

“Getting Your Attention”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – May 1, 2022

Acts 9:1-20

An old farmer liked to brag around town that he could command his mule with nothing more than a few soft words; no whips or prods necessary. She would respond, he claimed, with nothing more than gently spoken commands. Of course, people were skeptical, so one day his buddy down at the feed store asked for a demonstration. “Prove to me that your old mule will respond with nothing more than gentle language.”

Out in the field they went - the farmer, his buddy, and the mule. As the friend watched, first in awe and then in horror, the farmer took a huge piece of lumber, a two-by-four about six feet long, and swung it with all his might, hitting the mule on one ear! When the animal stopped braying and bellowing and prancing around, the farmer then said, quietly, “Come here” and the mule came. “Sit.” and the whimpering creature sat. “Back up.” And she backed into the harnesses of a plow and waited calmly for him to hook up. “You see? She’ll respond to a simple voice command.” But his friend objected, “Whatever are you talking about? You said all you had to do was talk to her, but you hit her with this huge two-by-four! What do you mean, you just command her with words?!? That’s not what I saw!”

“Oh, that,” said the farmer. “Well, first I do have to get her attention!”

It seems that quite often God uses the proverbial two-by-four to get our attention because without it we would not listen, we would not follow. We get so busy going about the routines of our lives that God often has to do something dramatic, or we wouldn’t even notice that God is calling us. God is calling us to do something. God is calling us out of our stubbornness and is urging us to adjust our lifestyles, and we don’t even notice until that two-by-four thuds against our heads; or in Saul’s case, until a flash of light knocks us to our feet.

In his book, *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby says that you must make major adjustments in your life to join in God's work. And sometimes, coming to a point where we make those adjustments requires some "prodding" from God. Saul of Tarsus found that out very quickly as he made his way to Damascus, and Ananias just a short time later. Saul was a tentmaker and a devout Jew; he was intelligent and relatively wealthy. There was no reason for Saul to make any changes in his life; things were going pretty well for him. And Ananias, a follower of the Way, a Christian; he was experiencing the abundance of life under the new covenant of grace. There was no reason that Ananias' path would cross with Saul's, at least not willingly. But in an instant, both of these seemingly comfortable existences were blown out of the water and dramatic change happened; a change that would start the greatest missionary movement in the history of Christianity. If we are going to join in God's work, we have to make major adjustments.

As we easily recognize, Saul made some major adjustments, a 180-degree turn, even! Saul's dramatic turn is indeed remarkable in and of itself, but there's something about Saul that's even more fascinating and noteworthy to me. Saul thought he was following God. Up until that moment when a flash of light interrupted his stroll to Damascus, Saul thought he was doing exactly what God wanted him to do! He was a devout Jew. He knew the Hebrew scriptures, and he thought these Jesus followers were getting it all wrong. So, as the passage tells us, *"SAUL, STILL BREATHING THREATS AND MURDER AGAINST THE DISCIPLES OF THE LORD, WENT TO THE HIGH PRIEST AND ASKED HIM FOR LETTERS TO THE SYNAGOGUES AT DAMASCUS, SO THAT IF HE FOUND ANY WHO BELONGED TO THE WAY, MEN OR WOMEN, HE MIGHT BRING THEM BOUND TO JERUSALEM."* Saul thought he was going to get people "back in line, back on track." As Saul set off for Damascus with what essentially amounted to an open arrest warrant for any Christian, he thought he was doing what God wanted him to do! He was probably even meditating on the Scriptures as his horse plodded

toward Damascus, and then BOOM! a flash of light and a question, “WHY DO YOU PERSECUTE ME?” And when Saul asks who it is, the voice says, “I AM JESUS, WHOM YOU ARE PERSECUTING.” Suddenly, everything that Saul thought is turned on its head, and he sees that he wasn’t actually doing what God wanted after all.

Have you ever come to such a realization? I think the story of Saul’s conversion affords us a good opportunity to consider the possibility that we aren’t necessarily following God as we think we are. Or perhaps we are not dedicated to God in the way that we should be. I mean, Paul was devout, but it turns out he was devout in a bad way. We can be devout too and still be harming the church; we can be devout and still be acting contrary to Christ. We can be devout and mix up politics and religion and forget that “love your neighbor” thing.

This is what Saul learned as he made his way to Damascus, and it is what you and I must learn if we are to be true disciples of Jesus Christ. We can come to church every Sunday and think ourselves devout. In fact, in this day of declining church attendance, we would certainly be considered among the most devoted. But our lives as followers of Christ are about more than just being in the church when the doors are open; it’s about sharing Christ in the world outside of the church! This is the message of the Damascus Road experience! And with that message comes the question: How are we opposing Christ and the church rather than building it up?

We fail to build up Christ and the church when we have the form of religion without the power. We fail to build up Christ and the church when we walk out of the church doors on Sunday morning and do not think about our commission as believers until we walk back through those doors the next week. We fail to build up Christ and the church when we talk badly about our church or our church family in our social circles. We fail to build up Christ and the church when we cross to the other side of the street, so we don’t have to walk right by the beaten

traveler; or the ragged-looking homeless person. We fail to build up Christ and the church when we hoard our personal resources rather than giving generously to God and God's purposes in this world. We fail to build up Christ and the church when we do not actively seek out opportunities to serve in Jesus' name and to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. And then suddenly, BOOM! Christ asks us, "WHY ARE YOU PERSECUTING ME?" And all this time, we thought we were following Christ.

Saul had to make a radical change, and so do we! We have to think in terms of a whole new life, a whole new identity, because this is precisely what Christ offers us! Saul was so changed and so adjusted that he even changed his name! And Saul, the old Pharisee, became Paul, the new man in Christ. Saul, the old persecutor, became Paul, the new preacher. Saul, the old struggler against sin, became Paul, the free spirit who openly talked about his joy in Christ. Saul made a major adjustment, a total adjustment, got a new name and a new identity, in order to join in God's work. God calls all of us to major adjustments.

I believe we do know, deep down, what we, as a church, have to do to really join in God's work. We have to get up and enter the community. We have to know the people around us. We have to give of our resources. We have to open our hearts and our lives to children, to youth, and yes, even to adults; the sinner, the outcast, the downtrodden. We have to feed the hungry. We have to offer support to the addicted, and help to the ill, the grieved, and the burdened. We have to be proponents . . . God's greatest cheerleaders, and God's greatest servants. We are to be the hands and feet of Christ at work. We have to go into our community, with all its problems, its sickness and its sin.

We used to sing a song entitled, "Give Me That Old-Time Religion." And in the song, it says, "**It was good for the Hebrew children, and it is good enough for me.**" But it wasn't good enough for the Hebrew

children. The faith of Abraham was not adequate for them; God had something more. God had to deliver them from the bondage of Egypt and show them something new. The Red Sea would part, Mount Sinai would explode with fire and the voice of God. Commandments would be given and there would be new lessons learned in the wilderness. The song says, **“It was good for Paul and Silas.”** The truth is that the old-time religion was not good enough for Paul and Silas. For years Paul wanted it to be good enough, until he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. He wanted to keep the old wineskin of Jewish tradition, but Jesus was bursting the seams of that wineskin. New wine had come, and new wineskins were called for.

You can't have the old-time religion. Your mother's faith will not do, it has to be your faith. Your father's faith is not adequate, you have to have your own experience with God. In fact, your faith, the faith used to get you by, several years ago, will not do for today. You can't remain static. You can't stay where you are. Yesterday's experience will not do for today. Your faith must be current. The Lord says, **“FORGET THE FORMER THINGS; DO NOT DWELL ON THE PAST. SEE, I AM DOING A NEW THING! NOW IT SPRINGS UP; DO YOU NOT PERCEIVE IT? I AM MAKING A WAY IN THE DESERT AND STREAMS IN THE WASTELAND.”** (Isaiah 43:18-19) Amen.