

Text: Acts 9: 1-19
Title: Recalibrated
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Roger Allen Nelson

As a much younger man I took a spin on the youth ministry speaking circuit. I spoke at conventions, conferences, chapels, camps, and retreats. It was an ill-fitting calling. I wasn't funny enough, spiritual enough, or charismatic enough. I had too many questions and not enough answers. But, I heard a lot of other speakers....

I heard the middle-aged woman who sprinkled the gospel with self-deprecating jokes about her weight and her bathroom escapades. I heard the athlete who approached every speaking opportunity as a coach encouraging more effort to secure victory. I heard great story-tellers, great biblical teachers, and great love for kids. And, I heard countless conversion stories that followed a predictable pattern.

The speaker would first recount a battle with God. It was typically fight or flight through sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll, or there was some terrible tragedy or iteration of human brokenness, but then there would be a dramatic encounter. God would strike them down with an overwhelming love, they would turn around, and live happily ever after. They functioned like the romantic-comedies that Sandi watches on the Hallmark channel. Cue the music and an invitation to experience the same love....

I know that sounds cynical and as if I'm taking a swipe at youth pastors. That's not my intention. God works in all sorts of ways and those youth ministry moments can be part of a life-long journey of encountering God and ideas about God.

However, conversion stories often follow a familiar narrative arc. They're long on salacious details before God and short on life after God. They tell the road to perdition, highlight the U-turn, and invite others to make the same turn, but they often don't tell what happens next. They don't typically tell the whole story....

Dear friends, our text typically serves as a template for conversion, but I wonder if there's something more.

Is there a hint here of the whole story?

As those who long to practice resurrection is there something helpful here?

What does our text reveal about the practice of resurrection?

Some context....

A community of Christ-followers was gathering and organizing around the apostles in Jerusalem and news of the resurrection of Jesus was beginning to spread throughout the region. If the chief priests thought they could tamp down Jesus and his disciples through the crucifixion ~ the resurrection, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, proved to be like wind on a wildfire. And, that's not what the religious establishment had in mind. Therefore, a new wave of persecution was instituted. There were hearings and threats and stonings and Saul of Tarsus (his Hebrew name) was part of that persecution.

A word about Saul...

Saul was born in Tarsus (which is in Turkey) and held Roman citizenship. He was also an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin and a Pharisee.

The Pharisees usually get a bum rap. Truth is, in the face of opposition and oppression they wanted to maintain Jewish identity and faithfulness. Therefore, they were zealous for the law of God and were especially concerned about the daily practices of faith away from the Temple. Saul claims that he was great among the Pharisees because of his passion for their goals. So, when he became aware of the followers of Jesus (the Way), he unleashed his fury against them. Acts 8 describes how he went from house to house to find them, jail them, and was complicit in their executions.

Our text reads that Saul asked to be deputized so that he might chase down those who fled to Damascus (in Syria, just north of Israel.) Actually, arresting Christians and bringing them back to Jerusalem would go way beyond the jurisdiction of the high priests, but he could encourage the local leaders to join in the suppression and maybe even throw in a beating or two....

So, faithful-Bible-believing Saul is living out his faith when God bowls him over just outside of Damascus.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes it this way:

One minute Saul can see, and the next he can't. One minute he is full of himself and the next minute he is patting the ground trying to find his glasses.

Luke writes that when Saul got up he couldn't see and his partners in persecution led him by the hand into the city. Where for three days he sat in the darkness....

There is no evidence of a great moment of conversion on the road.

There is no recounting that he responded in faith to the voice of Jesus.

There is no telling if Saul was converted when he lost his sight or when he got it back.

What we know is that for three days Saul "was blind, and he did not eat or drink anything."

Literally and metaphorically it's easy to be afraid of the dark. The darkness is often a place of loneliness, silence, loss, and despair. But it can also be a place of stillness, reflection, and resurrection. Listen again to Barbara Brown Taylor:

Resurrection is always announced with Easter lilies, the sound of trumpets, bright streaming light. But it did not happen that way. If it happened in a cave, it happened in complete silence, in absolute darkness, with the smell of damp stone and dug earth in the air. Sitting deep in the heart of Organ Cave (West Virginia), I let this sink in: new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.

Saul spent three days in his own dark tomb.

Whatever his conversion it involved a time of loneliness and loss.

Whatever his conversion it involved groping and grappling in the dark. Whatever his conversion it involved recalibrating his sense of self,
recalibrating his faith,
recalibrating his take on Jesus.

Just imagine the confusion and conflict that Saul experienced. He was blinded by the light, heard the voice of one whose resurrection he denied, and now knew that the organizing framework of his life was flawed. He'd been wrong. He had three days in the dark to come to grips with that reality.

What about you?

Have there been times of darkness when you were lost in loneliness or stuck in the despair? Have you been beatdown and couldn't find the strength to get up? Have you fumbled and failed, again and again, trying to find your way forward? Whether for three days, or three months, or thirty years have you found yourself kicking at the darkness that it might bleed daylight? Sometimes we're lucky enough to have friends lead us to a safe place, but that doesn't mean we don't spend time in the darkness....

Saul is alone in the dark when God instructs Ananias to deliver him a message. Knowing Saul only by reputation, Ananias had every reason to fear him and no reason to find him. But, according to the vision that he received from God,

Ananias needed to recalibrate his take on Saul,
even as Saul needed to recalibrate his take on Jesus.

Dear friends, what's often lost in the narrative of conversion is the long process of recalibration. What's often neglected is time in the darkness. What's often left out is the time that it takes to see things differently, come to grips with the lies that we've lived by, and begin a new journey.

A couple years ago Sandi and I drove to Quebec for a race. Google Maps said 14 hours, but 17 hours into the drive we were lost in the dark in Canada on poorly lit mountain roads, with no cell service, and no reliable maps. Sandi was having panic attacks about how fast I was driving on the narrow winding roads and we had only a rough estimate that we were headed in the right direction. Our situation did not improve when we discovered that the further into Quebec we traveled the more French it became. The signs, the markers, the preferred language at petrol stations was French. It's quaint over a breakfast croissant; its maddening when you're lost in the dark. But! We eventually came upon a town, cell service kicked in, and Google Maps recalibrated our route. We only had 90 more minutes to go....

Last week we said that the heart of the matter was forgiveness. The practice of resurrection calls forth the proclamation of forgiveness and a daily ethic of forgiveness. In the light of the resurrection the followers of Jesus are forgivers.

I would suggest this morning that the practice of resurrection also requires recalibration. That to journey with the living Jesus means times of darkness and times of turning to travel a different road. The resurrection means, in part, that God is still breaking in to

recalibrate our take on life, faith, others, and even God's self. (Reformed and always reforming.)

That means that our reading of scripture is not fixed but open to new understandings. That means wrestling with where we are wrong, and listening to the experience of others, even (or especially) those whom we've persecuted ~ women, black folks, Native Americans, LGBT community, immigrants. That means learning to see things anew and beginning the long slow process of taking a different route. That means accepting the council of others. And that means waiting on God ~ even in the dark.

As near as I can figure a robust life in Christ is not a fixed unmovable position, but a journey that involves change, knows darkness, and calls for recalibration. It was true for Saul and Ananias. May it be true for us.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.
Amen.