



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
 Asheville, North Carolina  
 5 May 2019  
 Sermon: Damascus Road  
 Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

John 21:1-14  
 Acts 9:1-9

Saul blinded on the road to Damascus. The lectionary this week offers us a choice. You can read chapter 9 all the way to verse 19, following blind Saul down the road to the city, where a helpful disciple named Ananias cares for him until the scales fall from his eyes, and he regains his sight and strength and is filled with the Holy Spirit. Or, you can end early, in the first few verses of the chapter, stopping with Saul, blind on the road, surrounded by the darkness. And this week, we need to stay lost with Saul.<sup>1</sup> Because:

- On Tuesday a 19 year old former student walked into UNC Charlotte, about 130 miles from this very spot. He carried a pistol and shot 2 students to death on their last day of class and injured 4 others, 3 of them critically. One of those killed died as he disarmed the shooter. Riley Howell was from Waynesville and a student at TC Robertson, right here in Buncombe County.

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<sup>1</sup> I am thankful to Cathy Caldwell Hoop's helpful commentary in picking up this thematic difference in the lectionary options. See Joel B. Green et. al (Eds). *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Vol. 2*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 219-220.

- And on Saturday a week ago a teenage gunman walked into Chabad (Kyi-bad), a Hasidic Synagogue in Poway, California, right before Shabbat services. He killed a woman who had come to offer prayers for her deceased mother and injured the rabbi.
- And on Easter Sunday, 2 weeks ago today, suicide bombs exploded in three Christian churches in Sri Lanka, killing over 200.
- And before that, March 15, 7 weeks ago, in Christchurch, New Zealand, a 28-year-old gunman entered 2 separate mosques during Friday prayer services, killing 50 worshippers, streaming the massacre online. The Sunday following that shooting, we rang 50 handbells, one for each of the dead, here in this room, to honor their lives. That was 7 weeks ago, but it feels like yesterday. That was 5 weeks before Sri Lanka, 6 weeks before Chabad, 7 weeks before Charlotte.
- And on and on, and on and on.

So, I feel a sense of familiarity with Saul along that road, Saul who was once so certain that he was doing the right thing, the work of God, but suddenly he lost his way, thrown into utter confusion. This week, while preparing to preach a resurrection sermon today, on the third Sunday of Easter, I found myself lost on the road with Saul.

Have you felt lost this week?

I started on Monday reading many of the stories and responses to the Chabad Synagogue shooting. A couple titles caught my eye. One read: “Why Do Jews Have to be Murdered for you to Admit Anti-Semitism is Real.”<sup>2</sup> That one hit home, because it’s right. Anti-Semitism is not something I think about often. Another, article was this striking lamentation by a Jewish mother named Carly Pildis. In her article, “Once We Were Free,” she writes, “The era where the Jew could consider herself safe here, safer than anywhere else in the rest of the world, has ended. My daughter will grow up with a Judaism under lock and key. Prayer behind armed guards. Jumping out of your skin if a child knocks over a folding chair. No babies out of sight. No hiding behind the synagogue curtains with their best friends, trading chocolates and whispering secrets. Stay close to Mom,” she writes.<sup>3</sup> That article was published Monday. The next day was the UNC Charlotte shooting. Can we stay in this moment of lamentation, for a moment? Can we sit with Saul in the darkness along the road? We are there, in confusion, in helplessness, in the darkness with him.

But it’s not that Saul was just suddenly lost. He was implicated by the darkness. And likewise, reading today’s scripture beside these articles, I couldn’t

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<sup>2</sup> Ariel Sobel, “Why Do Jews Have to be Murdered for You to Admit Anti-Semitism is Real?” *Forward*. April 28, 2019. <http://jd.fo/ypmk>

<sup>3</sup> Carly Pildis. “Once We were Free: Mourning the Era of American Jewish Freedom.” *Tablet*. April 29, 2019. <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/284038/once-we-were-free>

help but be struck by some of the language of Acts, chapter 9. 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.” That language comes with some baggage today. The author of Luke-Acts wrote during a time when Christians were this persecuted minority, but we do not read this story as first century Christians. We read it as the inheritors of millennia of Christian persecution of Jews and poor theology claiming Christians have superseded the Jews in the eyes of God. Today, in a way the author of Luke and Acts could never have foreseen or intended, this text about a violent Pharisee can be used as justification for violence and anti-Semitism in the hands of white supremacists like the shooters in Poway and Christchurch.

For example, we even learned this week that the shooter in Poway went to a Presbyterian church. When his name came out, his pastor responded to reporters, saying, “It certainly calls for a good amount of soul-searching.” The shooter’s pastor said, “We can’t pretend as though we didn’t have some responsibility for him — he was radicalized into white nationalism from within the very midst of our church.”<sup>4</sup> When that story came out, many of my Presbyterian friends spoke about

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<sup>4</sup> Julie Zauzmer, “The Alleged Synagogue Shooter was a Churchgoer who talked Christian Theology, Raising Tough Questions for Evangelical Pastors.” *The Washington Post*. May 1,

how important it is to name the violence our tradition carries, the violent histories of interpretation in our scriptures. And part of me wanted to be defensive and say, ‘oh, but of course, not here, not Grace Covenant. We name these histories every week.’ But I return to that title of the article that struck me so deeply early this week, “Why Do Jews Have to be Murdered for you to Admit Anti-Semitism Exists.” And I wondered, why did that strike me so? Where have I been silent when I should have spoken out? What have I conveniently overlooked? Saul was implicated in the fact of his being lost. How am I implicated? How are we? Again, that feeling of being lost beside him.

So then, in the middle of all this, on the Damascus road, come these pictures of God showing up. Monday there was an editorial by the Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein. It begins with the line, “Today should be my funeral.” At the top of story is a picture of Rabbi Goldstein giving a news conference. His hands both wrapped in blue casts, covering his injuries. He was shot in both hands. He lost one of his fingers. “I used to sing a song to my children,” he writes, “a song that my father sang to me when I was a child. ‘Hashem is here,’ I would sing, using a Hebrew name for God, pointing with my right index finger to the sky. ‘Hashem is there,’ I would sing, pointing to my right and left. ‘Hashem is truly everywhere.’ That

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2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/05/01/alleged-synagogue-shooter-was-churchgoer-who-articulated-christian-theology-prompting-tough-questions-evangelical-pastors/>

finger I would use to point out God's omnipresence was taken from me," writes the Rabbi.

"I pray that my missing finger serves as a constant reminder to me. A reminder that every single human being is created in the image of God; a reminder that I am part of a people that has survived the worst destruction and will always endure; a reminder that my ancestors gave their lives so that I can live in freedom in America; and a reminder, most of all, to never, ever, not ever be afraid to be Jewish."<sup>5</sup>

This Rabbi proclaims the omnipresence of God the day after his synagogue was attacked by a white supremacist gunman. The day after his body was maimed in a house of prayer. You see, it's not just that God is present in the darkness. Of course, God is present. What stands out, what we from our vantage point must see, is God present precisely in this incarnation, an injured Rabbi embracing that which makes him stand out, that which makes him persecuted, because it is how he proclaims the love of God.

Another image. In the days after the Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka, Muslims on the island feared for their lives. The country has a long history of anti-Muslim violence, including a series of anti-Muslim riots there just last year. In the

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<sup>5</sup> Yisroel Goldstein, "A Terrorist Tried to Kill Me Because I Am a Jew. I Will Never Back Down." *The New York Times*. April 29, 2019. <https://nyti.ms/2IQbIS2>

days after the bombings, the president passed a law forbidding clothing that covered the face, directly affecting the religious practices of Muslim women, a small minority within the country. Hundreds of Muslim refugees fled the island's port cities where ethnic tensions run high and went into hiding in the interior cities. Armed guards policed the mosques. While Christians buried their dead, local Muslims feared for their lives. But in the midst of that fear, they also voiced their love and solidarity with those who were killed. The twitter hashtag #MyFastMySriLanka began to trend later that week as Muslims across the country declared a day of fasting and prayer for the victims of the bombing. The day before the fast, a Sri Lankan Muslim and journalist named Raashid Riza explained its significance, "Together with my fellow Sri Lankan Muslims, I will be fasting tomorrow from dawn to dusk. I will be foregoing any food and drink during this period... Fasting is a special act of worship done by Muslims, it is a time and state in which prayers are answered. It is a state in which it is incumbent upon us to be more charitable, with our time, warmth and whatever we could share. I will be fasting and praying tomorrow, to ease the pain and suffering of those affected."<sup>6</sup>

And again, here is God present in the darkness, in a very particular incarnation: Fearing persecution themselves, Muslims across Sri Lanka committed

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<sup>6</sup> Raashid Riza, "Sri Lankan Muslims to Fast in Solidarity With Fellow Christians." *Muslim Matters*. April 24, 2019. <https://muslimmatters.org/2019/04/24/sri-lankan-muslims-to-fast-in-solidarity-with-fellow-christians/>

themselves to witness to the God of peace through fasting and prayer in solidarity with their Christian siblings.

One final story. I am facebook friends with a professor of queer theory and religion at UNC-Charlotte named Kent Britnall. On Wednesday, the day after the shooting, he posted this paragraph that would be the end of a lecture he was giving the next day at a Christian seminary. In it, he talks with appreciation of the many prayers given to the students, faculty, and parents affected by the shooting, but he notices an absence of concern for the shooter, for his family. He writes, “I don’t think a person walks into a classroom, pulls out a pistol and opens fire on his classmates without carrying with him some form of unresolved pain...And I imagine that the worry, confusion and helplessness experienced by someone whose child is facing murder charges is comparable to that experienced by a parent whose child is in critical condition in a hospital bed...Insofar as we think in terms of villains and victims...insofar as we think that some people deserve compassion—as if vulnerability and powerlessness aren’t always relative conditions—and that some people merit scorn—as if cruelty and the will to power aren’t colors we’ve all worn, then we...will continue to fuel the machinery of violence with our sense of being in the right and on the side of the good, which is what always fuels violence. I don’t know how to eradicate [this] endemic [violence]...but I remain



convinced, that any attempt to do so that involves taking sides, that acts as if we are not each broken and a breaker, will be woefully inadequate to the task.”<sup>7</sup>

And there again is God, in a professor of the university that is the latest, but surely not the last in a growing list of schools. God incarnated in the condemnation of our certainty, our self-righteousness, our divisions and distortions, our inability to name our own pain and brokenness. God incarnated in the proclamation that such are at root in the violence we see.

Today, we celebrate 66 years of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church on this anniversary Sunday. There is so much to celebrate. For the first anniversary Sunday in many years, we have a full staff; membership is peaking and growing; we met the budget this year, the biggest in our history; there are numerous, vital and tangible ways our community is reaching out, partnering with and learning from the communities outside of these walls. Today is a day of celebration; it is; and at the same time, yes, it’s also one of feeling lost.

Is that strange? You know, I don’t think so, not in these days. So, let’s not ignore this tension; in a time of celebration *and* confusion, let us not retreat to our own certainty, our own sense of being right and having all the answers, like Saul before the Damascus Road. Rather, let us live into the uncertainty of this time, and

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<sup>7</sup> Kent Brintnall is associate professor of religious studies at UNC Charlotte. You can read more about his research at <https://pages.uncc.edu/kent-brintnall/>. This paragraph was posted to his facebook account on May 1, 2019.

keep looking at how God is calling out to us in the darkness, and keep searching for God today, because God is showing up, again and again and again, sometimes in unexpected places, the places where we might not look, if we thought we already had all the answers. God shows up, and calls us to show up, not despite our feeling lost, but in the very midst of it all, on our Damascus Road. And that truly is something to celebrate. Amen.