

May 1, 2022 Third Sunday of Easter

Acts 9:1-19a

“Who can be an instrument of God?”

1. We like a good origin story
 - a. It may not take much prompting to get us talking and share stories about how we met our spouse years ago, or how we discovered our passion for our line of work, or when we emigrated to this country, or when we went away for college, or when we welcomed a child by birth or adoption.
 - b. We look back, maybe aided by pictures and definitely by stories, to harken back to those early days of what would eventually be a very important part of our life: our family, our career, our community, etc.
 - c. That’s part of what we’ll be doing these next few Sundays: we’ll be looking at stories related to how the Christian Church began
 - d. We do know some about that origin story, after all
 - i. We read about Jesus and we take to heart the things he taught and showed us
 - ii. We just celebrated a couple of weeks ago at Easter the key story of Jesus’ resurrection and of Mary Magdalene’s proclamation
 - iii. We know about the disciples (though maybe we only remember a few by name) and we have a vague sense of what they did after the resurrection of Jesus
 - iv. Today we skip ahead a little bit in the story of the church after Jesus’ resurrection.
 1. The center of activity for the community of faith had been in Jerusalem
 2. The believers were on fire for God and the teachings of Jesus
 3. We learn that the message of Jesus couldn’t be contained, and it had begun to spread beyond Jerusalem.
 4. We also learn that there was a great deal of tension between the Jewish believers who followed Jesus, and those who did not follow him
 5. Because at that point there was no such thing as Christianity as we know today, but rather there was within the Jewish community a movement which followed the teachings of their Rabbi, Jesus
 - v. We have a story today about a key part of that origin story, and it has to do with someone who never even met Jesus in person. Saul, whom we know also as the Apostle Paul.
2. Saul / Paul is a complex character
 - a. You may have heard this story before
 - i. Saul was a Jewish leader who wasn’t from Jerusalem.
 - ii. He was actually a Roman citizen, a Jew living in the diaspora, who opposed the Jesus movement within Judaism
 - iii. In fact, he did more than that. He actively persecuted Jesus believers within the bounds of the Jewish laws.
 - iv. Did you catch how the people who believed in Jesus were referred to? They were known as followers of “the Way”

- v. And as our passage told us today, Saul / Paul was on the road to Damascus to capture some believers when he encountered the presence of the risen Jesus.
 - b. You may know about Saul / Paul's role in the early church
 - i. Today's incredible story sets Saul / Paul in a completely new trajectory
 - ii. This once prominent critic of the Jesus movement, becomes himself a key proponent of it, traveling and preaching about Jesus all over Europe
 - c. You may even know of Saul / Paul's outsized influence in what we believe
 - i. He was a prolific letter writer, and we know about his preaching and his missionary trips because some of his letters to particular churches he had started which were preserved, copied and shared, and eventually they came to be part of our scriptures
 - ii. Whereas the four gospels share the stories and teachings of Jesus in narrative form, Saul / Paul's letters were his sermons and interpretations of what Jesus shared, and more importantly, of what he understood it to all mean
 - d. Saul / Paul's origin story, which focuses on that encounter with the risen Jesus, is a pivotal point for how the church would grow and expand
 - i. Saul / Paul started reaching out beyond the Jewish community, to the so-called Gentiles
 - ii. And even though he himself was a Jew, he argues that following Jesus does not mean having to become an observant Jew
 - iii. He wanted to tear down divisions, writing that "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28)
 - e. But as you might imagine, this transformation made those who knew the previous history of Saul / Paul very nervous
 - i. Who can be an instrument of God?
 - ii. How can someone who persecuted us with such zeal now become one of us?
- 3. The thing about origin stories is that often we don't know we're experiencing a new beginning at that very moment
 - a. Because we don't always get a shocking transformation as Saul / Paul did
 - b. But it could very well be that God is starting something new with us, this moment, or building up through today, a new direction God has for us
 - c. And we don't get to pick who God chooses as instruments leading to change in us.
 - d. I wonder if you can bring to mind people who helped you see the world differently, who prompted you to understand God in a new way.
 - e. Some of those folks may have been expected: a Sunday school teacher, a parent, a dear colleague or a beloved aunt.
 - f. But some folks may not have been who you expected God to use: a grumpy neighbor, or that teacher you couldn't stand, or someone with whom you always disagreed.
 - g. What is key to remember is that God sometimes chooses the unlikeliest of instruments to get God's message across.
 - h. And why not? God's message doesn't make sense. It's upside down. God offers love and grace to all, and to prove it we point to Jesus, a used cross and an empty tomb. It's

foolishness, writes Saul / Paul. But it's only foolishness if we think like humans instead of thinking like God does.

4. Those are elements of our origin story as followers of the Way. And maybe there are still moments when the core of that message dawns on us anew.

Sources: *The Anchor Bible. The Acts of the Apostles*. By Joseph A. Fitzmyer. New York: Doubleday, 1998. p. 418-432

Paul. By Günther Bornkamm. New York: Harper Row. 1971. p. xiii-42.

Reflection Questions

1. Share a story of a time when your life took a distinct turn in a new direction. Did it feel like it was as big a deal then?
2. Put yourself in the place of Ananias (Acts 9:1-19a): what would you tell God about Saul? And what would be your takeaway from seeing Saul turnaround?
3. What is a central part of your faith, your beliefs, and who was someone instrumental in helping you embrace it?