

God Revealed
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Acts 9:1-9
Revelation 5: 11-14
John 21:1-19

Easter is over. At our house that means there are no candy or eggs left in the Easter baskets. Unfortunately, I still find colorful plastic grass, stray candy wrappers and wandering jelly beans under the couch and in dark corners.

But in the church, liturgically, we are in the midst of Easter. We continue hearing stories of Jesus appearing to his followers after the resurrection. In the suggested lectionary readings, the customary Old Testament passages are replaced by readings from Acts about the life of the early church. Today we concentrate on stories about the way God is revealed to humans, the many ways that God reveals God's self.

One of the things that I love about the Bible is that I keep seeing new things in familiar stories. The Feminist Theology Bible Study, or FemTheo, fairly recently read the Book of Acts. We are currently studying Paul, trying to make sense of this revered saint who has made life so difficult for women over the centuries. One of our discoveries in FemTheo is that like Jesus, Saul was Jewish. We know that he took pride in hunting down betrayers of Judaism, those who followed this new rabbi Jesus. We know he was stopped in his tracks on the way to Damascus, blinded by a light, heard a voice he could not see and became a follower of the very prophet whom he despised. But Paul, Jewish? Well, yes, since there wasn't anything yet called Christianity.

So why have we made Saul into a Christian? What is wrong with being a faithful Jew? With postmodern understanding I respond, “Nothing.” Judaism points to God. God spoke to and through Jewish people for generations. God continues to work in and among the Jewish people and tradition.

So as a Jew did Saul need to be converted? Certainly when we hear his story we recognize that he needed some kind of conversion. How healthy can it be to breathe threats and murder about those who believe differently than you? The writer of Acts (who we call Luke since Acts is part II of Luke’s writing) reports that Saul was ready to bind any Jesus followers and bring them back to Jerusalem and present them to the authorities.

He was angry, probably fearful, about what these new interpreters of the tradition were up to. If Saul’s conversion is from an angry man with murderous thoughts to a man with new understanding and compassion — then I am all for this conversion.

But I wonder if reading Saul’s dramatic conversion experience satisfies a need for spiritual superiority as Christians centuries later. Does his complete turn around prove that his is the definitive experience of God and that all Christians, and Jews and everybody, should be seeking dramatic conversion experiences? What about those of us who don’t have such earth-shaking stories? Are we worthy Christians?

I have been reading the latest book by preacher and author, Brian McLaren. After writing books called *A New Kind of Christian* and *The Secret Message of Jesus*, McLaren goes all the way with a book called *A New Kind of*

Christianity. While I mostly appreciate the general direction he is going, there are plenty of Christians who are threatened by the work McLaren has been doing the past 10 years. The call for a new kind of Christianity is one more menace that he is propagating to God-fearing Christians.

Evangelicals, fundamentalists and even some emergent church folks rail against McLaren and his supporters who understand the Bible in a less literal way. McLaren asks questions of Christianity rather than expecting it to provide all the answers. McLaren invites readers to rethink authority, the Bible, Jesus, the gospel, church, pluralism and other important pieces of the faith puzzle.

His detractors are vociferous and graphic. A quick check on the Web and one can find a picture of a wolf in sheep's clothing used to illustrate a scathing critique of McLaren's work. The Lighthouse Trails Research Project and Apprising Ministries warn that if we get on this bandwagon with McLaren and his cohorts we are being driven toward a "Global Religion." Beware also contemplative spirituality, Catholicism and The Purpose Driven Life.

I hope these Christian leaders who so strongly oppose McLaren are not breathing murderous threats. It is clear they are fearful of new teachings or different interpretations that may challenge the people for whom they feel spiritually responsible. As religious leaders, they are holding tight to what they know best and to what was taught to them. Likewise, McLaren is not breathing deadly threats at the evangelical church but he sure does want it to change.

In making this comparison, we are reminded once again that as was the case with Saul, religious people have the tendency to insist there is one way to experience God, one way to have Christ revealed, one way to achieve salvation.

While my study leads me to wonder about Saul's conversion from one thing to another, I also recognize that the account in Acts is told by Luke. While this is the most familiar account of Saul's' conversion, Saul (later Paul) himself writes about his experience in Galatians and it is quite a different story.

We heard part of the story from Acts this morning. After Saul is blinded, Luke tells us that Saul is rescued by the Jesus follower, Ananias. Ananias is reluctant to go to Saul as his violent reputation precedes him. *But God says, "Saul is the instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel."* In the presence of Ananias, Saul regains his sight, fellowships with the disciples in Damascus for several days and immediately begins preaching in the synagogues.

In Galatians 1, Paul writes his own version of the experience. Paul says that Christ was revealed to him, though he does not claim to have been blinded by a light or hear a voice. He simply says, *"God called me by divine grace, choosing to reveal God's Own through me, that I might spread Christ among the Gentiles. Immediately without seeking human advisors or even going to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before me, I went off to Arabia; later I returned to Damascus."*

Should these different versions of the same story make us uncomfortable? It depends how we understand the Bible, its purpose, its origins, its use for us

today. The different story doesn't bother me as much as the fact that Luke, years after the fact, uses this early follower Saul/Paul for his own purposes in telling the story of the early church. But perhaps the story took on a life of its own when Paul's ministry began to flourish. Or maybe the experience was so unusual Paul didn't really talk about it much and certainly not in writing to the congregation in Galatia. In any case, God was revealed to Saul and it changed his life and the trajectory of the Jesus movement.

But this is not the only way God is revealed. In the passage from Revelation 5 we don't see God, but it is clear that God is present. The text depicts the revelation of God through the power of joining together in worship — angels, humans and creatures. The whole of creation joins together in song and praise.

If you have ever been part of a large gathering of singing Mennonites, this scene may feel familiar to you. *Myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands singing with full voice, "Blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever."* A rich experience of worship can feel like God revealed in a new way.

Or perhaps you are not a singer — you resonate more with the creatures in the Revelation passage. Maybe you are most aware of God's presence and the revealed nature of God when you become one with the environment.

Or perhaps the physical act of falling down, of moving the body in worship, as the elders do in this passage, is more akin to your experience. Running, dance, tai chi, biking — all physical ways in which we might encounter God.

It only takes three passages from the lectionary this morning to see that there are a variety of ways that God is revealed. There are multiple ways to experience God.

In Revelation we have God revealed through worship. When all of earth and heaven are in harmony God is there; we enter God's presence. In Acts, we have God revealed through light and sound and then fellowship. The writer of John gives us God revealed through the every day acts of work, food and conversation as we heard in the time for children.

So what does this mean for us? How do we experience God? How is God revealed to us?

When is it that, like Saul, you are stopped in your tracks and have to pay attention to something that seems outside of yourself? Or have you had an experience like in Revelation when it seemed that all of heaven and earth were working together in harmony? Or have you ever like the disciples seen someone familiar or a common situation in a whole new way? When you are surprised or caught off guard by the simple or the remarkable, stop for just a moment, just one breath. Breathe a breath of gratitude, of thankfulness. This is God revealed.

Here at Hyattsville Mennonite we tend to spend more time on the questions of faith than the answers. Some of us grew up with such strong answers that when we discovered questions could be asked, we just couldn't get enough. Asking the questions, wondering, wrestling, asking some more has become part of our spiritual practice.

But endless questioning doesn't work for everyone. I have heard several people in this very congregation say that they wish we would talk more about what we can affirm, rather than what we question. Could we talk about what we hold onto rather than what we are letting go? (Oh dear, do you hear that? I am even asking this as a question!)

I would venture that, except on membership Sunday when new members share their spiritual journeys, most of us are hesitant to talk about our personal understandings of the holy. We don't speak much of the mysterious and inexplicable experiences that somehow make us feel connected to God, make us feel part of something greater than ourselves.

I suggest that we begin to pay attention to those ways that we see God revealed, personally and among us here in the gathered community.

This may be quite difficult for some of us. We don't all connect to mystery. Many of us gravitate more to the rational. Or we understand our faith more by action than belief. What actions connect us most to God? In what beautiful, rational experiences do we see the likelihood of Love? The possibility of an energy that connects us all?

In this community of worship, work and service, can we take the risk to share our experiences of God revealed? Do we dare speak aloud the ways that God is at work and together grow in our understandings of God in the world.

Today instead of a hymn of response, I invite you, if you feel comfortable to turn to someone near you and speak of a time when you experienced God revealed, when you were caught off guard just enough that you did a double take

and said, oh maybe that is Christ. Let's take a few moments in silence for you to remember a time and then I will invite us to share with one another. I will ring the bell to bring us back. May we be granted courage and grace to see the risen Christ in the world and to join in Christ's work.