

Palisades Presbyterian Church
June 10, 2007

Can You Hear Me Now?
©2007 Ray Bagnuolo

It must have been Paul's wiring. I mean, he really, really believed that Jesus of Nazareth and these followers of his were absolutely going to tear down everything he and his ancestors had relied upon – for, well, forever.

Paul was a Pharisee, a member of the privileged Judaic community, given special permission to seek out these troublesome followers of Jesus, wherever they may be, and to bring them back to the leadership for persecution and execution. He was a 007 of sorts, and in his net of attempted annihilation of the followers of Jesus, he even caught up Stephen, the first of the Christian martyrs. Yes, he caused people to be killed.

He was a bad guy to the followers of Jesus, and he was good at it.

Then something happened. Was it the accumulating, penetrating look of those he had captured, chained, imprisoned, and persecuted that eventually got to him?

Was it the faces that would not go away, faces of those he handed over with disdain and hatred? Were they getting through? Was he starting to have trouble sleeping at night?

Was the heat of the fire of their faith and passion, taking its toll on Paul? Did his physical superiority and might slowly wane in the great high he once felt in the surge of power as he used it for his cause of righteousness?

Maybe it was words of others from his own tradition and training, like the author of this morning's psalm. Paul knew the Psalms. He knew it all – probably by heart!

- Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob
- Whose hope is in the Lord their God
- Who made heaven and earth
- The sea and all that is in them
- Who keeps faith forever
- Who executes justice for the oppressed
- Who gives food to the hungry.
- The Lord sets prisoners free
- The Lord open the eyes of the blind

He had to know he wasn't living justly, sooner or later he had to know. And then it happened

whether it was God thrusting Godself on Paul or Paul bursting into God's presence – suddenly it happened - he was the blinded one; losing sight of all he knew, managed, and controlled –forced to enter into the changing chemistry of his mind brought about by whatever caused it – to suddenly see how wrong he was and how the one whose followers he hunted – was actually the one he now knew as Lord.

The laws that a short time ago ruled his life, were now seen by him from the eyes of the oppressed – and he crumbled by the weight of all the wrongs he had done. God, though, is not a destructive Spirit – and the transformation, however painful would be greater in what the new Paul would produce.

Clearly, Paul's spiritual experience was powerful and life-changing – and he was soon to find himself in those communities he had persecuted and oppressed; exhorting them to follow the teachings of the one he formerly condemned.

What a powerful and unnerving sight that must have been.

And with all the energy and zealousness he put into his efforts at persecution, he became one of the most important missionaries of the early church with influence that has continued to exert itself two thousand years later.

Amazing.

It seems rules aren't all they are cracked up to be sometimes. Literalness, maybe, can be so brittle, they eventually those it envelopes must crack with it!

It makes you wonder about the things we sometimes rely upon to determine whether we are living up to our "faith," so to speak. How do we study and assure ourselves that we are on the right path?

Well, for example –

Stack the 20 volumes of books on the pulpit!
Hold up one bible.

And yet, one Bible and this miniscule portion of what has been written and spoken and studied to understand this – this grain of sand on the theological beach – is too often accepted as the end to God's discussion with humanity.

"Here it is!" God says. Everything I have to tell you is in these books written by inspired, faithful, flawed humans. See you when you get to the Pearly Gates and then we'll have a discussion about how you did on your RAE's: Religious Achievement Exams.

You remember those, right?

We know better than this, but for many the idea of listening to God, revealing God's self today in our and others' lives, continuing to write the Canon with new stories and human narratives – well, it's tough work. It's tough to take the risk of listening to the God that comes to us by Grace, calling us to compassion and advocacy for the oppressed, especially when a church or tradition is standing on the side of dogma, holding up the banner of God with one hand, and holding down marginalized and oppressed groups with the other.

To me, that's "not believing" in God. The psalmist and Paul and so many of us have come to believe that God is active, alive, inviting us into the joyful, happy, radiant life of being Christians, followers of Jesus – allowing the same grace into our lives that changed the direction of Paul, the most faithful of traditionalists – into a voice for the oppressed and marginalized.

For example,. we study and debate so much about the lives and participation of LGBT folks in this denomination, as well as so many other excluded, dominated groups – we do so much research and so many task forces and study – that I think we often miss God's call.

Do we need to be blinded first to regain the new sight that we need in this society that appoints rulers and leaders who see rules and might as answers? Do we secure ourselves and our spiritual lives by gluing ourselves to intransigent and rigid interpretations that contribute to the violence of exclusion?

Of course not. I think we need to become more reliant upon God and less reliant on these and other texts and what not -- for the answers that come first – through grace and revelation – in our hearts.

Study. Read. Pray. And Listen. Listen to God who still speaks to us, as God did to Paul and others.

It is that listening that will lead the PNC in calling the next minister to this congregation, that heart sense that says, "OMG, yes, this is the person." It will be the Spirit that calls the next minister here through the group – just as it will be God and the Spirit that calls us into our actions and behaviors each and every day.

"Can you hear me now," God calls. "How about now?" No answer. Again and again God calls, turning more often than not to Archangel Michael or Michele saying, "Gee, is the network down? I'm not getting any answers, just a lot of static?" "Hello? Hello?"

Sisters and brothers, today we welcomed into this family Nicolas James. Let's not clear a path for him that pulls him like gravity back into a regressive church, with leaders who hold onto a "stairway to heaven" mentality, promising salvation with a pre-ordained checklist to be completed prior to departure.

Let's continue, as we do here, to create a path that is like the one Jesus followed from what we can tell: filled with a heart and presence and mind that listened for God's will, knowing that the God that called him and calls us today would never ask us to build a kingdom by trampling others.

It's really very simple to get the call, you know. You simply dial: love God and others and then listen for the reply.

Can you hear me now?

Listen. I think you will.