

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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May 1, 2022

Acts 9:1-6

John 21:1-19

If you watch children's shows, you will see that the bad guys and gals are very honest. Hey say "Bwaahahaha! I am about to do an evil thing!" Children are like this too. They say, "Bwahahaha, I am about to do a bad thing!" And then they do a bad thing, and then they get in trouble, if they're lucky.

We grownups, we are not so honest. We do a bad thing and then we say, "No, no, you don't understand." "No, no, it was understandable. It was not a bad thing, it was actually a good thing. I am not a bad person, you are the bad person, not me, you." And so on.

In the second lesson for today, Saul, whom we later know as Paul, is doing a bad thing. In fact, he looks like a pretty bad person. Before the second lesson for today, he supported and helped a mob to kill Stephan. They got so mad at him that they dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death. Very much like a mob lynching. Saul, of course, does not get his hands dirty. But he watches their coats. The members of the mob take off their coats and Saul keeps an eye on them to make sure nobody steals them away while their owners are committing murder.

That's the kind of person Saul is.

In the second lesson for today, Saul is traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus to catch Christians and carry them back in chains. So, it would be as if someone saw you come to church this morning, and then came to your house this afternoon and dragged you out of your house or apartment or room, kicking and screaming. It

would be as if someone dragged your family out with you, your mom and dad, your grandma and grandad, your brothers and sisters, if you have children, your children. Dragged all of you out kicking and screaming and threw you into an unmarked van, and drove you a long way to a different city, where they tied you up with chains in a bad place, like a drug dealer's compound or a terrorist's wet basement. And then you did not know when someone might just come and shoot you.

This was what Saul was doing. A bad thing.

But oh no, Saul would have taken great offense if you had pointed this out to him. He would have said, "No, no! I have a right to be doing this. Saul was ever so righteous, ever so pure and holy in his crusade. "Those Christians are a threat to my religion," he would have said, "to my way of life. They are ruining my culture. Just throw them all in jail."

Saul seems beyond redemption. And he is beyond redemption, at least, beyond our redemption.

But Jesus's redemption at the cross reaches beyond our redemption. God's hope reaches beyond our despair, God's light reaches beyond our darkness, God's love reaches beyond our hate. God's life reaches beyond our death.

So Jesus comes to Saul and says, "Why are you persecuting me?"

God has come to people beyond redemption, beyond hope of recovery for a long time. God came to Moses, a murderer, at the burning bush. God comes to Elijah, at the brink of suicide in the desert. Jesus comes to Peter in the Gospel lesson for today, Peter who was supposed to be this great leader of the disciples, ends up denying that he had ever followed Jesus. Jesus comes to him. Jesus heals Mary Magdalene from seven demons. If you've ever spoken with someone who talks to people who aren't there, so that what they say makes no sense, you will know they seem to be beyond help.

Jesus comes to you and me, too. Maybe not in a blaze of light like with Saul or a burning bush like with Moses. Jesus comes to us, perhaps in another person, or in the quiet of a moment and says, "Why do you persecute me? Why are you ignoring other people who need you? Why are you hurting and loathing yourself? Why are you destroying this bright creation around you? Why are you persecuting me?"

And notice, now, Saul is curious. He has been confronted with something beyond himself, and he does not just dismiss it. He is willing to accept the fact the he does not know everything, that there is more to learn. He asks a question. It's good to ask questions. He says, "Who are you, Lord?"

Jesus tells Saul who he is, and then gives him a purpose: "Go into Damascus."

Notice, now Saul is blind. The hope of God, the peace and the life of God are so beyond our thoughts, that it will disorient us. That's why we come to church, to be disoriented, to be reminded of the love of God, which is beyond our imagination, and we walk out staggering into our new purpose.

God always has a purpose for us. We might not know the whole purpose, but God has a purpose. God does not tell Moses that he is going to lead the people of Israel through the Red Sea into freedom. God does not tell him that he is going to give the people The Ten Commandments. God just tells Moses the next thing. God says to Moses, "Go tell Pharaoh, king of Egypt to let my people go." God does not tell Elijah all the things that he is going to do as a prophet. God tells Elijah, "Go to Mt. Sini:" the next thing. Jesus does not tell Peter all the miracles Peter is going to do. Jesus just tells Peter, "Feed my sheep." Jesus does not tell Mary how the Gospel will spread across the world. Jesus just tells Mary Magdalene, "Go tell the others that I am risen from the dead." And Mary runs. She runs and she says "I have seen the Lord."

Even if you think that you are beyond redemption, God's redemption reaches beyond our redemption, to you. So watch for God's redemption, whether it comes in a person or a quiet moment, or a blazing light. Even if you think you know the world pretty well, God turns our worlds upside down with hope and life beyond what we know. So expect to be dizzy. Even if we don't know our purpose, God has a purpose. Watch for it, whether it speaks to the next ten years or to the next ten minutes, we have been made a part of God's life. Thanks be to God.