

Sunday May 5th, 2019

Easter III

PRAYER: O Lord, appear to us in a vision, though the glory of your face should make us shield our eyes. Speak to us a revelation, though the power of your voice should make us cover our ears. We do not know who you are. We do not know what we do. O God, if you would make us your chosen instruments, if you would have us be faithful disciples, blind us, that we might hear you more truly. Then we will know more fully whose we are and who we can become.

OFFERTORY SENTENCE: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” (1 John 3:17-18)

PASTORAL PRAYER: O Holy God, as the Apostle Paul states, your wisdom is far greater than our own and your weakness is greater than our strength. Time and time again you undertake amazing things that to our limited vision seem ridiculous, yet ultimately reveal your glory. Today we examined the life of your servant Paul, who was the most unlikely one to carry your saving message to the Gentiles. Yet, your legacy through him is astounding. So much of what we know about you and your vision for us comes from his pen, and his experiences.

Paul’s experience causes us to pause and reflect on possibilities that exist in us, if we but submit to your love and calling. However, we are prone to discount your power in our lives. We do not believe that you could use us as you used Paul. We carry on a litany of self-doubt and negativity. We say things like, “I could never do that. I have no words to say. Leave it to the professionals.” We erroneously tell ourselves we have nothing to offer, so we sit on the sidelines content to observe rather than engage.

Where is our faith O God? Why can we not live as if Your Kingdom is alive and active in our midst? Why can we not hear your call to each one of us and declare that “Here we are send us”?

Maybe we are like Ananias. We believe but we keep our heads down. When called upon to undertake something daring for your Kingdom, we question your wisdom. Even if ours is but a small part in the greater drama of grace, we balk at the opportunity. We declare that composure, comfort, and security: are more pressing matters for us. No wonder our days seem so devoid of adventure, joy or purpose. We just don’t believe we have it in us to be anything more than we already are. But how we forget that your Spirit is in us and “we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.”

Forgive us O God, for thinking that your glory days and the glory days of your church are in the past. We resist saying that you are dead, but we act sometimes like you are. O how we need a reawakening in our hearts. We need a fresh encounter with the risen Christ. We need to be blinded to this world so we can see your glory. Make today our Damascus Road. Set our feet on a different path, and show us what can be done by your power and in your name.

BENEDICTION: Receive now the blessed promise of Easter: every night shall be broken by dawn, and every tear shall spring from joy; every step shall become a dance, and every word shall carry a song. The promise is yours to share. Carry it to those still standing on Golgotha; take it to those still trapped on Good Friday. Let your souls erupt in praise-let them not be silent!

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Acts 9:1-20

“Change of Heart”

Some people said that Peter Cartwright had the strength to wear out a dozen threshing machines. He was of medium height and packed plenty of power into his two-hundred-pound body. He had a dark complexion and hair as unruly as the wilderness. In fact, Cartwright made his living in the wilderness, spreading the Gospel during the 1800's in what was then called the “west”, meaning the western United States.

In some ways, Cartwright was like another man of the wilderness, John the Baptist. Both were as blunt as a hammer. As a staunch Methodist, however, Cartwright probably wouldn't be too happy seeing the word “Baptist” associated with his name. According to his autobiography, he was forever debating Baptists, and others, on the issue of baptism. Cartwright also didn't think too highly of Easterners, who he said, were too cultured for their own good.

This introduction leads us to this incident in Cartwright's life. A newly minted seminary graduate was assigned to work in Cartwright's territory. Cartwright referred to him as the Yankee preacher who thought very little of westerners-even going so far as to say they were on the same level as cannibals. As for Methodists ministers, the Yankee preacher thought they were illiterate ignoramuses of inferior tact and talent.

One night, Cartwright allowed the green Yankee preacher to preach at his camp meeting. But Cartwright was not impressed. He said the Yankee read his sermon, balking, hemming and coughing the whole way through. Later in the service as Cartwright attended to those heading for the mourner's bench, a very large man was suddenly overcome by the power of God. He jumped to his feet and cried aloud for mercy.

The Yankee preacher thought this was a very unseemly way to behave and he pressed through the crowd tapping the very large man on the shoulder saying, “Be composed. Be composed.” When Cartwright saw what was going on, his assessment of the Yankee fell even further. Yelling as loudly as he could, Cartwright called out, “Pray on brother! Pray on! There is no composure in hell or damnation!”

Still the Yankee persisted saying calmly, “Be composed; be composed, brother.” Cartwright hurried through the crowd to the big man all the while shouting, “Pray on, brother! Pray on!” Reaching the large man, Cartwright took him by the arm and started to lead him to the mourner's bench, the place for people moved by the Spirit. Then all of a sudden, the big man was overcome by “an ecstasy of joy” in Cartwright's words.

In fact, the big man was so overcome with joy he tried to grab Cartwright in a holy hug. Cartwright writes about what happened,

“Fortunately for me, two men were crowded into the aisle between him and myself, and he could not reach me,” Cartwright said. “Missing his aim in catching me, he wheeled around and caught my little preacher (the Yankee) in his arms,

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and lifted him from the floor; and being a large, strong man, having great physical power, he jumped from bench to bench, knocking the people against one another on the right and the left, front and rear, holding up in his arms the little preacher.

The little fellow stretched out both arms and both feet, expecting every moment to be his last, when he would have his neck broken. O! How I desired to be near this preacher at that moment, and tap him on the shoulder, and say, "Be composed; be composed, brother! (Doug Peterson, Many Are Called but Most Leave Their Phone Off the Hook.)

Be composed; be composed brother or sister! For most of my life, my church experience has been one of composure. Spontaneous expressions of any kind were unheard of in the church I grew up in. It wasn't that we didn't want people to repent, and come to Jesus, it is just we expected some sense of order and decorum. I think it was, and is that way even today, because we find such a posture comfortable. No surprises and no hysterics.

As I reflect on the itinerate evangelist Peter Cartwright, I must confess that like the Yankee preacher, I wonder; is he and those like him, of any true value to the mission and ministry of the church. Let us be honest, for most of us, we love and prefer composure. We have set ideas about whom and how ministry should be accomplished. Even when there are identifiable results, we question when someone does something differently.

This is especially true when God calls out men and women who are, in our opinion, less than stellar candidates for ministry like: Peter, Cartwright, the disciples, and less I forget our focus for today, a man named Saul. When I read the story of Saul, who becomes Paul the Apostle, I cannot help but shake my head. Surely there were better candidates to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles than Saul of Tarsus?

Just look at this guy. I have mentioned before that Saul was likely present when the disciples were brought before the high priest, flogged, and ordered to stop preaching about Jesus. Saul was a student of Gamaliel and in his own words was "zealous for the faith of his fathers". Saul was as popular as Gamaliel, and we read in Acts chapter 8 that Saul was present when the apostle Stephen was stoned to death.

Egged on by the crowds, and the council's endorsement, Saul becomes a one-man wrecking crew against the fledgling church. He went house to house, dragging out both men and women: having them jailed, flogged, and martyred for the faith. So, can you think of any candidate more unworthy of Christian ministry than this man? Thankfully, God sees beyond the past and the present; and sees what the potential is for the future.

Even as Paul was heading out, breathing threats against the church, eager to destroy more believers in Christ, God intervenes. Possessing letters of request for cooperation from the Damascus synagogues for his persecution project, Paul sets out from home angry and full of hatred for the "People of the Way" as Christians were called then. On the road, a brilliant light suddenly shone on Saul, knocking Saul to the ground. Composure was hardly possible during Saul's conversion. I doubt any of us would find the strength to be composed having been met in such a dramatic way by Jesus.

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“Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?” “Who are you, sir?” Saul asks. And the voice replies, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what to do.” Paul had been struck blind by his encounter with Jesus, so he was led by hand to Damascus, where he went three days without food or water. Waiting until God sends Ananias to Saul.

It is not an understatement to say that Ananias wasn't too thrilled with going to Saul; after all he had quite a reputation. Nevertheless, Ananias, obedient to his Lord Jesus, goes to Saul. I am sure all the while praying, “I hope you know what you're doing Lord” and traveling with the difficulty of knocking knees and trembling heart.

Thus, we have Ananias laying hands on Paul, so he can receive the Holy Spirit, and suddenly something like scales falls from his eyes and he can see again. Then Ananias baptizes Saul, and Saul takes in some food and drink, ending his fast. It is a wonderful story and one that resonates deeply in us; but let us consider the ramifications of what Saul's conversion means.

Saul, who becomes Paul, goes on to be perhaps the greatest missionary the church has ever seen. He plants churches all over the known Gentile world, and he writes about one third of the entire New Testament. In fact, his writings are the source of much of our theology, and certainly form the basis of our church practices. As great as this is though, I'm with Ananias. “Are you sure, Lord?”

This is Saul, after all. The guy who hunts your people down, and humiliates them, jails them, and we know he has been present when at least one disciple was stoned. It is very doubtful this, or any other modern church, would have hired a person like Saul, despite their conversion, to do anything, let alone preach. Why would God choose such an objectionable character for his work?

One wonders though, why we feel we are the final arbitrators of who is worthy to serve God. Maybe it frightens us that if God can take someone like Saul, turn him around, and use him for his glory, then who knows what he could do with us? That's the real issue when we look at men and women like Peter Cartwright and Saul. Their example sheds too much light on our own deficiencies for a calling to serve God.

Maybe we are even afraid that if God gets a hold of us, we will be seeking someone to reel us back in saying, “Be composed!” The nature of the Kingdom of God is such that God wants to take each and every one of us out of the darkness we have become too accustomed to, and give us a broader vision. He wants the scales to fall from our eyes. Christ Jesus wants to challenge the present circumstance that we have grown too comfortable in, and offer us a grander more abundant life.

In his book, *Detours: Sometimes Rough Roads Lead to Right Places*, Clark Cothorn tells of a Christmas when his family encountered an unexpected house guest. A squirrel had fallen down their chimney into the wood burning stove in the basement of their Michigan home.

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Cothorn writes,

I thought if it knew we were there to help, I could just reach in and gently lift it out. Nothing doing. As I reached in...it began scratching about like a squirrel overdosed on espresso. We finally managed to construct a cardboard box "cage" complete with a large hole cut into one side, into which the squirrel waltzed when we placed the box against the wood burner's door.

We let it out into the safety of our backyard. Later, I thought, "Isn't it funny how, before its redemption, our little visitor had frantically tried to bash its way out of its dark prison? It seemed the harder it struggled in its own strength to get free, the more pain it causes itself. In the end, he had to simply wait patiently until one who was much bigger-one who could peer into his world-could carry him safely to that larger world where he really belonged.

I think Saul was a lot like that squirrel. The zealousness with which he strove to persecute the early church, and at the same time try to protect Judaism, were really his way of fighting the darkness in which he resided.

Perhaps he thought, "The harder I serve as the defender of the faith, the closer I come to some value in God's eyes." So, Saul scratched, and clawed his way to prominence and power among the religious elite, believing in his dark mind he was doing the right thing. He would have remained in this state had not Christ intervened and forced him to see that bigger picture.

I wonder sometimes if I am more Saul than Paul. Am I living, despite my assertions to the contrary, in pre-Christian darkness or am I eye scale free? How grand is the vision of what I could be doing for the Kingdom of God? Like Saul I might be very busy being zealous for the faith of my fathers. I might say all the right things, do all the religious things, but am I living abundantly?

Is there a Peter Cartwright just waiting to break forth from within me? Is there a Paul waiting within me? Is there not a greater existence for me and for you and for this church? In Revelation chapter 3 John writes a warning to the church at Laodicea that speaks to me deeply today. God speaks through John with these words, "*I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish you were one or the other. But since you are lukewarm water, I will spit you out of my mouth.*" (3:15-16)

Cartwright's Yankee preacher was lukewarm. He was prepared to just coast through life, never having been overcome by the "ecstasy of joy". Maybe what made Saul a good candidate was that he was hardly lukewarm. He may have been misdirected until his conversion but he had passion about something in life. Maybe what is holding us back according to Leonard Sweet, is that we do not have passion about anything in life.

We have become lukewarm about every aspect of our lives, and it is hard to harness dispassionate people for any meaningful endeavors.

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Saul's story confirms what we instinctively already know. What we have now is not worth comparing to what we could have with Christ's intervention in our lives. There are two dangers that constantly confront God's people.

Like Paul we can be passionate, but live in darkness or we can be like the people of Laodicea and be lukewarm. Either way we need the redeeming light of Christ to shine upon us. If we are passionless, Christ can kindle a new fire to burn in us, and if we are misdirected, he can give us a new and clearer focus. All of us need a change of heart, and that is something only Christ can give us.