

Sermon 5-4-25  
Paul Purdue preaching

Congratulations graduates, you have earned your degree. Take a breath. Praise a favorite teacher. Give thanks for parents, friends, and others who have traveled this road with you. Rehearse the happy moments. Celebrate your victories and obstacles you overcame. Share your wounds, disappointments and hurts: do not walk alone. Celebrate, linger in the moment, not rushing onto the next big thing: sabbath, savour, digest, rest, retell. You have achieved something that will help you the rest of your life.

Our story today is about someone who had graduated from seminary. They were zealous, dedicated and sharp. They knew exactly what they were supposed to do with the rest of their life, until a lightning bolt from heaven made them question everything. Saul, who clearly saw the path before him, suddenly needed to be led by the hand into a strange city. **But this a good news story** because this student went on to travel over 9,000 miles around the Mediterranean Sea, planted some 14 churches (some of them you know like Galatians, Ephesians and Corinthians), championed inclusion pushing the church to welcome all people, and wrote some of the best chapters in the Bible: *“Now faith, hope, and love remain—these three things—and the greatest of these is love.”* ( 1 Cor 13) This is a story about how God makes things new, healing hardened hearts, changing impenetrable minds and guiding us home even when we are not aware we are hopelessly lost.

Acts 9 begins “Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked the high priest for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if Saul found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, Saul might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.”

The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible tells us that in Jesus’s day *“the office of the high priesthood was little more than a concession traded among parties at the whims of the Romans and their proxies”*. Powerful families literally bought and sold their way into the chief priesthood. Between 63 BCE and 70 CE there were over 30 Chief Priests or one every 4 years. This corruption deeply concerned our friends, the Pharisees, who stood in opposition to the chief priests and rulers. Saul is a fringe religious zealot using political power to deport Christians. Indeed, the rabbinic counsel will rule *“if this new Christian Way is from God, we can not resist it”* (Acts 5) So let’s clear something up, the Jews were not trying to snuff out the Christians.

The problem is not Saul’s Jewish beliefs, the problem is their heart. There are many loving Jewish people, who like Jesus, uphold the Torah keeping kosher and sabbath laws. I grew up surrounded by kind, generous, and loving Christians who told us “not to drink, dance or chew or go with girls who do”, watch R rated movies, or shop on Sundays. Such Christians and Jews, like every religious or agnostic person in the world, have blindspots and hidden hypocrisies, but such folks generally do not breathe murderous threats. Saul’s problem is not that Saul graduated seminary under Dean

Gamaliel's instruction, "being trained in the strictest interpretation of the ancestral Law". (Acts 22) The problem with Saul is that Saul was breathing murderous threats. (Acts 22)

If we breathe murder we will use the Bible as a weapon to harm people. If we breathe in God's Loving Spirit the Bible will become a tool to build community, sew justice, and create freedom. In Matthew 15, Jesus talks about what can spiritually contaminate us and surprisingly it is not our hands, hearts or unmentionables. Jesus says "*out of the heart (or soul) (can) come evil thoughts, murders, unfaithfulness, impurity, thefts, false testimonies, and insults.*"

What are you breathing in, what are you breathing out? Breathe whatever is "*excellent, admirable, true, holy, just, pure, lovely, and worthy of praise.*" (Phil 4) Check your breath for hate, fighting, obsessive competitiveness, explosive temper, constant oppositionalism, selfishness, group rivalry, jealousy, magical thinking, hard partying, and stuff like that. (Galatians 5) Our breath may matter more than our theology.

Saul, breathing hate, journeyed to Damascus hell-bent on forcing others into his vision of right living. Freedom of Religion, freedom to think, believe and write are inalienable human rights. He had the papers, but as Saul neared Damascus, *suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. Saul fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*. Acts 9 tells us others heard the voice. In Acts 22, Paul says "*My traveling companions saw the light, but they didn't hear the voice of the one who spoke to me.*" The details of our holiest experiences often get lost in the glory.

Usually angels come with a commandment like: "do not be afraid", "go I am sending you", "say to Pharaoh" or "Marry Mary" but this time God asks a question: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Why are you doing this? Often people go to seminary to work through some deep inner question. "Who is Jesus or Why do we ...?" Confirmants, graduates, sojourners do not dismiss your lingering questions, at times, God leads us into the light with questions that call us to change our minds. Hebrews 4 tells us *God's word is living, active, and sharper than any scalpel. It penetrates deep into our souls... probing*

"*Who are you, Lord?*" Saul asked. Perhaps, Paul was trying to categorize the people so as to justify mistreating someone in God's name? Sometimes, we use God or nation to justify the most inhumane things we do. Asking "*Who are you:* what is your status or who did you vote for" can allow us to ignore the image of God standing in front of us, and treat someone as less than a human being endowed by our Creator with an unalienable belovedness. Who are you Lord? Maybe Saul could not yet see God in the face of a Damascus Christian, or a Parthian, Mede, Elamites or a resident of Mesopotamia, or an Egyptian, a Greek, an Arab, a Roman Centurion, the female head of Philippian Fashion House, or an Ethiopian eunuch who worked for an African Queen. (Acts 2) Maybe Jesus does not look like the Jesus we expected?

"*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,*" is a deeply incarnational declaration. I am the baby laid in a manger. I am the child refugee immigrating to Egypt. I am the stranger

you did not welcome in. I am the hungry person you could not make eye contact with. (Matthew 25) I am the unhoused. I am the falsely accused. I am the crucified one. I am the target of those deportation papers in your satchel.

The idea that God dwells with the oppressed is as old as the Bible. In Exodus 3 God calls Moses through the light of a burning bush, *"I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them."* I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting...

*"Who are you, Lord?"* Jesus does not hand Saul a 12 page single spaced theology paper arguing for greater inclusion. Jesus speaks through a lingering proposition that makes Saul question his strict interpretation: what if God is with those people? Suddenly, amid the questions the circle of light vanished and the guiding voice went silent. Saul is alone on the ground. When he opened his eyes, he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. Saul had been so sure of what he had read in the Bible, he was confident the papers in his satchel were correct. He had been so sure, but suddenly he could not see one thing.

In John 9. Jesus confronts some religious know-it-alls saying "because you say "we see", your sin remains." Paradoxically, it is only the blind, or once blind, who truly see. The certainty of your spiritual direction means you are off target! Dear graduates, dear confirmands, dear sojourners in Christ, do not be afraid of those sticky spiritual questions like: "what does this job mean", "why major in humanities", "where am I doing harm", "what does these papers from the chief priest really mean", "what do I do with this awful Bible passage", or "who is Jesus?". These at times blinding questions may be God's light that will somehow help you see your way home.

If you keep on reading you will read about the courage of a Damascus Christian named Annanias, who despite his deep misgivings greeted Saul saying *"Brother Saul, the Lord has sent me to you to restore your sight."* After experiencing the radical hospitality of being named a "sibling in Christ" Paul tells us that *"something like scales"* fell from his eyes. Still, the journey from blindness to answers and then sharing the light of Christ took 3 years, not 3 days. In Galatians 1 Paul tells of his spiritual journey spending 3 years in Arabia asking questions and practicing the spiritual disciplines and then 15 days with Peter before beginning to share the good news of God's for all people. And Paul's understanding would deepen and widen over the next 10,000 miles and 25 years of leading churches.

So congratulations, confirmands, graduates, sojourners take a sabbath, celebrate all your journey. And as you begin to answer life's next round of questions, be sure to check your breath for hate and remember God is with you in your travels and your questions. Amen