

SERMON
“Surprised By God”
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St. John’s Chapel UCC

Acts 9: 1-9

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” Then men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

John 21: 1-14

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught. So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them, and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him. “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

SERMON

From Mary Magdalene to Peter, to the couple on the road to Damascus, to breakfast with the disciples beside the Sea of Tiberias, Jesus surprised people after his resurrection. And he kept right on doing this from that day forward. He promised the Holy Spirit would take his place once he left, but it seems he never really left us. That day on the road to Damascus, there he was again. Surprise! Surprise! And the surprises will never end for those who follow him, or those who persecute him. Easter lives on!

“Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?” You’ve got to realize here, Saul is not directly or physically persecuting Jesus. He persecutes those who belong to the “Way”—which is what early Christian were called. “You persecute my followers—those who carry the good news to the world. You persecute me,” says the resurrected Jesus to Saul.

Last weekend Dean and I went to see “The Book of Eli.” It was not the best of movies, but it made some good points. Eli, played by Denzel Washington, carries this book across a desolate and violent wasteland that used to be America. The book he carries is the Bible. Eli alone is the carrier of the good news, the last standing disciple, the last follower of the Way--and everyone but everyone is persecuting him.

The Bible he carries is also the last Bible in existence. All Bibles were destroyed after an earth-shattering war, because it was believed that sacred books were the cause of what Eli calls

the “Big Flash.” When you think about it, this is one of the ways our world still persecutes Jesus--all this fighting and feuding over who has the right to which holy land and who doesn't, and who's got the right interpretation of the Bible or Quran, and who doesn't. And whatever else we can find to fight over about our differing religious positions. Will it be the sacred books of the world that will be our undoing?

Then there's this one man, Carnegie, who sends out an army of men in search of one particular book—which turns out to be the Bible. Why? Because he hungers for the control that comes from manipulating the sacred. Never, for a moment, think we have not persecuted Jesus in this manner—using the Bible to enforce slavery and oppression. The Bible, through the ages, has been quoted to women, African Americans, and children to keep them in their place. Scripture used to oppress people is power gone insane—as truly Carnegie, the evil one of the movie, is—insane, that is.

Carnegie offers Eli all the treasures that are in short supply in the afterlife of a nuclear war: food, water, a clean bed and even a virgin—in return for the book. Eli accepts the food, water, and bed for the evening—and befriends the young woman, Solara, sent to him—but come morning he masterfully sneaks out to continue his journey to the West. The place God has instructed him to carry the Bible—a place where the knowledge contained therein can be used to restore hope to the land.

It is clear that the sacred tome must not fall in the hands of the persecutors. Yet, within that sacred book is a story about just that happening. The persecutor, the villain, Saul soon-to-be Paul, Jesus entrusts with the sacred word to be carried into the Gentile world. Surprise! Surprise!

Follower or persecutor it does not matter. We'd best all be on the outlook for the resurrected Jesus is on the move.

How did the movie turn out? Well, I'm not going to be the spoiler. You'll have to go see it. But I can tell you how the Paul story turns out. It is a story of wrenching, dramatic movement from darkness to light, from being "church enemy number one" to one of the greatest leaders of the church in its mission into the world.

It is a story of radical transformation that takes us by surprise. We don't expect God to give treasure to the biggest bully on the block. It is a story of what happens when God touches a life.

Most of us think of ourselves, most of the time, as the result our hard work. My *self* is whatever I have chosen, worked out, decided, and strived to be. In many ways there is some truth in this, but it is not until God puts things together in us that we are entrusted with being carriers of God's greatest treasure.

The persecutor becomes the preacher, the one who testifies of Jesus before kings and hostile mobs. Who would of thought? A man negative about the Christian faith becomes a believer.

C. S. Lewis was such a man. His experience of the Christian faith was extremely negative. He didn't persecute Christians, but neither was he particularly fond of them. Protestantism in Northern Ireland, he said, was just out-and-out dull. "We were offered dry husks of Christianity." The main point of Protestantism in Northern Ireland was to demonstrate that whatever they believed in, it was not Roman Catholic. College, army, and the war nurtured his hostility towards all things Christian.

Then out of nowhere in 1931, Lewis writes, “I have just passed from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ.”

“God closed in on me,” he exclaimed with surprise.

Lewis’ great moment comes as he rode a sidecar to Whipsnade Zoo. You might want to note here that God strikes, in these stories, when we are mobile, just in case you are trying to avoid all places where God could do a number on you this Eastertide.

Anyway, here’s stodgy old Lewis bobbing along in a motorcycle sidecar on his way to the zoo. He doesn’t get all the glitz and drama of Paul. No bright, blinding light spooking his horse and throwing him to the ground. No he’s just bobbing along in a motorcycle sidecar.

Of that moment he later writes, “When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did.” That’s it? Rather uneventful spiritual stuff, even for an English professor!

Christians believe there is a rather hollow self inside until God makes a move, until God closes in on us, until the embrace, the intrusion--the SURPRISE—even for we followers who embrace Christianity with all our being.

The other day during Centering Prayer, right here in this church, Shirley Datema had such an experience. Following 20 minutes of silence, of trying to quiet the mind, which is what one does in Centering Prayer, Shirley reported that for a split second or two she felt God embrace her. The embrace surprised her so that she pulled herself out of it—but in those seconds she was brought to tears.

Whether a follower, heretic or persecutor, and there is more than likely a little of all floating around in our DNA, when we have a close encounter with the resurrected Jesus, we will

be transformed into carriers of God's greatest treasure—and it is not a book. It is the living Christ within us!