think that the only visions that really count are amazing ones like Paul had. If we don’t have dramatic experiences of the divine, we feel that we aren’t really “religious.”

And that, I think, is a mistake. For in practical terms, most people come to the Way of Jesus Christ in undramatic ways.

A woman might wander into church one Sunday. Some words that are said in the service or some music she hears gets her attention. So she comes back another Sunday. And another. She

volunteers for an outreach project. Eventually, over time, the woman realizes that she now thinks of herself as a Christian.

There is often another stage in the unspectacular experience of the Risen Christ that many of us come to have. After our initial identification with the Christian faith, most of us find that we also come to benefit from a second kind of conversion. We could call this, “*reconversion*.”

We sometimes realize that we have strayed away from God. We realize that we need to return to the path of believers.

Again, some insights that we have into ourselves can be so surprising that we would have to call them, “striking.”

Say that a friend of yours has criticized you for your political views. But then you realized that your friend was right! Your views should be more charitable--and more practical, too. You saw that you had to think more carefully about controversial issues, and you needed to weigh your opinions carefully.

Think again of the contrast between the old “Saul” and the new “Paul.” According to the reading that we heard, when Paul arrived in the synagogue, “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.”

The text adds that “For several days [Paul] was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’”

Paul’s experience of being plucked out of his Christian-persecuting occupation is a dramatic example of how we can be *struck* by the divine Spirit.

As life goes on, we can expect to be pushed and pulled by our faith. Sometimes, our inner beliefs can make us uncomfortable with our public lives.

Then we recognize how crucial it is that our faith be *honest*. It has to lead us to see ourselves as we are. We need to admit to our failings—not only the things we wish we hadn’t done, but also the good deeds that we failed to do.

We also need to be aware of the needs of others besides ourselves. So, as we remember the early life of Saul the persecutor and the later life of St. Paul who was himself persecuted, we should also remember fellow Christians who are being oppressed in our own day.

The example that will immediately come to mind is the church in Sri Lanka. Hundreds of Christians in that country were recently killed or wounded by suicide bombers apparently linked with Muslim terrorist groups.

Of course, we have to be careful not to blame all Muslims for the actions of a few.

That said, we still need to pray for the victims of the Easter bombings—for all who died, for all who were wounded or maimed, for those who are mourning the loss of loved ones. And we can support Christian organizations that aid Sri Lankan and other persecuted Christians.

Finally, we may note that at the same time that Paul was blinded by the vision, he seems to have been struck *dumb*. He asks Jesus one question, then after that says nothing until the scales fall from his eyes.

Ironically, though, Paul seems to have spent much of the rest of his life *speaking*! In his preaching and in his writing, he testified to the truth that he had found in Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.

Paul’s extraordinary self-revelation led to a happy ending. By the same token, the jolting revelations we have when we are on the wrong path in life can be good for us in the end.

The power of Christ can lead us to be more honest with ourselves. The power of Christ can make us better neighbors to those around us. As Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

And now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, power, dominion, and praise, now and forever. Amen.