

“The Book of Action: Blinded by the Light”

Psalm 29, Acts 9:1–22

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“The risen face of Jesus is a revelation not in the sense of making him plain in a straightforward manner. Rather, what is “unveiled” is a face that transcends simple recognisability that eludes our categories and stretches our capacities in the way in which God does. It provokes fear, bewilderment, doubt, joy and amazement.” -- David F. Ford

Saul is a strong, rational, no-nonsense, highly educated, well-bred man. He went to a highly ranked school and he was proud of it. He is the kind of man who is in charge, in control and is a rising prosecutor. And then one day, on his way to make his next round of arrests, comes a bolt out of the blue.

Nowhere in the text does it say he was riding on horseback, but the majority of classical paintings of this event picture Saul on the ground beside a group of horses. All these artists relish the image of the bad guy Getting knocked off of his high horse.

There Saul is, lying on the ground. A bolt of lightning hits, and Saul is blinded by the light. This is an image of the unfiltered, unpasteurized, unadulterated Holiness of God. The Holiness of God is not something that can be analyzed, objectified, explained or controlled. This is not sweet, saccharine, meek and mild Jesus. This is not warm, friendly, cuddly Jesus. This is Jesus the embodiment of the Holiness of God. The Holiness where divinity touches humanity. Holiness is disorienting, debilitating and devastating. It knocks you to the ground with the realization for all you thought you knew, you were wrong.

It is so disorienting, it changes Saul forever. Saul gains a new identity: Saul becomes Paul. And his story is our story. He reminds us of our arrogance, and the new identity Jesus gives us. So we keep on diving into the story, not just to learn more about Saul, but to learn more about ourselves.

Saul was very, very intelligent. But when it comes to things that truly matter, being smart does not necessarily help that much. It's like Garrison Keillor says:

Being well educated is like having 4 wheel drive;

It just gets you stuck in more remote places.

You spin your wheels, but you are stuck in the same place.

You get a new job, but you end up repeating the old patterns.

You may move into a new relationship, but you just make the same mistakes over and over again.

The computer gets into a loop, and it just keeps going around and around.

World where everything is for sale, it pretends that a cost-benefit analysis can answer all questions. As if everything has a financial price on it. As if you could put a price on the view of a mountain. As if you could take an endangered bird and put a price on its song. It is world that is filled with cynicism. Pretending that if lies are told enough times, with enough passion, then people take them for truth.

It is a cynical world. Life needs to have meaning for us to survive. But if meaning is about a connecting thread that ties the present with the past and the future, then we live in a world where life become meaningless. Because the values of the past are ignored, and the ideas of the future are cut off.

We, like Saul, live in a world that is surrounded by cynicism and meaninglessness. Saul lived within that kind of worldview: doing hurt in the name of hope, doing evil in the name of good. Doing violence in the name of God. The Bible says the presence of Jesus blinded Saul. I wonder: maybe it was that Saul was already blind, And the presence of Jesus revealed what he truly already was.

Saul thought he knew it all, but he did not understand at all. Saul did not understand anything. Jesus showed him how obtuse he truly was. Victor Frankel once said, "What is to give light must endure burning." We hear in this story the power of the light that is so hot it burns off his old self.

Maybe part of what Jesus does is to show us who we really are. Like Saul, we think of him as able to see. But maybe Saul was blind to start with. He had a hatred for people who thought differently. He built walls against outsiders as high as the sky. He was willing to stand by and nod approvingly when someone different was murdered for being different.

There was no way to God. No doorway, no window to God was nailed shut. Seemingly, there was no possibility of encountering the transcendent.

There comes a flash of light: Saul is blinded by the light. He could not comprehend a different world. He did not see the darkness, the gloom of the world in which he lived. Paul Simon is coming to St. Paul. I always think of one of the first songs he and Art Garfunkle sang:

The Sounds of Silence:

People talking without speaking.

People hearing without listening.

And the air was stabbed with the flash of a neon light

That split the night

And echoed in the sound of silence.

Saul is walking around in the dark. He thinks it is daylight. He thinks he can see. There is a yearning for awe, wonder, transcendence. Our notions of God are too boxed in. That flash of light: we need that. We need something that takes our breath away And makes our hearts soar, Something that speaks to our emotions, to our passion Something that can change our minds.

In the Hebrew Bible it talks about the Shekinah: the radiance associated with the presence of God. The radiance touches Moses, Moses face radiated from his encounter with God. It transformed him. The people were afraid of him: Too Holy. Too powerful. They made him wear a cloth over his head, he was too powerful to comprehend.

Anani' as: given a vision.

Anani' as: interprets.

We know we have important gifts to use But we do not know what to do with my life. We thought for years we were doing the right thing, But now, we are not so sure. Where do we go from here? God sends messengers to speak to the world.

What the messenger reveals is: a whole new world. New paradigm. New way of seeing. New way of living. Listen.

A few years ago the band Creed had a song on the album Human Clay:

*Can you take me higher?
To the place where blind men see.
Can you take me higher?
To the place with golden streets.
Although I would like our world to change
It helps me to appreciate
Those nights and those dreams.
But, my friend, I'd sacrifice all those nights
If I could make the Earth and my dreams the same...
Up high I feel like I'm alive for the very first time,
Up high, I'm strong enough to take these dreams
And make them mine.*

Daniel Migliore: speaks about Jesus' prophetic stance Against ways of thinking about God that are idolatrous. We take something good, and turn it into a god. So we can take our country, which is good, and turn it into a god. We can take our political party, which is good, and turn it into a god. We can take our way of life, which is good, and turn it into a god.

Jesus comes: and confronts our idols: Sets us free with a flash of light, the holiness of the life-giving God, and Saul becomes Paul: because he has a new life in the new creation. Instead of fear, hatred and violence, He is free for a new relationship with God, An experience of love and friendship, for the spiritual resources to deal with The personal and corporate crises of the age.

In hopeless, cynical, meaningless times people feel lonely and ignored. They feel helpless against the forces of society around them. They have a hunger for a new life, new community and new joy that comes with the power of the living Christ through the Holy Spirit. It is a new spirituality that has real connection to real issues and real people. Real practices that draw people together. The closer we get to each other, the closer we get to God. The closer we get to God, the closer we get to each other.
A transforming power.

I once heard a story of an old monastery which had fallen on hard times. It was decimated to the point that There're were only five monks left: The Abbot and four others, all of whom were over seventy. Clearly the order was dying. Deep in the woods nearby the monastery was a little hut that the Rabbi from a nearby town used. One day, it occurred to the Abbot to visit the hermitage To see of the Rabbi could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot and commiserated: I know how it is. The spirit has gone out of people. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore. So the old Rabbi and the Old Abbot talked solemnly together. And they read parts of the Torah, and spoke quietly of deep things. The time came when the Abbot had to leave. They embraced. "It has been wonderful being with you," said the Abbot, "But I have failed in my purpose in coming. Do you have any advice that might save the monastery?" The Rabbi responded, "No, I am sorry. I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you. When the Abbot returned, the other monks heard the Rabbi's words, They discounted them immediately. "Surely, not one of us," they said.

But later each of them started to think. They wondered, "Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? He has been our leader for so long, and is so faithful." Or, they thought, maybe he meant Brother Thomas, for he is such a holy man. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elrod, He is so grumpy. But then again, Elrod is so wise. Surely he did not mean Brother Phillip: He is too quiet and passive. But then again, Phillip is always there when you need him. Of course, he did not mean me: Yet suppose he did. O Lord, could I be the one?

As each of the brothers contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect, on the off chance that one of them might be the Messiah. And on the outlandish chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, They began to hold themselves to higher forms of love.

Now the monastery was in a forest, and the forest was so beautiful, that occasionally people came to visit, to picnic. And they would wander the old paths which led to the monastery. When they were welcomed in, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect surrounding the five old monks. The atmosphere was permeated with a profound sense of love.

The people began to come more frequently, and to bring their friends. And their friends brought other friends. Some of the younger people who came to visit began to engage in conversation with the monks. They sensed something profound in their life together. After while someone asked if he might join the monks. And soon another. And then another.

Within a few years, the monastery became a thriving place. For it had become something fresh and new. The dawn had come and they all saw themselves in a new light.

I take that story to be something of what happened to Saul who became Paul. Stories of hope and guidance for us. May that light that blinds and then opens our eyes to the new creation enlighten us again and again. And help us to see the new creation of Jesus Christ.

Amen.