Sermon 5-5-19

Paul Purdue preaching

**Easter Open Our Eyes**

Acts unfolds with acts or scenes as in a grand play, “The Acts of the Apostles.” Our passage begins with directions: “Meanwhile.” Meanwhile, in simultaneous time, God’s unfolding drama leads Philip on one stage and Saul on another. Acts 8 began, “at that time, the church began to be subjected to harsh persecution...those who had been scattered moved on- preaching the Good News.” (Acts 8:1-3) If events unravel and scatter our United Methodist Church, we have choices: we can quit church, we can give up, or we can engage in mission moving on while spreading Good News. In the face of persecution, Philip persisted in preaching good news as the church moved onto new people and beyond old ideas. Indeed, without persecution perhaps the church would have not taken notice of Philip, or included Gentiles, or worshiped on Sundays, or eaten pork barbeque. In two scenes, the Holy Spirit leads Philip to reach across old boundaries- some geographic and some theological. Philip goes to Samaria baptizing former sorcerers. Next, Philip baptizes an Ethiopian eunuch. Deuteronomy 23:1 banned eunuchs from the Lord’s assembly. If we feel life’s winds blowing hard against us, maybe God uses even ill-winds to lift us up like a seedpod, and carry us into new fields to grow new understandings. The cross brought Easter. Perhaps persecution can seed something beautiful.

Acts 9 begins, “Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples.” What ill winds and toxic words fill your lungs? What air do you regularly breathe? Are you focused on what is pure, excellent, admirable, true, holy, just, lovely, and worthy of praise? (Philippians 4) Do you daily exhale murder, revenge, threats, mean tweets, untruth, jealousy, ignorance, idolatrous striving, hypocrisy, hatred, greed, fear, elitism, descension, cowardice, bitterness, back-biting, and all other dead air? Do we remember how on Easter Jesus breathed forgiveness, boldness, authenticity, and love on them? ( John 20)

Again this week, Easter three, the lectionary text brings us to the scene of a church trial. Did you know Luke’s four previous acts tell of four arrests and Stephen’s martyrdom? Our passage begins with Saul leading a gang to terrorize and arrest those belonging to Way- trial number five! Suddenly, just outside Damascus, a light from heaven flashes around Saul, encircling and drives Saul falls to his knees. A voice calls out from the halo, “Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?” The unknownness haunts Saul; it questions him to the core. Could God be with these I see as perverters of God’s truth? Might my passion for God be wrong? Saul stammers into the searing light, “Who are you, Lord?” The yet-unseen Lord responds, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Let’s put ourselves in Saul’s shoes. He was sure he was right. He had the papers from the high priests, the seminary education, the law, the tradition, and the scriptures all on his side.

Jesus continues, “Now get up. You will be told what you must do.” Get up, Saul, and you will be told what you must to do! Who wants to be told what they must do? And yet to follow Jesus, we must live with a sense of always seeking direction, of confessing our blindness, and waiting for God to lead us. “Think not of tomorrow,” Jesus said, “Lose your life to find it, keep on knocking, seeking and searching, seeking first the Kingdom of God.” (Matthew 6, 7)

Saul’s traveling companions stood speechless. They hear the voice but see no one. They pick a broken Saul up off the ground. When Saul opens his eyes, blindness remains. Saul must be led by hand into Damascus. For three days Saul remains unable to see. Saul is ill or fasting, not eating or drinking. Saul is praying. Do not miss the metaphor of blindness. In addressing spiritual blindness, Jesus says “because you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”  (John 9) Jesus warns us to not call anyone “instructor” (Matthew 23), oh but how we church folks love titles and authority. We love to say, “we see!”

Heavenly light blinds Saul so that God can open Saul’s soul to understand scripture, theology, and tradition through an experience of new insight or light. It is a theme in Luke. Easter opens the church’s eyes to read the scripture in a new light. On Easter’s Emmaus Road, Luke 24 tells “how beginning with Moses and all the prophets, the yet-unrecognized Jesus interpreted the things about himself in all the scriptures…. Then the disciples’ eyes were opened, and they recognized Jesus… They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while the unrevealed Jesus talked with us on the road, opening the scriptures to us?” Just so we do not miss it, Luke’s last paragraph begins: “Then Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures.”  Perhaps there is something to that? Perhaps Jesus is still opening our eyes to the scripture even today?

The empty tomb is not the end of faith. Jesus promises to be with us to the end of the earth, even just two or three of us, and gives us the power to interpret scripture. (Matthew 16, 18, 28) “You are a letter of Christ, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts…. God has made us ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Corinthians 3)

On a dusty Damascus road, Jesus shakes Saul’s deepest understandings cracking open his tradition and opening his eyes to see familiar passages in new light. Indeed, Paul’s experience will become scripture! No one really sees the risen Lord along the Damascus Road, just a big light. Is that why some called Paul less than an apostle and why Paul gets chippy about the “so called super apostles”? (2 Corinthians 11, 12) It is indeed strange to me how progressives don’t like Paul who comes as a theological innovator. Paul champions inclusion, against the party of circumcision, kosher rules, and alleged scriptural fidelity.

The Holy Spirit uses Paul to turn the church in a New Testament direction. Paul preaches the Good News that he once resisted. “Faith has come… in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith… There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. You belong to Christ! (Galatians 3) So the Holy Spirit directs the acts of the apostles to widen the understanding of grace: baptizing eunuchs, dropping kosher rules, not requiring circumcision, ordaining Phoebe, commissioning Priscilla, including Gentiles as full members, ordaining Gentiles, and planting churches all over the world.

So where is the Spirit leading you? Are we so sure of what we see that we are blind to God’s leading? Are we too trusting of our traditions, titles, positions and papers? Do we have open hearts and open minds? What stale air do we need to exhale so that God might animate something lovely and true in our hearts? Might God turn that ill-wind to good effect and blow Good News beyond our geographic and theological boundaries, seeding new life in unexpected places? Exhale. Close your eyes. Fall to your knees. Listen for Jesus’ calling. Come, Holy Spirit, blow new life into our dry disjointed bones. Come, Jesus, shine new light into our world. Come, Creator God, create in us a new heart. Amen.