

“With a Little Help from Our Friends”  
June 12, 2022

Isaiah 35:1-7  
Acts 9:1-16a

“Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples...”

We’ll come back to Saul in a few minutes.

This story—and what I want to talk with you about this morning—is not primarily about him. It is about sight. And blindness. And vision. And healing.

It is about the ways in which Saul—like all of us—needed the help of his friends

And, most importantly, it is about the Source of all sight and vision and healing and friendship.

That’s a lot for one morning, isn’t it?

Let’s start with sight.

The Bible—and especially the New Testament—is filled with wonderful stories of sight restored, of vision renewed.

The Gospel of Mark tells of a blind man—Bartimaeus is his name—crying out: “Son of David, Jesus, have pity on me!” Jesus asks him: “What do you want me to do for you?”

Bartimaeus knows. He responds right away: “I want my sight back.” He recovers his sight and follows Jesus on the road.

The Gospel of Matthew tells of *two* blind men following Jesus. Like Bartimaeus, they shout to him: “Have pity on us, Son of David!” When Jesus asks them: “Do you believe that I have the power to do what you want?” they both answer: “Yes.” Jesus then touches their eyes and their sight is restored.

As is often the case, Jesus also sternly tells them: “See that no one hears about this.” And is also often the case, as soon as they leave Jesus, they talk about him all over the region.

And John’s Gospel tells a long story about a man who was born blind. As a sign that Jesus is the very light of the world, he spits on the ground, makes a paste from the dirt, and spreads it on the man’s eyes. “Go wash this off,” Jesus says. And in doing so, the man is able to see.

Both this man and Jesus anger the religious leaders because of this. But at the end of the story, Jesus tells him—and tells us if we, too, will listen: “I have come into the world to give sight to the sightless and to make blind those who see.”

Which brings us back to Saul, because if ever there was someone who was sure of his sight, it was Saul. And he didn’t like what he saw.

It’s a long story as well. It involves Stephen, one of the first deacons in the early church. He also angered the authorities and his defense only made his accusers more violent. When they took Stephen out to stone him, they laid their coats at the feet of an approving young man.

That man was Saul.

The next thing you know, there he is, breathing murderous threats against the Lord's disciples, on his way to Damascus to arrest any followers of the Way—any Christians—that he can find and to bring them to Jerusalem.

It doesn't go well.

The story is so important that it is told three times in Acts. Light from the sky flashes all around Saul. He falls to the ground. He hears the voice of One who says: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." As it turns out, it is the very risen Christ whom Saul is after with his threats, not simply his followers. And he has met his match.

Saul gets up.

He opens his eyes.

He has seen the light—and he no longer has his sight.

This encounter with the light of the world would change Saul. The argument can be made—and *is* made—that this encounter changed the course of Western history. But first it leaves Saul blind and helpless.

Those with Saul lead him by the hand on to Damascus. They were the members of Saul's murderous, threatening group. They, too, had heard the voice of the risen Christ, but saw no light. They had seen no vision—but they had their sight.

Had they, too, changed?

We don't really know. But we can imagine. We can imagine *they* changed because *we have changed*, even if we have had no heavenly vision. We, too, have heard—we have heard the message of God's love made real in Jesus, crucified and risen. We know ourselves to be different because of this—not always *better*, although that is sometimes the case, but different. Changed.

Blinded. Helpless. Neither eating nor drinking, Saul is in Damascus for three days. Three days as good as dead. You can see where this might be leading.

Meanwhile...

A disciple of Jesus named Ananias lived in Damascus. His story his filled with echoes of the Hebrew scriptures.

He hears the Lord call his name and he responds: "Here I am, Lord."

The prophet, Isaiah's great vision of God in the Temple led him to say: "Here I am, Lord."

And the Lord replies to Ananias: "Go." Which is what God says so often.

To Abraham: "Go."

To the people through the prophet and judge, Deborah: "Go."

To Moses: "Go."

And Ananias, having the clear word of the Lord, does what many do. He hesitates, stalls, and finds excuses to *stay*, much like Moses did. And also like Moses, even like us when we are at last able to overcome our fear and reluctance, Ananias *goes*.

He finds Saul, who, it turns out, is not an enemy, not a threat, but a brother. No touch is needed here. At the word of Ananias alone, it is as if scales fell from Saul's eyes. He could see once more.

And consider this: For Saul to regain his sight, something like scales had to fall from the heart of Ananias, so that he could let go of his fear, his suspicion, even his hatred of such an enemy as Saul. So that he, too, could see in a new way.

Saul rises up—and, yes, the Greek is the same word used for the rising up that is the Resurrection. So this is a story not simply of new sight, but more importantly of new *life*.

I turn to this story today because we find ourselves in a time when clear sight is desperately needed for the many difficulties and problems that confront us as individuals and as a congregation—and indeed that confront our nation and our world. Paul's story—and those from the Gospels as well—tell us that we do not always have the clear sight needed, that even after “seeing the light” we might still be blind.

We see the problem—but we don't see the solution.

We see the problem *and* the solution—but we don't see the unintended consequences, the downside.

This story reminds us of how much we need one another—even if the only traveling companions we have are also confused and clueless. It's not exactly the blind leading the blind—Jesus warned about that. But it helps to have the sight of others who can see better than we can—or as importantly, who can see in ways different from what we do.

We need a little help from our friends.

And, maybe, like Ananias with Paul, we might find friends in the most unexpected people.

Late in May, former Attorney General, Loretta Lynch addressed the graduating class at Harvard Law School. She spoke of the ways in which people have begun to come together to address issues of race and injustice in what she called “an epiphany of understanding and empathy that began to fuel what we hoped was systemic change. And,” she said, “we saw the possibility of change that recognized the costs of pernicious racism, not just to its immediate victims, but to *all* of us. And we began to explore...why we continue to let a distinction without a difference repeatedly tear us apart.”

It was this new sight, this fresh perspective that brought hope, that united people.

And Lynch concluded by quoting those wonderful words of Reinhold Niebuhr that speak not only of the long process of working for justice but of the ultimate need for understanding, for grace, for forgiveness. It's the end of Niebuhr's words that I find especially relevant for today, but listen again to the entire quote that Lynch offered:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime. Therefore, we must be saved by hope.

Nothing which is true or beautiful or good, makes complete sense in any immediate context of history. Therefore, we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore, we must be saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe, as it is from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.

“We must be saved by love.” Nothing...can be accomplished alone. We need friends. And we need the friendship that love makes possible.

“No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe, as it is from our standpoint.” Others will always see things differently, and we need that difference.

Ananias found that final form of love that is forgiveness. By the grace of God, he was able to see Paul, not as a persecutor but as one called to follow in the way of Jesus Christ. And by the grace of God as well, Paul was able to see what he had in common with those followers of the Way.

The forgiveness that comes when we *see* that others *see* differently but just as clearly is vital for our common life—and for the life of our nation—in these days.

This is a story of coming to see in new ways.

And did you notice how this story ends?

After all of the drama, after lightening and heavenly voices, after visions and blindness, after reconciliation and restoration, the author makes a point of telling us that Paul had something to eat! It’s a prosaic, everyday detail.

But, you know, when resurrection happens, when life is restored, the Bible often makes a point to say that people ate.

Jesus brings girl back to life and, as he leaves, tells her parents: “Give her something to eat.”

The risen Christ appears on the beach and asks his followers: “Do you have anything to eat?”

And here’s Paul, once a threat, now a friend, enjoying a meal.

So, Jesus tells his disciples: “You give the people gathered here something to eat.”

And as his followers we still want not only to feed the hungry but to gather ourselves around any table we can find to eat, to gain strength and courage with one another, to show that resurrection continues to happen.

This is not simply a long way of encouraging you to go to the all-church picnic two weeks from today—although if that’s what you take away from this, well, great! It would be so good if you join the rest of us. We need one another in these days. We desperately need one another.

And as we eat, we sit across from each other and we not only see, we *behold* the image of God in our neighbor.

Sight is restored.

Friendship is deepened.

We get the little help that we all need so that we can continue to live in faith, hope, and love.