

Lord God, who calms the troubled waters, we bless you for your presence in the midst of all our fears, all our trials, all our worries. We release to you the things we hold too tightly, and we trust your words of peace. Be among us in this hour and may we lean into your everlasting arms of love, secure that we are yours, now and always. ... May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing and of you, who are ROCK, REDEEMER, and COMFORTER of us all. Amen.

Our theme these next few weeks is UNRAVELING...seeking God when our plans fall apart. Each week we will spend time looking at our lives in partnership with a biblical narrative where God meets us in the spiraling, unraveling our plans and our lives... and weaving us into something new.

As we do each week we ask: What's unraveling... what's being separated, sorted or untangled... what mystery is being revealed? How should this inform our lives?

Today we are working with a narrative that often gets song titles crafted from it... I Saw the Light... Blinded by the Light... The Light... you get the idea. As Debra read this story of Saul meeting Jesus on the road, perhaps these songs flitted through your mind.. or maybe others popped into your head. The point is, we often miss the significance of the story if we stop and only focus on the encounter on the road.

For example, there are several persons hearing this message that recall that I participated in an ecumenical weekend experience called The Walk to Emmaus. It was during this experience that I surrendered to the call to ministry I had been wrestling with for some time. However, it would be 5 years before I actually enrolled in a seminary class and another four years before I was appointed to serve a church as their pastor. And through those years there were many encounters with people who affirmed my call, mentored me in this call, and supported the journey to live into this call.

In other words, on that mountain top experience, I met Jesus in a brand new way and responded to the call to serve. Yet, I continued to wrestle with living into the

call because I could not see differently. It took years to peel away the scales from my eyes, little by little. I needed a lot of work, and it took many people to aid my unraveling and to reveal a new path.

This biblical story introduces us to God's chosen change agent, Saul of Tarsus. Saul has been intent on helping to round up disciples of the Way of Jesus. He has received permission to go to the city of Damascus to arrest believers and return them to Jerusalem. As Saul and his companions were close to Damascus, a light from heaven shone on Saul. Falling to his knees, he cannot see, and is informed that he is speaking with Jesus who asked, 'why are you harassing me?' Then Saul is directed to continue to the city and he will be told to go to Judas' house on Straight Street and a man, Anaias will meet him, lay hands on him, and restore his sight.

Scripture tells us this encounter is between Saul & Jesus... but there were also witnesses to this encounter... Saul's traveling companions who guide Saul to the city. They have witnessed Saul's encounter. They have heard the verbal exchange. They realize that Saul cannot see. They lead him to the city. Imagine the unraveling that they are experiencing?

And then there's one more person, Ananias, a follower of Jesus, who is becoming unraveled. Ananias has heard the stories of the threats, the violence, and the deaths of other believers. Yet, the Lord directs Ananias to find Saul and lay hands on him to restore Saul's sight.

First, realize, Ananias knows the Lord! His life has been woven into the fabric of followers such that Ananias responds, 'Yes, Lord, I am here for you!'

Second, Ananias is so familiar with Jesus that he reacts... You want me to do what? This guy is a killer, why would you want him to be in the family?' It seems, Ananias finds Saul to be unworthy. But let's pause a moment...

Let's ask the question, Have you... have I... ever discounted someone as unworthy... not good enough... because of what we've 'heard'... because of perceptions we hold?

What judgements do we make that prevent us from having a transformative encounter?

Now, we know that Ananias obeys the directive. But what if Ananias had said 'no, no way, Lord, that man is a bad man and I'm not gonna do it.'

It has been said, transformed lives transform lives. It seems to me that Ananias' heart had been transformed as a follower, as one who knew the Lord, as one who remembered that he himself had been a scoundrel and unworthy. I believe Ananias, like me, was not the person he once was. And so, Ananias follows the directive to find Saul at Judas' house on Straight Street and places his hands on Saul so the scales could fall from Saul's eyes and Saul's sight be restored.

So I ask you 2 questions... 1) how many lives were unraveled in this story; 2) What does this mean for our lives?

As for the first question, I think at least 2, but countless more!

First, Saul's traveling companions were witnesses to the initial encounter and all the way to the city. It's quite likely they were still around to see Saul's sight restored and new life begin.

Second, the impact of Saul's transformation continued with the disciples, just as it had for Ananias, as they taught, listened, and heard Saul proclaim Jesus as God's son. Ananias, too, is transformed. And so are all those who listened to Saul preaching in the synagogues. What a powerful message of a transformed life to transform lives.

Saul is transformed from an enemy to a brother; from a persecuter to a 'chosen instrument' called to a particular mission to welcome Gentiles to the fold.

So, what does this mean for our lives, as followers of Jesus Christ... and as a faith community?

In the context of this time (a global pandemic, global protests over respecting black lives, and an approaching national election), I have been reflecting on this scripture passage with a wider lens, a broader perspective, and a focus on who I

may have discounted, disregarded, and been disobedient in approaching with an open heart. I ask myself, with whom do I have a hardened heart?

Friends, I ask each of us to reflect on the state of our hearts and the process of transformation. We must be willing to release identity of who we've been so that we can receive the identity of who God wants us to become. In Jesus, we are made new... Paul tells us this in 2 Corinthians 5:17, 'if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and, look, new things have arrived.'

As we heard in this story of Saul and Ananias, the shift in identity is disorienting, like transitioning from darkness to light, chaos to meaning. But with a faith community that comes alongside, there is acceptance for the new life in Christ and support in nurturing growth in life together.

It is my prayer that in the coming months, we will gather in small groups to wrestle with racism, especially, so that our hearts and minds can be transformed like Ananias.

May it be so. So be it. Amen.

Go to Prayer of
Confession led by Liturgist
Lord's Prayer