

Easter III, April 10, 2016. Acts 9:1-20, Revelation 5:11-14, John 21:1-19  
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All of today's readings have a mystical element to them: Peter's threefold betrayal reversed with a three-fold affirmation of love, as the now-risen Christ - in Eucharist-like presence - leads all the disciples (and especially Peter) to recognize that loving Jesus must lead to feeding God's sheep.

Likewise the author of Revelation is transformed by a mystical encounter with the divine, where he discovers that no one is left out in God's quest for universal healing.

And then there's Paul. Paul who begins our story as Saul. Don't underestimate Saul's Darth Vader-like appearance in this story for first-time readers! Earlier in Acts he's portrayed as approving of the execution of Stephen, and Luke develops a portrait of him as the arch-persecutor "ravaging the church ... dragging off both men and women." The sound of Nazi jack-boots across a fearful, pre-War Europe provide a stark echo of the way many early Christians must have thought of Saul. Up until today's reading, a first-time reader of Acts must surely have been left wondering what role this Saul might play in this story – could it be that he would remain the nemesis of early Christian communities?

We need to be careful here not to see Saul as the epitome of Jewish violence toward the early Church. The Gospels themselves are anti-Semitic and bear much of the blame for creating this anti-Semitic perspective. That's ironic, because there's much evidence to suggest that the early relationship between traditional Jews and "Jesus-Jews" were pretty good.

With the gospels rather perverse view of Judaism it has become easy for us to miss exactly how 'off-the-rails' Saul was, compared to mainstream Judaism. Jewish Rabbis of Saul's time abhorred the idea of killing any human being, and especially fellow Jews – if you read the Mishnah you find that while capital punishment was allowed in Jewish Law, the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Rabbis made it so incredibly difficult to implement as to be impossible. Saul disapproved of this 'soft' view – his obsession was saving Judaism from change at any cost. Today it would be easy to exchange the stones used to execute Stephen's with another contemporary tool, a sword, and to exchange long, wheat-colored 1<sup>st</sup> Century robes for long black 21<sup>st</sup> Century ones – and you could see Saul as a violent Jihadist. Think about that for a moment – the propaganda video of the victim in an orange jump-suit, the narrow, violent ranting, and the brutal murder....and you have Saul of Tarsus. That doesn't sound like the man who said this:

*"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal..... Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

Really?!! Saul said that? That's one heck of a transformation!!

What intervenes is today's story, played out on the dusty Damascus Road – a moment of encounter with God – a mystical, transformational moment where this brutal, cruel man is brought face to face with the consequences of what he's been doing. This is the redeeming of one

who has been deeply, profoundly lost. Who would not feel blinded if all that we had lived by was stripped away, and God turned out to be different than we thought?

It's a truism that if our understanding of God determines both our faith and our life, then if our view of God changes, so does everything else. Everything else changed for Saul of Tarsus, on that road, all those years ago.

There's another mystical encounter in the Acts story – Ananias of Damascus – who could be forgiven for running – Jonah-esque – in the other direction when told by God that he should go and look for Saul of Tarsus. As one biblical scholar has said, that's rather like telling a rabbi to go find and meet with Adolf Hitler in 1930's Germany. But Ananias didn't run in the other direction; he went and sought out Saul. Ananias is an almost-forgotten hero of this story, a figure who places his faith in God before his fear of Saul. And Saul, through baptism, becomes Paul, and it seems pretty clear that bread is broken and wine shared in Eucharist.

So there it is! A story of personal encounter, transformation, the experience of the presence of God. There's deep irony to the fact that for the following 20 centuries the mystical writings of Paul of Tarsus have been used by Christians to develop a complex doctrinal institution which is pretty good about determining who's "in" and who's "out" – about how we say God should love and who not!

Paul's new faith is, from this very moment forward, always based on his experience of the living Jesus and the faith of those he shares the journey with; there's no longer a question about being "in" or "out" – there's "no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female....we are all one in Christ Jesus."

For Paul, from this moment on, faith's about real human struggles during life's journey in a real, often-harsh world, and how if we make that journey together – *together* – we can not only be transformed ourselves but bring about the transformation of the world. That's a timeless truth that as accessible to us today as much as it was to Paul on that dusty middle-eastern road.

I think it's pretty clear from the story that while God's new truth for Paul was accessible to him, he had to make the choice to embrace it. Baptism is that symbolic "yes" – the moment he made the choice for God.

There's one other thing about both Paul's and Ananias' experience on that remarkable day: their divine encounter is both mystical and vocational, a divine encounter that was also a commissioning.

- For Ananias, it was to go to a place that epitomized not only his own fears for his personal safety but also the change that such an encounter would bring. It sounds a lot like the description of the disciples after Jesus' crucifixion – hiding fearfully behind locked doors for fear of what the new, different future might bring.
- Paul's commissioning is equally powerful, and – equally – about a new and different future. When Saul's eyes are 'opened' and he sees for the first time with this new sight, the first person he sees is someone who he'd devoted his life to exterminating.

Resurrection is a remarkable thing! Transformation is possible for anyone – even a narrow, violent Jihadist. Even us. If God can transform a hate-filled Saul of Tarsus into St. Paul, there's hope for me, and for you, that God will do the same with us.

