

SERMON – 08/19/07

DESTINATION: FAITH! ‘Damascus – New Identity’

Welcome to week 2 of our four-week series, “Destination: Faith!”

- Last week we traveled across the seas to the United Kingdom, and experienced a portion of what my family encountered there this summer...
 - Reminding us to look for God’s messages in a variety of places...
 - Today we’re venturing down the road to a place called Damascus, with a guy named Saul...
 - It’s an important journey because it will help remind us about the way God claims our lives for the sake of God’s Kingdom...
- So why Damascus? What’s significant about this location?
 - Well many archeologists will tell you that Damascus is one of the oldest continuously inhabited towns in the world, dating back 10,000-12,000 years!
 - Currently it’s the capital of Syria... and lies approximately 50 miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea... and 135 miles north/northeast of Jerusalem.
 - Back around when Jesus lived, Damascus was a strategic commercial center for the Roman Empire... as several important trade routes passed through it.
- But in order for us to get a better understanding of the question ‘Why Damascus?’ we have to look back a chapter in the book of Acts... back to 8:1b... (I invite you to take out your Bibles, if you have them)...
 - *“That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.”*
 - The early Christian church was made up of Jewish ‘believers’ of Jesus in Jerusalem... but with this onset of persecution, the church scattered across the region...
 - Evidently, some of those believers settled in Damascus.
 - That’s where we encounter our main character for today... Saul!
- Acts 9:1-2... *“Meanwhile, Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the LORD, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way... he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”*

- It’s important to understand exactly what Saul is doing here. It may look like he’s some religious zealot out to rid the world of some other threatening religion... but that’s not the case.
- Remember that the early Christians were, in fact, JEWISH! They didn’t think of themselves as starting a new religion... they saw Jesus as the fulfillment of everything Judaism was pointing to!
- Not everyone shared that opinion, however. Saul was part of a group of dedicated Jewish leaders known as the Pharisees. The Pharisees saw themselves as the “gatekeepers” of Judaism ... and sought to keep the faith pure & untainted.
- Saul’s mission was to rid his own religion from what he saw as a dangerous rebellion within Judaism.
- So his trek to Damascus was to search out those “radical extremists” who had fled from Jerusalem, and be sure that they ‘cease and desist’!
- And did you catch in these first few verses from Acts 9 what early Christianity was known as? THE WAY!
 - Followers of Jesus were called “People of The Way”. (I love that name!)
 - We’re going to come back to this later... but it’s extremely important to remember this part of our roots.
 - Following Jesus means we’re all on a journey of faith... we’re on ‘**The Way**’ with Him... and we should never get to the point in our faith where we’ve stopped journeying!

So we have our man, Saul... who’s on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus... armed with letters from the high priest in Jerusalem, determined to extradite the renegade fanatics.

- (v.3ff.) *“Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’”*
 - Saul does not see himself on some personal spiritual quest here... he’s not questioning his faith or his calling or what he sees as his place in God’s Kingdom...

- No... he's doing what he thinks is right... and it's while he's on this pathway... this road to Damascus... that he experiences the presence & power of God in a very real way!
- No longer is Jesus some dead historic figure that others talk about... but Saul finds out he is, in fact, alive... and active in the world!
- Some of you might be thinking to yourselves, "Sure, if God appeared to me in a blinding light & I heard my name spoken audibly, I'd follow God, too! But God doesn't speak to me that way, Pastor Jim!"
- Well, God doesn't usually speak to me that way, either... but what I take away from this was that God chose to break into Saul's world... in a way that definitely got his attention!
- The author of Acts tells us that Saul's buddies didn't know how to respond.
 - They heard a voice, but didn't see the light (or anyone connected to that voice)... so they just stood there with their mouths hanging open!
 - Well, Saul gets up off the ground... dusts himself off ... and although his eyes are open, it's soon obvious that he can't see a darn thing.
 - His traveling companions literally take him by the hand & lead him into Damascus, where he stays for 3 days... not able to see at all!
 - Metaphorically, despite what he thinks about himself, Saul is indeed "spiritually blind"... but that's all about to change.
 - And, as it is often the case in real life, when God does something new and powerful in someone's life, those around him/her don't always comprehend just what's taking place.

It's at this point that we get introduced to another character in our story... Ananias!

- Though Saul may not have known him by name, Ananias was one of the people in Damascus that Saul was on his way to condemn to death...
 - Ananias was having his devotional quiet time with God one afternoon... when God decided to speak!
 - (v.11ff.) *"The Lord said to (Ananias), 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is*

praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.’”

- Can’t you just imagine Ananias’ reaction after this divine memo from the Lord?
- “Excuse me... but who did you just say you wanted me to visit? Saul of Tarsus? *(pause)* SAUL? Pharisee Saul? THAT SAUL!?!?!”
- (In fact, in verses 13-14 Ananias takes makes sure he and God are talking about the same guy!)
- To get the full power of this request from God... we need to look back a bit in the story...
 - In Acts, chapter six... the early church faces one of its first leadership dilemmas...
 - In order to solve it, they decide to set apart 7 men to be “elders” or teaching leaders in the church... among those is a man named Stephen.
 - The apostles laid hands on & prayed for these 7 new leaders... and from their work, verse seven says, *“The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”*
 - Stephen took a prominent role in the spreading of the Gospel... so much so, that he incurred the wrath of some of his Jewish brothers and sisters, and they had him arrested.
 - They testified that Stephen had disrespected the temple and taught that Jesus would change the customs of Moses.
 - When given a chance to speak for himself, Stephen launched into one of the great summaries of the Old Testament... it lasts for the entire 7th chapter!
 - The end of his testimony was “THE END” of Stephen, for the people killed him by stoning... v.58ff. *“Then they dragged (Stephen) out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he died. And Saul approved of their killing him.”*
 - It was from then on that the people of The Way in Jerusalem started to flee...
 - And we get one more juicy piece of information about Saul... (v.3) *“But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house dragging off both men & women, he committed them to prison.”*

- THIS SAUL... the one “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the LORD”... this was the guy God asked Ananias to visit.
- Is it any wonder he was a bit reluctant?!?
- But despite his initial misgivings, Ananias was obedient to God... and went to Saul.
 - You see, God had shared a key insight with Ananias... a glimpse of the divine plan.
 - (v.15) *“But the LORD said to (Ananias), ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’”*
 - When Ananias arrived at the street called Straight... and found the man he had formerly thought of as “public enemy no.1”...
 - And you know how he greeted him? Do you know what term Ananias used for Saul? He called him “brother!”
 - (v.17ff.) *“So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.”*
 - What an amazing transformation, don’t you think? Oh, I’m not just talking about Saul... but about Ananias, as well! I guess Stephen’s dying prayer was starting to take hold in very concrete ways, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!”
 - This was the kind of faith Jesus talked about... a faith that could forgive even murderous enemies! Saul, the ‘enemy’ had now become a ‘brother!’

So how might this story speak to us here today at Aiea United Methodist Church?

- Well, to begin with, permit me to put aside the notion that Saul is the model for how ‘most Christians’ come to faith...
 - I don’t think it does any good for us to try and compare our road to faith with Saul’s...
 - We are people of The Way, indeed... and there are many ways that God chooses to bring us into the fold...
 - Sometimes it’s a sudden, life-changing experience like Saul... but other times, it’s a much more gradual process.

- The point is not HOW we came to believe in Jesus... but rather simply that we came to believe in Jesus!
- And God takes us from wherever it was that we WERE... to a new place that we could not have gone without Him!
- Ultimately, this story is not about Saul... or Ananias... or even Stephen... it's a story about God!
 - Conversion is something that God chooses to do in our lives... not something we choose to do!
 - Faith – anyone's faith – is a gift from the Lord! God loves us too much to leave us to ourselves!
 - It's a journey from being self-centered, focused only on what we think is best for our lives... toward what Bishop Will Willamon calls "child-like dependence."
 - Saul had to have his own heart & mind reoriented towards Jesus and the people of The Way... Ananias had to have his heart & mind reoriented towards Saul!
 - How might we need to have our hearts & minds reoriented by God?
- As I was praying over this passage, I felt as though the answer to that question lied in Saul's new mission...
 - Do you remember what insight God gave Ananias, prior to his meeting with Saul?
 - *"But the LORD said to (Ananias), 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel...'" (Acts 9:15)*
 - Saul was to go to the Gentiles... to the people who weren't Jewish!
 - The early church was doing a pretty decent job of taking the message of Christ to their fellow Jews.
 - But Saul would become the one missionary who was most effective reaching out to those outside the faith community... you may know him better as "Paul," the man who wrote many of the books of the New Testament!
- As I was going over this story, I kept feeling that Saul's assignment was to become our assignment here at Aiea UMC... to reach out to the 'Gentiles!'
 - We have done a wonderful job of developing a loving & supportive community of faith for those who are looking for a church home.

- But have you noticed that most of the people who come to this church... most of the visitors that we get... are people who are already, in one way or another, part of the larger faith community?
- Could it be that God wants us, like Saul, to be more intentional about reaching out to those who don't even know that they need what God can provide?
- It would be very easy for us to tailor this congregation towards those of us who are here now... in terms of worship attendance, we're actually one of the more 'significant' English-language ministries within the Hawaii district of the UMC.
- But it's not about us or our preferences... if God has called us into the Kingdom, then we can't be content with what we've got...
- There are so many... so many here in Aiea, Halawa & on the military bases... that haven't discovered how valuable a relationship with Christ truly is!
- So in the weeks & months to come, I'm going to help us remember this... and I encourage you to do the same for me!
- It won't necessarily be easy... it sure wasn't for Saul!
 - The early church not only had a hard time accepting him as a 'brother,' they also struggled mightily with the vision God gave him for the Gentiles...
 - But the key, my friends, is that it was a vision GOD gave him... not something he decided on his own.
 - Anthony deMello said, "The truth that sets us free, is almost always the Truth we would rather not hear."
 - Could it be that God is speaking a word of Truth to us here today?
 - Could it be that we, too, have scales that need to fall from our eyes, in order that we might be able to truly see the mission that God has given us?
 - I won't presume to speak for you, my brothers and sisters... but I dare say that I've heard what that word is for me.
- May God continue to surprise each of us with the myriad of ways God calls us and claims us for the Kingdom! AMEN.