

SERMON TITLE: "Varieties of Religious Experience: Lightning Bolt Jolt"
SERMON TEXT: Acts 9:1-19
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 14, 2016, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday afternoon, two people were found dead in a cemetery in Batavia, New York. No, I'm not talking about people buried in graves. I'm talking about two people who were above ground. Police believe the two were under a tree when a storm went through, and their deaths occurred when lightning struck the tree. These days, most Americans are being more careful about lightning than we used to be, so the numbers of casualties are going down. But, averaged over the past 20 years, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration indicates that the odds of an American being struck by lightning in any given year is about one in a million—which would be the equivalent of three people per year in Utah. The odds of one of us being struck in our lifetime are about one in 12,000. On average, about 500 Americans are hit by lightning in any given year, and about 50 of them die. The other 450 or so sustain varying degrees of injuries.¹

My guess is that's what happened to the man named Saul, who later became known as the Apostle Paul. Saul of Tarsus was making his way along the road to Damascus when, "suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him," knocking him to the ground, and blinding him. While his companions temporarily lost their speech, Saul heard the voice of the Lord speaking to him in this lightning bolt jolt.

For these first three Sundays of August, we're exploring varieties of religious experience. Last week, we overheard the conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well, a person whose soul had become parched from various kinds of discrimination and hardship. In her story, we discovered how Jesus offers us the same opportunity to be quenched by living water. Today, as we enter into this story in Acts 9, we move from the soothing and revitalizing nature of water to the startling and shocking impact of

fire and light. As we observe this conversion and calling of Saul, we might wonder if we, ourselves, are in need of a lightning bolt jolt.

1—WHO WAS SAUL?

Let's begin by asking, "Who was Saul?" Saul was a Jewish man who was well-educated and raised as a strict Pharisee. At the same time that the earliest Christians were beginning to spread their faith in Jerusalem and beyond, Saul was holding strong to traditional Jewish beliefs. In his own words to the Philippians, he "was circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, a Hebrew born of Hebrews" and blameless under the law.² He was a straight arrow who obeyed what he was taught, and he thought everyone else should too, even if by force. That's why Acts 8:1 says that young Saul approved of the killing of the Christian believer Stephen. And that's why Acts 8:3 says that "Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house. Dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison." And that's why Acts 9:1 tells us that Saul was "breathing threats and murder."

According to verses one and two, Saul had gone to the high priest in Jerusalem and had gotten documents that must have been like subpoenas or warrants for arrest. And, on this day, Saul was zealously delivering those letters of judgment to the Jewish synagogues in Damascus. With his hands full of such great authority, Saul must have been feeling pretty sure of himself. His goal was to round up, hold accountable, and punish those Jews whose faith had become compromised and contaminated with Christian beliefs. Saul was confident that those followers of Jesus, or followers of "the way," as they were called back then, were leading Jews down a slippery slope and must be stopped.

I guess that's why it took a lightning bolt jolt to bring about a change in Saul's life. When you're that sure of yourself, when you're that determined, when you're that confident that other people are wrong, when you're that zealous to keep the traditions that you've inherited and fight off the new changes, then a conversation about living water beside a well might not be enough to get your attention. Maybe, just maybe, you'd need a kick in the seat of the pants and a jolt strong enough to knock you to the

ground. Maybe instead of leading the charge, you'd need a religious experience that would force you to humbly accept someone else's guidance. When you're that sure that you see the truth with a capital "T," maybe you'd need to be blinded for a few days in order to get a new and clearer perspective. Maybe you'd need some down time to fast and pray. If that's what Saul needed, that's what he got.

2—WHO COULD SAUL BECOME?

Of course, this lightning bolt jolt story isn't just about who Saul was. It's also about who he could become. And that's where Ananias enters the stage. According to verse 10, Ananias was a disciple who lived there in Damascus. Ananias would have been one of those Jews messing around with Christian beliefs and practices. He would have been one of those wayward, heretical, law-breaking Jews that Saul was trying to arrest and haul off to Jerusalem for trial and punishment.

So, when the Lord came to Ananias in a vision and told him to go to Straight Street to look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, it's no wonder Ananias balked a bit. It wasn't that Ananias didn't want to do God's bidding. When God first called Ananias in the vision, Ananias quickly responded, "Here I am, Lord." Just like in the Old Testament story of young Samuel who responded to God's call in the middle of the night, Ananias was responsive and ready. But to go to Saul of Tarsus—yikes! Ananias had heard from many people about how much evil Saul had done to the Christian saints in Jerusalem already. And now he was right there in Damascus. And the Lord Jesus wanted Ananias to go find him?! Wouldn't it be better to hide instead?

But the Lord works in mysterious ways, doesn't he? Do you get it that Jesus was asking a so-called wayward and heretical Christian Jew to correct and guide a law-abiding, traditional Jew into a new and better kind of faith? Do you get it that Ananias was to lay healing hands on the guy who wanted to lay hurtful hands on him? It's truth stranger than fiction. You couldn't make this stuff up.

And why was Jesus asking Ananias to seek out and heal Saul? In verse 15, the Lord said, "Go, for [Saul] is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the

people of Israel.” Despite his past record of breathing threats and murder against the Christian believers, apparently Saul had a skill set that the Lord needed if the Christian faith was going to advance.

Saul was raised in the city of Tarsus, in what is now the country of Turkey. That was a crossroads of the ancient world. Tarsus was a cosmopolitan city where Saul would have grown up speaking Greek and even reading the Old Testament scriptures translated from Hebrew into the language of Greek life and culture. His life experience of dealing with Greek and Roman people provided a natural bridge for a ministry that would later connect Jews and Gentiles through the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ.

Apparently the lightning bolt jolt was enough to redirect Saul’s zeal, or at least to get him started on the new path. And the suffering he had just experienced, and would continue to endure, would cause Saul to become a more grace-filled and compassionate messenger of the gospel of Jesus Christ. With that explanation, Ananias obeyed Christ’s call and found Saul at the house. Ananias laid his hands on Saul and prayed over him. After Ananias’ blessing of accepting forgiveness, Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit and his sight was restored. Saul got up, was baptized, ate, and began to regain his strength.

According to his letter to the Galatians, it took some time for him to get things figured out and get on with his ministry. In contrast, Acts 9:20 indicates that Saul immediately began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues. Whichever it was, later or sooner, the Saul who persecuted Christians became known as the Apostle Paul whose missionary journeys, church starts, and pastoral letters of encouragement and teaching did more to promote the Christian faith than anyone other than Jesus himself. If Saul had clung to his Jewish righteousness, if he would have persisted in his stubborn and determined opposition to Christian teaching, we probably wouldn’t be here in a church today. But because Saul interpreted that lightning bolt jolt as a message from God to change his ways and to be more open-minded, Saul not only overcame his aversion to Jews accepting Christ, but he even came to believe that unclean Gentiles could become Christians too. Saul came to realize that some old Jewish traditions and laws didn’t translate well

into the Mediterranean world view and lifestyle, and that those binding rules and limiting structures really weren't necessary for receiving salvation through faith and grace in Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

So, I guess now all that's left in this sermon is for us to figure out how Saul's experience on the Road to Damascus relates to us. I hope we don't have to be struck by a lightning bolt for God to get our attention and open our minds. I hope we don't feel so strongly about our religious correctness that we think it's OK to accuse, persecute, or deny other people's faith and calling. We who are quite loyal to a faith tradition hold onto it tightly because it gives us strength and confidence. It anchors us through the storms of life. It shines like a beacon in the dark. Dedication to laws of faith and order gives us assurance of our own salvation, it allows us to point others toward that same hope, and it gives us purpose as a church.

But, as Saul's lightning bolt jolt shows us, even the most faithful believers can sometimes be so rigid that God has to shine some shockingly bright light on the situation and reveal to us our blind spots. The question then is, "When Ananias shows up to lay hands on us, will we accept God's healing touch? Will we realize our opportunity to embrace Christ's mercy and grace? Will we allow Christ to work through us to speak words of loving kindness to those who have felt left out of God's plan of salvation?"

This story of Saul's religious experience is told three times in the Book of Acts—in chapters 9, 22, and 26. It's a power-surged testimony of how God re-set Saul's thinking and mission and changed the trajectory of the Christian church. Saul's variety of religious experience may not be what you need. But if it is, I invite you to claim it today. Allow God to give you a lightning bolt jolt.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lightning_strike

²Philippians 3:5.