

The Road to Hunter

Psalm 100, Acts 9:1-20

November 11, 2007

Our passage from the book of acts dramatizes the abrupt conversion experience of the man we have come to know as the apostle Paul's. And yet, I often wonder if his conversion was in reality as sudden an occurrence as the story in Acts reports. For Saul like everyone around him would have heard stories of Jesus' work and teachings for years. Now we know that Saul was a very religious man, and he worked diligently to uphold the beliefs of his faith as he understood them. Saul like Jesus was a man who believed in the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaiah and Ruth. But Saul had been so busy making sure the rules of the faith were followed to the nth degree that he forgot about the power of the living God. Saul forgot that God was at work in the world, and he could not or would not believe that the Messiah had come. His beliefs led him to hunt down and arrest those who had converted to "The Way", as this new Jewish sect was known in its earliest days.

Yet, I think that as Saul made his way along the road to Damascus, he was in the midst of a crisis of faith. Much of what he had believed to be true and had worked to preserve was in doubt. Could this man, Jesus, truly be the son of God? Could God really love human beings so much that God would take on the form of a human being to suffer and die so that he, Saul, could have eternal life? Had he been wrong to persecute the followers of Jesus? Perhaps he had been asking these questions for some time, but he had been afraid to let go of the security of what he knew. If he accepted Jesus as the Son of God, he would lose his livelihood, his status as a rabbi; he would lose everything he knew. And then it happened, "a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'" And when Saul rose from the ground, he could see nothing. His companions led him into Damascus, and for three days he was without sight." What must have gone through Saul's mind during those three days? Did he replay the event over and over again? Did he question his own sanity? Or was he filled with a sense of peace as all his doubts about who Jesus was vanished? The story doesn't give us an answer for any of these questions. But we do know that Saul was praying, and he was waiting for God to send

Ananias to restore his sight. Saul was waiting for God to act so that he might respond in a new way. And once his sight was restored, Saul was baptized and began proclaiming that indeed, "Jesus is the son of God."

Every time I read the story of Saul on the road to Damascus I wonder if I would have been able to accept my own call more easily if I had been struck blind for three days and nights. Would the road that has brought me to Hunter Presbyterian Church have been any smoother? And I always conclude, probably not. For each of us must travel our own journey, we must walk down the road set before us. For me, the journey that has led me here to Hunter Presbyterian Church has been rather circuitous. Sometimes I have found myself waiting for God to act so that I might respond in a new way. But as I look back over my life I realize that God acted openly and lovingly again and again, and God was often simply waiting for me to respond. Fortunately, for all of us, God can wait for us with the patience of eternity. As I look back over the course of my life, I see how God waited for me, watched over me and held me as I struggled to understand what God was calling me to do.

In many ways, my journey to Hunter began in 1982. I was born in Kansas, lived most of my life in St. Louis, but moved to Houston, Texas after graduating from college. I had worked for a bank holding company for about 18 months and had become dissatisfied with my job and my life. I was restless and knew that I wanted and needed to do something else, but what? I agonized and prayed for months. I'm sure that my friends got tired of my constant questioning. At the time I was Moderator of a Young Singles group at a large Presbyterian Church, and I began to realize that my time working with this group was more meaningful and satisfying than anything I had ever done before. At the time I had never met a woman minister, and it didn't occur to me that this was even an option.

It wasn't until one January evening when I was on the phone with a friend that my call became clear. As we talked, and I once again posed the question, "What am I supposed to do?" I heard a voice saying, "You are to go into the ministry." As I think back, I'm not sure how I responded. I know that my heart slowed down and sped up all at once, and I felt weird all over. I think I quickly glanced around the room to make sure no one else was there. And then very hesitantly I asked, "Hazel, did you hear that?" I assumed she

would say, “Hear what?” Instead she just said, “Yes.” Now, I’m sure that it could have been someone breaking into the line, but both Hazel and I were alone in our respective homes, and we each had only one phone.

I always hesitate to tell this story because I have no rational explanation for what happened. But over the next few weeks, I visited with three different ministers. After each conversation, I was more convinced that I had truly experienced a call to the ministry. And thus, over the next four years, I prepared to accept this call. I became a candidate under the care of Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church and New Covenant Presbytery in Houston, Texas. I attended Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary and graduated with a Master of Divinity in 1987. I did supply preaching at small churches near Austin and completed internships at the state hospital and First Presbyterian Church. I took and passed the Ordination Exams and filled out a PIF. I did everything necessary to be well prepared to become a Presbyterian minister. And yet, in the midst of all these preparations, I had what I now understand was a crisis of faith, and I was gripped with fear. All I could think of was that I was going to end up in some isolated town of 200 people in North Dakota without family or friends. What if I don’t believe the right things? What if nobody wants me? My fear was so great that I could not wait for God to answer my cry, my longing. I fled back home to St. Louis; and within the following year, I withdrew myself as a candidate for the ministry.

For the next ten years, I would periodically cry out the words from Psalm 13: “How long O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?” What I didn’t realize at the time was that even though I had been good at preparing for the ministry, I had never truly learned how to respond to God’s call. God’s face was never hidden from me, I was simply too scared to admit that God was right there waiting for me to turn my face. Over the course of the next ten years I worked with troubled adolescents, I went back to school to study history, I was head of circulation in a university library, I worked in a bank, and I continued to wonder what God wanted me to do with my life. Yet, whenever I sincerely asked the question, the answer was always the same. But I wouldn’t or couldn’t allow myself to hear or accept this answer. I would simply take another

class or find a new job. It was a though I had completely forgotten my own call experience – so even if I had been struck blind I'm sure I would have found a reason as to why it wasn't really a call from God.

It wasn't until my husband and I moved to Pittsburgh in 1996 that I finally found the courage to answer my call. I found myself in a city where I knew no one. I took the first job I could find to fill my time and pay the bills. I was basically alone for Darrell was either at school or studying. And once again, I began asking God what I was supposed to do with my life. You know it's much simpler to wait for an answer when you don't have friends or money or enjoyable work even to distract you. I was stripped of the basic comforts of my life and left alone before God. I turned again and again to the Bible for comfort and guidance and began sincerely to pray the Psalms every day. I most often prayed Psalm 25 in particular: "Make me know your ways, O God; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long. Be mindful of your mercy, O God, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old."

Blessedly, God was waiting for me when I was finally able to let go of my fear and say, "Here I am, send me." After settling in Pittsburgh, I began attending Third Presbyterian Church . . . less than two blocks from our apartment. I soon discovered that God had moved me into a Presbytery with more than 160 Presbyterian churches. Maybe that really has nothing to do with it, but it sure made me suspicious. What was God up to? What did God want from me? I want to say . . . and then suddenly, but there is nothing sudden about my journey. Each step has been taken with much prayer and many agonizing moments. I joined Third Church in November 1996 and knew that I was going to have to talk to someone about this call business. I simply was unable to wait any longer. So I made an appointment with the minister; and as I waited for the day to arrive perhaps my waiting was like Paul waiting for Ananias to restore his sight. I was waiting for someone to acknowledge my call and restore my confidence. Since that November I became a candidate in Pittsburgh Presbytery, I attended Interim Ministry training, and I began serving congregations as an Interim minister. During the past 10 years I served in seven very different congregations . . . from 60 members to 400 members. I was solo pastor, associate pastor and head of staff. With each step I more thoroughly

embraced my call. I learned to let go of my fear and trust completely that God is with me each step of my journey. This doesn't mean that I am never afraid, but rather that I trust God to lead me forward in spite of the fear that I may experience.

Through the words of Scripture, my ministry with and for God's people of all ages and the leading of the Spirit, I am absolutely confident that God travels with each one of us offering us the courage to take yet another step along the road that we must travel as we journey through life. And God calls each one of us to a different journey, but none of us walks this road alone. As we travel our own road to Damascus or Lexington or wherever we may roam, we will meet many others who will help and encourage us along the way. Even more importantly, we are never alone because God is with us now and always through the spirit of Christ sent to teach us all things and bring remembrance of all that Jesus taught as well. Whether we are waiting to regain our sight or whether we are struggling to find the courage to move forward in life, God is with us because this is what God has promised. For us like Paul, it is often hard to truly believe that God chose to be revealed to us in Jesus Christ solely because God loved us. It was nothing that we have done, can do or will do in the future. God chooses to love us and to wait for us simply because we are God's children. In the same manner as the father of the prodigal son waited for him to return so that they might celebrate together once again, God waits for each one of us to return so that all the heavens can celebrate.

But as God's children we have been created with free will. We have the power to choose whether or not we are going to answer God's call and take another step on our journey or whether we will hide our face from God or hope that God is hiding from us. For when we choose to accept God's call whatever it may be, we must remember that our lives will be transformed. Since deciding to accept God's call for my life, my life has been changed forever. For now I always know that the time is upon me, and God's wish for me is being revealed at this very moment in time. No longer do I cry: "How long O Lord?" Rather I rejoice with gratitude: "O God, my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. O God, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those who have gone down to the pit . . . You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sack cloth and clothed me with joy so that my soul may praise

you and not be silent. O God, my God, I will give thanks to you forever.” (Psalm 30) This is God’s wish for each one of us that our souls may be healed, our sight restored and our lives filled with joy. This is not to say that we will never have any challenges or pain in our lives, but rather that we can remember again and again that God is with us through every challenge our life’s journey may bring.

And so this morning, my journey has led me on the road to Lexington, Kentucky and Hunter Presbyterian Church. Perhaps the last part of my story could begin, suddenly I received a phone call from Doug Maxson, chair of the Interim Search Committee at Hunter Pres. Church. You know God does work in mysterious ways. So now together we begin our journey along the road to the future . . . we don’t know where this road will lead, but together we can proclaim that Jesus Christ is the Son of God . . . and Christ will lead us along our way. God is with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.