

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷ *The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.*

¹⁰ *In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"*

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹ *The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."*

¹³ *"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem.¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."*

¹⁵ *But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."*

¹⁷ *Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. (Acts 9:1-19a)*

Jesus Shows Us his Glory

Teddy Roosevelt believed in war. He was a big believer in manliness and he thought that countries got soft if they didn't fight a good war now and then. He wanted to be a war president. Of course he wasn't. He was out of office by the time World War I came around. But he offered to raise and presumably command four volunteer divisions for that war. President Woodrow Wilson refused to let him do that. Some historians think that Wilson was afraid of Roosevelt having too much success as a general and returning to power. American politics has proven over and over again that covering yourself with glory in a war is a great way to win the presidency. Wilson may have feared giving his biggest rival opportunities for glory.

Today, we fear war. Yet, we Americans still love a war hero. We still honor veterans, especially combat veterans. Anyone who has won the Congressional Medal of Honor rightfully has glory in our eyes. There are other ways of winning glory, of course. Most of them revolve around winning and achieving and the cheering of the crowds. But in God's eyes, glory isn't always what we would think it is. This morning, we have before us the story of the conversion of St. Paul. The story is really about giving glory to God. There is a very public aspect to giving God glory. But God's glory is about more than getting people to cheer for him. The cheering comes naturally from who God is. When he acts in love, his glory just shows itself. In the way he dealt with Paul, **God shows us his glory.**

I.

God shows us his glory through the witnesses he chooses. Who is the witness in this reading? Luke calls him Saul here. We know him better as Paul. Before he became the great missionary and author of New Testament epistles, Paul lived a very different life. Our reading begins by saying, **"Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples."** He was involved in the murder of Stephen,

and the severe persecution that followed. Luke tells us, **“Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.”** Paul hated Christ. He hated the Christian Church. He was determined to stamp out our faith. When he drove most of the believers out of Jerusalem, he got letters from the high priest authorizing him to arrest Jewish Christians in other cities of the empire. That’s how he came to be on the road to Damascus.

That’s the man God chose. A man who would never be able to go to church in Jerusalem without the possibility that he would see someone whom he had arrested and perhaps tortured, or the spouse or child or sibling of someone who had died because of his actions. Would we welcome someone like that into our congregation here, even if he became a believer? How would we even know that his conversion was real? How would we ever be able to trust a man like that? How could you ever take such a committed enemy of Christ and make him a believer? You and I could never do that. In my experience, it’s a waste of breath even to talk to people like that. But God turned him into the greatest missionary in the history of the Christian Church. He became the most famous spokesman for the faith – so famous and successful that the Jewish leaders tried repeatedly to kill him. Obviously, that was an incredible public relations coup! Only God could’ve done that. We dream about things like that happening today. Imagine a leader of ISIS converting to Christianity. But the only person with the power to reach into an ordinary sinner’s heart and make him a believer is God. How much more when we’re talking about a dedicated enemy of the faith!

This gave real glory to God: he chose to make Paul his witness. God chose to make him a man who would travel over land and sea to win converts for Christ, who would become all things to all men so that by all possible means he might save some. God chose to make him a man who was repeatedly scourged and beaten and imprisoned for the faith that he once did all those things to! And he sang hymns and rejoiced – and eventually died for that faith. God made Paul his chosen instrument. And he did the same with you and me.

Now, that doesn’t seem nearly as glorious, first of all, because we aren’t famous persecutors of the church. It’s no great public relations coup to get us. And we aren’t famous missionaries. The world doesn’t hold its breath when we talk. Nothing we write is ever going to become a Christian classic that future generations will treasure. Paul’s conversion shows God’s glory pretty clearly. But ours? What glory is there for God in ours? The glory of his love. The glory of his plan. The glory of the songs of praise that we will sing to him for all eternity in heaven. And the glory of the gospel we proclaim.

Every time we pray with our children and read to them about Jesus, we are giving God the same glory that St. Paul did. Every time we bring our children here so that they can know their Savior better, we are giving God that glory. And we’re doing the same thing every time we share the good news with someone at work, or encourage a brother or sister in Christ who’s struggling, or call a believer to repent. And every dollar we give to the Lord supports the work of preaching that gospel here at Peace and throughout the world. You and I are part of the gospel being proclaimed. A small part, to be sure. But a part.

And it’s God’s love that makes us a part of it. The truth is, we don’t deserve to be a part of preaching the gospel any more than Paul did. Maybe we haven’t dragged Christians off to jail for their faith, but how often have we failed to encourage other believers? How often have we deliberately avoided talking to people we know have all kinds of problems because it’s just exhausting? How often have we failed to teach our own children about Jesus or even to let them see our faith in our lives? How many times did God give us the chance to share the good news with someone or to invite friends to church, and we remained silent? And if we can’t do it ourselves, have we at least been generous in our support of the preaching of the gospel here? What do you think? Maybe we haven’t actively persecuted the church, but have we really been a part of proclaiming the gospel?

We all could do better. We all have to admit to sin and laziness and shame. In our way, we’re just as guilty as Paul was. But Jesus is still our Savior. He died and he rose for us. When he rose, he proclaimed to you and me that all that laziness and sin and shame are gone forever. He has erased all the opportunities we didn’t take, all our failures to teach and confess and share. He has wiped away our stinginess with our offerings and our time and our lives. Jesus rose and all that sin is forgiven forever. And in that message of resurrection, Jesus came and filled our hearts with faith. Through that message, he made us new. Now he has given us that message. He has made us his chosen witnesses. It’s still true that we will never be St. Paul. But it’s also true that we are exactly the people God has called in this time and in this place to proclaim his message. It’s just as

much a miracle that we believe. It gives him just as much glory when we share the good news, because that message is all about Jesus and what he has won for us.

II.

So in Paul, God shows us what his real glory is like. It reflects him, rather than what this sinful world views as glorious. Now, we don't live in the age that Teddy Roosevelt did. I doubt any leader in the United States today would advocate war because it builds manly virtues. Today, we see strength in compassion. Do we see glory there? If you consider the way the world looks at people like Gandhi and Mother Theresa, I think we would have to say yes. Whether the world sees it or not, God shows us his compassion as the very pinnacle of his glory. **God shows us his glory through the mercy he shows.**

For Paul, that mercy began when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. Paul was on his way there to arrest Christians and drag them back to prison in Jerusalem. Jesus could've come to him with fire and brimstone. But instead, he called him to repent. That was his greatest mercy. But it wasn't the end of it. When Jesus appeared in that bright light, he struck Paul blind. For three days, he had to be led by the hand. Then the Lord sent Ananias to heal him. You can see what a tremendous act of mercy it was, because Ananias argued with Jesus. Think about that. The Lord himself appeared to Ananias and told him to go and heal Paul. Ananias presumed to give the Son of God advice. "I've heard terrible things about this guy and all the damage he's done." Ananias was asking Jesus, "Do you really want to do that?" Doesn't that seem just a little gutsy? Why would he do that? Because Paul didn't deserve God's mercy. Because he had done terrible things to the church and he deserved a little blindness. But Jesus sent Ananias to heal him anyway.

So Ananias went and said, **"Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."** It was God's mercy that Ananias called him "brother." In spite of all the hurt he had caused, the church did accept this persecutor as a brother. Ananias made sure Paul knew who sent him: Jesus. That was mercy, too. He would know for sure who really healed him. Then God gave Paul two gifts. The obvious one was his sight – something like scales fell off his eyes and he could see again. But he also promised to fill Paul with the Holy Spirit. Think of the man he became: the missionary who crossed land and sea, who faced storms and thieves and hostile mobs, who suffered and finally died confessing Christ. None of that was possible without the Holy Spirit working in his heart.

All that was clearly God's mercy. If you think about it, so was the blindness because it gave Paul the opportunity to personally experience the love of Christ. All that mercy shows Jesus' true glory, a glory that you and I experience all through our lives. We were all born unbelievers. The natural state of our heart is to hate God. Now, we don't always realize that's the case. In fact, like Paul, we might think that our hatred and disobedience is really serving God. But that's all a lie. Yet, Jesus found us. He died and rose for us. He claimed us through the gospel. He baptized us and fed us and filled us with the Holy Spirit. Every time we come here, he gives us that Spirit again.

Jesus has mercy on us every day. He hears our prayers. He frees us from illness and hardship and fear. Yes, he works through doctors and medicine, jobs and police officers and all manner of other things of this life. But it is Christ who is caring for us and healing us and protecting us every bit as much as it was Christ who worked through Ananias and made those scales fall off Paul's eyes. Sometimes, he works through hardship in our lives. Certainly, every time he rescues us, we see his love. Well, you have to be in trouble to be rescued. Sometimes, he allows pain and hardship to continue because he's working through those things. He's giving other Christians the opportunity to show us love. He's purifying our faith and teaching us to let go of the things of this life that don't matter. He's creating blessings that we can't see yet – maybe even that we won't be able to see until we reach heaven. But every step of the way, he is bringing us to eternal life.

All that is God's blessing to us. It all comes from his love working. It all brings glory to him. But you know what? Even though we can relate to some aspects of the glory – the value of love, the reality of God's grace being shared and people seeing and hearing about it – the truth is, God's glory will never be completely revealed in this life. Only in heaven will the saints and angels gather around the throne of Christ and see his love clearly and sing his praises for all eternity. In this life, sin and unbelief will always get in the way. But the glory is real because the love is real. The more we see our Savior who loved us and died for us and who rose for us and promises us love and care and finally eternal life with him, the more we see his true glory. Jesus shows us his glory today. Be thankful and look forward to seeing it perfectly tomorrow in heaven. Amen.