

Sermon -- 05/01/22

Text — Acts 9:1-22

Theme — “Who Are You?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I love a good Western, and Clint Eastwood has made LOTS of them. At the end of one of my favorites, “High Plains Drifter”, the dying villain asks the man who shot him: “*Who are you? Who are you?*” It’s the question the audience has been asking itself for the whole movie: who IS this guy? Well, he was the town’s former marshal, the one that the villain and his evil cohorts had brutally whipped to death in that same street a few short years before. The one that no one in the town had lifted a finger to help then, even though he had done so much for them. The one who became their resurrected savior, though, when the murderers came back to the town to rape and pillage and plunder and kill.

Now, I don’t know if the writers and director of the film were trying to make any connections with Christ, but I think those connections are there: the good and innocent man killed simply because he WAS good. The weak and dastardly responses from those whom he had helped, as they do nothing while he is killed for them. The plotting and scheming and killing of an innocent man, done by those in authority. The death and resurrection of that good man. His ultimate saving of the townspeople, who are totally undeserving of it.

But, of course, there are also a number of very significant differences. For instance, as the marshal lay dying in that city street, he cries out: “*Damn you! Damn you all to hell!*” Our Lord, however, as He dies, prays: “*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!*” The marshal comes back, seeking revenge. The marshal repays violence with violence, indifference with indifference, hatred with hatred. Jesus, though, repays our sin with forgiveness, mercy, and love.

Still, it IS a good and memorable movie even now, 40-some years after its release. And those words of the dying villain — “*Who are you?*” — came to mind when I read today’s text. (pause)

You all know the story. Paul — who was then known by the name of Saul — was a famous and zealous persecutor of the Church. Our first glimpse of him in Scripture is as the man who held the cloaks of those who stoned St. Stephen to death. Then we are told of how he volunteers his services to the high priest, to sniff out and track down Christians in and around Jerusalem. And he was good at it! He was responsible for the arrest, imprisonment, torture, and death of many believers. So good, in fact, that he sought and obtained permission to take his murderous posse on the road. To go into other lands and territories, seeking and killing Christians.

And that is where we find him in our lesson. On the road to Damascus, the capital of the Roman province of Syria. To capture and bring back for trial as many Christians — men and women and even children — as he can. To stamp out and destroy the Christian Church. Because, in his mind, these Christians were idolators and blasphemers of the true God. They worshipped a Man — Jesus — as the Son of God. Indeed, as God Himself! And, as a Pharisee, that Saul/Paul could not abide. They must be stopped. They must be eliminated. They must be killed. Just as much as their teaching, their faith, that Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior, God-in-the-flesh.

So, imagine his surprise and horror and fear when he has the vision of which we heard! A blinding Light. A heavenly Voice. And that accusing, damning question: “*Why are you persecuting Me?*” Saul/Paul is just as confused, lost, and afraid as that dying villain in the movie. And he asks the very same question: “*Who are You?*” So, what do you think went through his mind when he hears the answer: “*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting*”!

“*I am Jesus*” — remember, the name of God (a name so holy that no good Jew would even utter it) was Yahweh: “**I Am**”. So, by His answer, Jesus is making clear that He IS God. The very thing that

Saul/Paul had denied. More than that, had hated and persecuted and cursed. The One Saul/Paul had believed was only a liar and fraud and charlatan. A false Messiah, who deserved His crucifixion. Whose followers deserved a similar fate. Everything that Saul/Paul thought he knew about God turned out to be wrong! He was the one who was the idolator and blasphemer. He was the one who lied about the Lord. He was the one who deserved death and damnation. And here he was, face-to-face with the One who should carry out that sentence. Caught red-handed (literally red-handed, with the blood of Christ and His Church dripping from Saul/Paul's hands). Can you imagine the terror that must have gripped him? The Law has finally hit home for Saul/Paul. (pause)

It is the same for us, when the Law is brought to bear. Like Saul/Paul, we tend to think of ourselves as good. As people who know God. As worthy of the Lord. But when the magnitude of the Law's demands become clear — when we realize that PERFECTION is demanded of us — then things start to change. We are idolators, putting things and people ahead of God. We are blasphemers, whose sinful lives belie God's goodness. We are haters and persecutors of those for whom Christ died. We are selfish and greedy, liars and cheats, adulterers and murderers. Every commandment, WE break. Over and over and over again. In our thoughts, in our words, in our deeds. By what we do, and by what we fail to do. And we can't help ourselves — it is in our nature now, ever since Adam's fall. Conceived in sin, born in sin, living in sin. **We** are the ones who betrayed Jesus. The ones who denied Him. Who abandoned Him. Who mocked Him. Who condemned Him. Who nailed Him to the cross. Us. We are guilty.

If we understand the Law rightly, and appreciate its consequences, we know precisely how Saul/Paul must have felt on that Damascus road. We are caught red-handed too. We deserve death and damnation. And we stand before the heavenly court, that heavenly Judge, awaiting our sentence. That is what the Law says to us, just as it said to him. (pause)

Now, imagine the relief, the joy, the peace of NOT hearing a death sentence. Certainly, that must have been Saul/Paul's experience. When that divine Light shone around him, when Jesus spoke to him, and showed him his sin — and then did NOT blast him with a thunderbolt straight to hell — well, imagine how he must have felt!

Jesus comes, not to condemn, but to save. To save poor, miserable sinners. Like Saul/Paul. Like us. That is why He was conceived and born. That is why He lived and died. That is why He rose. That is why He ascended. That is why He sends His Spirit. To save.

All of Saul/Paul's sins were there that Good Friday, loaded onto Jesus' back. And He took all the punishment for them. All the pain. All the suffering. All the forsakeness. All the hell. It is there, on Him and NOT on Paul. So, when Jesus comes to Paul on the Damascus road, it is not to damn him — even though that is what he deserved and what he fully expected. No, Jesus comes to forgive. To restore. To give peace and hope and joy and life. Your sins are forgiven, Paul. By Me, the One whom you are persecuting. I have paid the debt. Accept My love.

And Jesus says the very same thing to us. Oh, we probably have not had a “Damascus road” type experience — a face-to-face confrontation with the resurrected Jesus, seeing and hearing Him. Or, then again, perhaps you could say that we have!

For who is it that speaks to us in baptism, in the absolution, in the Word, in the Lord's Supper? Who is it that comes to us where we are, whatever that road might be? Who is it that takes away our sin, who washes us clean, who brings us to the Father? It is Jesus, isn't it? Paul did not actually see Jesus, we are told — he was blinded by the Light. But Paul did hear His voice, though. And that was enough. Well, we do not visibly see Jesus either in these Means of Grace. And yet, it IS His voice, His words, His forgiveness given us there.

In fact, remember what else Jesus said to Paul: that he (Saul/Paul) was persecuting HIM (Jesus) when he was persecuting the Church. That is, Jesus fully and completely identifies Himself with the Church, with believers, every last one of them. To hunt and hurt and kill them is to hunt/hurt/kill Christ. He and they are one. What Saul/Paul does to them, he does to Jesus. And isn't that exactly what we say baptism does: it makes us one with Jesus? That we truly become members of Him and His Body? So, when we hear the Church — when we hear pastors and teachers and other believers — we are really hearing Jesus. When the pastor says “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”, that is really JESUS speaking and baptizing. When our parents and grandparents and Sunday school teachers taught us the faith, that was JESUS speaking and teaching. When the pastor absolves us of our sins, that is JESUS speaking and forgiving. When we hear “*take and eat, take and drink*” the Body and Blood of our Lord in communion, that is JESUS speaking and giving us life and salvation there.

And every time what we hear Him saying to us is the same: YOU are forgiven. YOU are loved. YOU are welcomed home as God's dear child. Not words of accusation, or condemnation, or rejection. But words of grace. Of pardon. Of life. (pause)

And then what? After Saul sees his sin and his Savior, after he is converted and saved, after he is killed by the Law and then raised by the Gospel, after Saul the persecutor becomes Paul the believer? What then? Well, Jesus has work for him to do. Because now he is a member of Christ. Literally one with Him. And what Christ does, Paul does. Where Paul goes, there is Christ. What Paul speaks, so says Christ. Listen again to what Jesus told faithful but fearful Ananias:

This man is My chosen instrument to proclaim My name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for My name.”

That means Paul will be used to bring the Gospel to others. But it also means he will suffer, as did his Lord. In fact, BECAUSE Jesus suffered, so will he.

And so it is for us too. Jesus has work for us to do as well. He uses US to proclaim His saving name. Maybe not to kings and foreign peoples. At least not directly (although He DOES use us in that capacity as we support missions by our prayers and offerings). But He uses us to proclaim His saving name here. To the people around us. To our families and friends. Our neighbors and co-workers. By our words and our actions. By teaching our kids and inviting others to church and Bible study. By our words of witness and our testimony of life.

Paul was an apostle of the Lord. He makes a big deal of that in several of his letters to the Church. An apostle is one who is sent, with a mission, a message. Well, in a way, we are Christ's apostles too. We are sent here — to this place, to these people — with the same message as was he. The same message we have had proclaimed and applied to us. The message of the Gospel. Of Jesus Christ. The One whom we persecuted by our sin, but who still lived and died and rose again for US. And who has done the same for them.

Jesus did not sugar-coat it for Paul — He told him exactly what he would suffer for his Savior. And I won't sugar-coat it for you either: you WILL suffer — much — for your Lord. The devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh will have it no other way. But it is worth it. For in Him, you have forgiveness and everlasting life. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS — Nicene Creed
FE — Offertory/Prayers