

Acts 9:1-19

Easter 3; May 5 & 6, 2019

Right now, all over the world, there are men and women and children who know nothing of Jesus. They don't know the beauty of the Gospel. They know absolutely nothing about the forgiveness that Jesus won on the cross. They know nothing about Easter. They know nothing about the salvation that only Jesus can bring. Yet, in places and in ways that we cannot imagine, our God will reach out and touch them with his love. You see, we have a God who wants to claim all people to be his sons and daughters.

So, how is he going to do that? And in a crazy twist of **"Take Your Kid to Work Day,"** God invites us into this plan. He takes us, his kids, to do his work. He uses you. He uses me. When you step back and think about that, we can't help but think: **How crazy is that?** Why would God do that? Yet, the pages of the Bible are full of **"crazy people"** that God will use for his purposes. Think of little Zacchaeus, the tax collector, who welcomed Jesus into his home when others thought: **Why would he go to that kind of a person?** Think of Mary Magdalene. Seven demons were cast out of Mary Magdalene, who would later become one of the first people to see and to proclaim the resurrected Jesus. Or you can think of King David? Or Moses? Or Simon Peter? Or, you or me? But perhaps, the **MOST** unlikely person that God would ever use was a man called Saul. Saul would be knocked off his high horse as a persecutor of the church to become one of the greatest missionaries of the Christian Church.

To say that Saul was an enemy of the Christian Church would be an understatement. He was passionate about getting rid of Christians. Saul went about his task with a 110% of his being. Luke writes: **"Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples."** The word that Luke uses here for **"breathing out,"** is the same word that Jesus uses when he speaks about the person who built a house on a poor foundation: **"The winds BLEW and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."** (Mt. 7:25) In the chapter before our text, Luke writes about Saul: **"Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison."** He was like a ravenous animal just wanting to tear the Christian Church apart. He was good at what he did. He thought he was doing all of this for his God.

Saul was not just some kind of a Wild West gun slinger. He was born in the city of Tarsus, which made him Roman Citizen. Tarsus was well-known for being a center of Greek learning and an important trade center. He was a very respected Pharisee. He was also a Jew who studied under a man called, Gamaliel, who was one of the most respected Rabbis of his time. You could say that Saul had become a rising star in the Jewish faith. He was a person who was getting noticed. Not only was he smart and respected, he also got things done. He was the perfect person to carry out the task of getting rid of Christians. Saul was there when Stephen was the first martyr was stoned to death and gave his approval. When Saul/Paul would later tell his story, he would say: **"I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished."** (Acts 22:4-5)

Saul was getting the task done. Scholars have estimated that by the time of Saul, the Christian Church in Jerusalem had about 25,000 people in it. After Saul got done there, only the Apostles were left. The others were killed or driven out of the city. Word had gotten to the Jewish leaders that many had fled to Damascus. So, Saul now traveled the 150 miles by foot to get to Damascus to finish the job. He later described his work when he wrote: **"I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers."** (Gal. 1:14)

Then on the way to Damascus, it all changed. **"As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'" Can you imagine how Saul felt when he found out that he had been so wrong? If this was true, then Saul deserved to be judged by God. He deserved to be struck down right then and now by God. What does God do instead? He tells Ananias to tell Saul: **"Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel."** Instead of crushing him, God chooses to use him as his tool.**

Martin Luther once wrote: ***“The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is lovable.”*** We like to think there’s something in us, something we have or do or think or inherit that sets us apart from others in the world. We foolishly think that we can contribute in some way to move God to love us. Yet, as hard as we can try, we can’t. God’s love, however, is perfect, undeserved, full of grace, and we dare not want it any other way. God loves us because He does, and thank God for that! We are lovable because God loves us. We are not loved by God because we deserve his love.

On the way to Damascus, Saul saw not just a bright light; He saw how much God loves. Later on, he would write to a young pastor named Timothy: **“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever.”** (1 Timothy 1:15-17) Jesus changes everything.

Paul would become God’s tool. We can see that in his name. Saul was his Hebrew name, his Jewish name. Paul, was his Roman name, his Gentile name. He would be God’s **“chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.”** He would passionately tell both Jews and Greeks about Jesus’ love. That’s what he wanted people to know. He wanted God to work faith in the hearts of others as he had done with him. He wanted people to know just how mind boggling God’s love is.

Jesus loves us in exactly the same way. He loves you. There is no sin too great that he cannot forgive. Think about all the things that we do wrong. Think about the words that come pouring out of our mouths at times. Think of the people that we try to hurt with our words and actions. Think about all the sin that we do every day. God says that he forgives us. As far as the East is from the West is how far he has removed our sins from us. That’s the truth that Saul learned that day on the road to Damascus. God loves.

That’s the truth that God wants you to know. You are loved by God, because He loves you. You are loved by God and He will use you as He sees fit, once again, because He loves you, and because He loves your neighbor. That’s why we exist as a church, isn’t it? We tell the message of Jesus to people who need to hear his message of love. We come here to confess our sins, and then be assured that they are forgiven by Jesus. He wants every single one of us to be part of that plan. That’s kind of crazy, isn’t it? But that’s how our God works. That’s the kind of God we have. May God bless us as we work together to share his love to this world. Amen.