

October 18, 2020 New Beginnings Pt. 5 Acts 9:1-20

It is ironic that on a day when we are without electricity, until noon, no heat, no light, no lift and no sound system, that I would want to focus on the experience of Saul of Tarsus as he becomes Paul, the disciple and apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul is one of the earliest heroes of the Christian cause. His contribution is marvelous in that in God's holy Spirit, he preached throughout the Mediterranean area, and in the city of Rome, chained and unchained, as a free man and a prisoner under military guard. Paul is responsible directly for half of the New Testament, the balance of the letters, and indirectly through his influence on Luke the physician, the fruits of his ministry include the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Luke was Paul's doctor. He cared for Paul and Paul taught and advised Luke. They were a team engaged in the service of Jesus.

Paul's story is a classic example of someone making new beginnings. Paul was Jewish and he was a Pharisee. He was anti this new Jesus cult and did everything in his power to destroy the infant church. He was one of the first and a zealot to the cause of persecuting the Christians he could find and identify. He sought their deaths. He was headed for Damascus when the Lord Jesus apprehended him on the highway in the midst of the journey. This is the moment in which Paul comes face to face with the truth. He is not persecuting the disciples but the risen Lord Jesus himself. And it is not that some claim Jesus is alive...HE is. And in that moment Paul realizes Jesus is the Lord God he has claimed to be serving.

Moments of new beginning, starting over, mean there are things which one must let go of that have been part of our past. Think of it! Paul's career in the Jewish community: he has to let go of it. His hatred for people like Peter and James, John and Andrew, Stephen the first martyr... he has to let go of it. Part of his living for Jesus...the rest of his life...involves letting go of his dedication to the laws by which he was certain he was a righteous man. He has to recognize that he has been opposing the will of the Lord his God, and he has to let go of that too, in order to become the servant of God Jesus wants him to be. I keep colliding with this idea that we have to be willing to change the way we do things.

We also see this in the episode with Ananias. Ananias does not want to go and see and minister to Saul/Paul, because he knows the man has been a real threat to the infant church. In fear and trembling he obeys Jesus to go and see Saul and lay hands on him, midwifing Paul in the receiving of God's Spirit, and sight, so that he can serve Jesus. And notice how Jesus describes Paul's mission. Paul is to make the name of Jesus known to Gentiles, to kings, and to Israel. And one more thing: Jesus will show Paul what he is going to have to give to this mission...he will suffer. In Rome he will die.

As we read the text, Paul received his sight, stood up, and was baptized. When adults are baptized it is always about declaring oneself as being on the Lord's side. So it was for Paul. He is baptized and he begins to declare the

truth...who Jesus is: God's Son, the Saviour, the Lord. That Jesus rose from the dead on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day, that precious and most marvelous Sunday morning. All the Biblical, Old Testament knowledge that made him a marvelous pharisee, makes him a marvelous theologian and preacher of the Gospel concerning Jesus. He becomes an instrument whereby people can make a new start, a new beginning, trading hate for love, and a zeal for the rules, to a passion for the saving of souls. It is the ease with which Paul leaves the old ways behind as he makes a new beginning, that impresses. Jesus has touched him and the old ways just do not matter any more.

We must never forget this: embracing new beginnings with Jesus means living a changed life. We wind up loving people we normally would not choose to be with. We find ourselves praying for people who at one time were totally unknown to us. We find ourselves in new places doing new things. And we even learn how to bear the suffering that becomes part of a well lived life. We are not hermits. Even in this plague ridden time, we are out and about and with others...as responsibly as possible, masked, hands sterilized, 6 feet apart, but about and with others, on the phone, on the internet, sharing copies of the message.

Next Sunday I will be back in place at St. Andrew's God willing. Until then be assured of the love in which God holds you. Permit me to pray for you.

Lord Jesus;

We need you and we know it. Touch us continually with your love and grace in the power of your Spirit. Make us stronger than we believe possible. Open doors of opportunity to be servants of others, and grant us an eagerness to be of service. Let your light shine in our lives, that people and even kings would be aware of the name, and the power of the name, of Jesus. Amen