

[Acts 9:1-6, \(7-20\)](#)

[John 21:1-19](#)

I wonder who was the most astonished; Saul – soon to be known as Paul - when the light flashed from heaven and the voice said “Saul, "Saul, why do you persecute me?"; Ananias when he had a vision telling him to go minister to Saul; or the disciples when they saw Jesus and pulled in an overflowing netfull of fish.

God broke through into all their lives in unexpected and astonishing ways.

I know that many of you have had sudden and unexpected encounters with God – moments when the Holy Spirit spoke directly to you and as a result your life was changed forever. For others of us, God has spoken more quietly and perhaps so subtly that we hardly notice.

At the beginning of Lent it had been dawning on me that I was not paying sufficient attention to my diet. I really don't want to be diabetic and caring for our bodies is an important part of the practice of stewardship. So I decided as a Lenten discipline to check my blood sugar every day. The first day I checked, I got a nasty shock. As a result I started being more careful about eating sweet things. I see God's hand in that - in the quiet promptings that I needed to look at the situation and also in the first reading which shocked me into change.

Please take a moment to think of a time recently when something caused you to see something differently and perhaps to make a change... and think about how that was a God moment – God quietly breaking through into your consciousness...

... now I invite you to turn to your neighbor and share how God spoke to you and helped you see or do something differently.

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Last week Sharon talked about the life of the apostle – one who is sent by God to minister the gospel and to share the good news of Christ. Every one of us who is enrolled in the kin-dom of God is called to be an apostle, not just a disciple of Jesus but an apostle sent by God to demonstrate God’s unconditional love in the world.

Before his experience on the road to Damascus, the apostle Paul was doing quite the opposite. He was determined to stamp out this new religious sect of Christians. He was present at the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Not only was he present but he approved of the stoning, and we are told, “That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem... Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.” (Acts 8:1-3)

Saul was ravaging the church. But then God broke into his life, astonishingly and unexpectedly. In a bright light which blinded him, he had an experience of the Risen Christ which would change his life forever. Saul turned away from the path he was pursuing.

And that is always the first call of the apostle – to turn. To turn and to return. To turn in repentance and return to the way of love.

Turning is always the first step on the way of love – the path of the apostle. But since the path is not a straight one but rather a spiral, a labyrinth, a mystery, again and again we find ourselves asked to turn. To turn away from the culturally acceptable path of material acquisition, competitiveness and divisive thinking and to turn toward God and the values of the kin-dom.

Our turning is always a response to the Risen Christ, because in God's love, Jesus the Christ breaks through into our lives.

It may not feel like that: it may feel as though we are making a decision based on our own thinking, but for the follower of Jesus, it is the presence of the Risen Christ which gives us the energy and the power to turn and become more Christ-like.

When Saul was blinded by the light on the road to Damascus, he lost control of his life and became dependent on others. His vision was not restored until he allowed himself to be ministered to by one of the very people he had been persecuting. Where he had seen the Other – those different from him – as people to be hated and persecuted, now he saw reconciliation in the love of the Risen Christ.

We live in a time of divisiveness where violence against those we distrust and dislike is almost a public virtue. And yet we are called to be apostles of reconciliation. Saul's turning was not just toward God but also toward those whom he had despised. And that is true of Ananias as well. His turning was toward God in trust and toward Saul whom he feared and would have hidden from. The call of the apostle is toward God *and* toward our neighbor who may not be someone we especially like or care for. In fact, we may distinctly dislike them.

Saul had to be completely dis-armed before he could complete his turn toward God and his neighbor. He let go of his anger and his hatred in order to receive the ministry of Ananias. At a time when our society is busy re-arming, we apostles are called to dis-arm, to allow our anger and hatred and defensiveness to be removed by the grace of God's love. The way of love is one of letting go of all the ways we armor ourselves against one another and against God.

The disciples had been fishing. They had fished all night and were returning to shore when their attention was caught by the man on the beach. Their attention was caught by the Risen Christ, waiting for them to return. Not waiting impatiently, not critical of the fact that they had caught nothing, but preparing breakfast for them. And then he told them to put their net down on the other side of the boat. And they did. And that simple turn yielded a harvest that they could not have imagined.

When we turn toward God we can always be sure of a warm and loving embrace. God is not the critical one in our heads telling us we are not good enough. We are always good enough in the eyes of the Creator. “And God saw that it was good”. And God sees that you are good.

Three times Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” not as a punishment or as a test but to enable Peter to put his betrayal of Jesus when on that dark night in the courtyard around a different fire when, before the cock crowed, he said he did not know Jesus... to put that threefold betrayal behind him. Now by this new fire on the beach in the morning light Peter is able to declare and know that he has turned back to the loving relationship he had with Jesus before. And the Risen Christ makes him an apostle, “Feed my sheep Peter”.

And today the Risen Christ is here with us. Asking us the same question. Giving us the same commission. Do you love Me? Feed my sheep. Turn to me then go into the world in my name and minister to my people.

When God breaks into our lives whether in unexpected and astonishing ways, or in quiet and subtle ways, it is not a gift to be hoarded but a blessing to be shared. God’s grace is for all people, for all beings, for the whole planet, indeed for the entire universe. And we get to be apostles of love. Alleluia!

