

PAUL'S CONFIRMING

The story of Paul on the way to Damascus is one of the most well-known and one of the most beloved stories of scripture. We say, almost without thinking, “Oh, I’ve always been in the church; I didn’t have a Damascus Road experience.” This is what we’re talking about. But why is Paul going to Damascus? And how did he obtain all the power that he needed?

Paul’s journey causes us to think. It forces us to weigh again our own actions against what we believe. Paul, chief among the Pharisees, has to create an alliance with, of all people, the scribes and the Sadducees in order to get the paperwork he needs to take care of the problem he faces in Damascus. The problem is exactly this: Damascus was a way station for pilgrims on the way to the temple. They would stop in Damascus and have their passports stamped, if you will, making it easier to worship, to pay homage. Damascus helped them in their journey to worship at the temple.

But it was rumored that some who came and were validated by the synagogue in Damascus were in fact Gentiles, or Jews who believed in the Messiah. And if those people were to slip through security at the temple, the whole building would be defiled. This was important stuff. And Paul is on a mission to clean up any possible corruption in the Damascus synagogue.

When Paul arrived, or before he arrived, little to his awareness, God has another plan. God tells Ananias that he has plans different than the ones which Paul has made. The story of Paul’s confirming, of Peter’s learning constantly what it means to surrender to the power of Jesus, and eventually, if you read on in the chapter of Acts, the story of Ananias are all confirmation class experiences. For they move us from the physical world into the true meaning of our lives, of our existence. The stories are so similar; they look like mirror images of one another. They are all about Jesus’ genuine interactive relationships with us. These early “confirmands” are teaching us the meaning of our faith as they live their lives in the process of constantly being made new. The most powerful words we will ever seek are the words we use we use to proclaim that Jesus is risen and he is Lord of our lives.

Every other covenant we make—every other truth we seek to proclaim—all comes from the power of these words to us in our lives. Scripture teaches us that the process of giving in to God’s Lordship in Christ involves two miraculous acts. First, we have to get up and go. We have to move from that place where we are quite comfortable to the place where God is calling us. We have to get up, verse 6 says, and enter the city. Verse 8 says, “So Paul got up from the ground and was led by his hand into Damascus.” Remember the old proverb “I was lower than a snake in a wagon rut.” (That is really low.) That is where Paul was when the lights blinded him, and he fell to the ground.

Later in the 10th verse, Ananias is told by Jesus in prayer to get up and go to the street called Straight and look there for a man named Saul. Ananias has his own confirming and commissioning, because he questioned the events that are taking place—the guidance that he’s receiving from the Lord.

Trust is about moving from that place where we are most comfortable to that place where we are challenged and stretched. You know that my family spent much of there early years in the south. There, as children of a minister, we were asked by, believe it or not, public school teachers, what exactly the nature of the work in which my father was engaged, the calling to which he had responded. I don’t know if it was because in the south or the rural regions where we ended up, a lot of the ministers were not full-time clergy. They were just weekend ministers. But it seems time and again we were asked, “What does your father do all day at that church?”

We have two children, and the youngest is a redhead with that fearless redhead personality; and even early on in the third or fourth grade when teachers would ask her that question, her favorite response was one she had memorized from us, “Well, during the week he spends a lot of time trying to comfort the afflicted. But on Sunday he does his best to afflict the comfortable.”

And usually the narrow thinking that had prompted the question in the first place was put at bay at least for a week or two. That is until there was a science lesson or something else. But what’s happening for all of these confirmands and what’s happening for us, is the moving beyond the instincts or the normal conduct of our lives. Confessing Christ as your Lord is radically different that just life as usual.

Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior? That’s the essence of the faith, isn’t it? And do you wish to serve him daily as one of his students? His apprentices? His disciples? Are you willing to move from that comfortable, easy way of interacting to a radically transformed relationship with your world and those around you?

I think it’s fascinating that Paul is on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus—*on* his way in order to persecute people *of* the way. I think it’s even more obvious that the Holy Spirit has inspired these words when Ananias says to Jesus in prayer, “You want me to go to Saul of Tarsus? No way. Haven’t you heard of his reputation?”

I think we ought to wish for more definition in English that we usually get when we are translating the Greek. But maybe this time, just by providence, the language we share serves us well. “No way, Jesus.” And Jesus says, again, “Get up, Ananias, and go. Go beyond the normal way you live. I have a new way that I have prepared for Saul and for you. Get up and go. And I will make your life of *no way* into *my way*.”

Do you ever see your struggles in this light? Your problems? Your barriers? Do you ever recognize afresh and really believe that God is making a way? God takes our world which is often filled with the word, “No,” and turns it into a world with “Yes.” God changes our way of being and acting. God changes our instincts. No more profound words have ever been

uttered than the words which Juliet will use in just a moment when she claims again as her own the faith that she has already experienced.

As Juliet wrote in her statement of faith, "It's as beautiful as watching ducks on a lake, or hearing the melody of crickets." She understands that it is God's spirit in her that brings joy even to these simple experiences.

So may we be people of the way for one another and in service to Christ, now and always. Amen.