

“Who is Calling?”

Psalm 121; Acts 9:1-9

July 28, 2024

Intro story 1

- I read many years ago the rather sad story of a young man who was about to graduate from college.
- He very much wanted a car and expected his dad to give him one.
- On the day of graduation, his father was there with a gift, but it wasn't a car.
 - o It was instead a Bible.
 - o Well, the son being rather brash and unkind, took the Bible and was deeply disappointed in his dad.
 - Although they didn't cut ties, they weren't close.
 - Several years later, the father died.
- When he was going through things, he found that Bible, the one he never opened.
 - o Opening it up, he discovered that inside was a check with the exact amount for the car he wanted. All he had to do was open the Book.
- Stories like that remind us sometimes that the very best thing in the world is right in front of us but we may not be aware of it.
- In our reading this morning, Saul wasn't aware of what was going to happen to him.
 - o In a very real way, the hunter is going to become the hunted.

Intro story #2

- Richard Connell, in his story, “The Most Dangerous Game”, tells a compelling narrative about a big game hunter, Roger Rainsford.
- Roger is a world known big game hunter, travelling to faraway places to hunt dangerous quarries.
- One day though, traveling to a hunt, his ship encounters a terrible storm and is capsized.
 - o Only by sheer will and great swimming does Rainford make landfall.
- It's a foreign island but after a time, hearing shots, he knew the land was inhabited.
 - o He makes contact with a Russian General Zaroff and his servants.
- That night, they have a great dinner, a banquet for the hunter.
 - o During the course of the meal, his host, the General talks giddily about his next hunt.
 - That he'll be hunting something supremely intelligent, really capable and has great reason.
- But wait, says Rainsford, “Animals don't reason!”
 - o To which the General replies slyly, “One does.”
- That's when he knows. Rainsford himself is to be this Russian General's next quarry.

The Hunter Becomes the Hunted

- Paul here is undergoing something of a similar effect.
- He is, after all, hunting in a very terrible way.
- As we know, Paul is actively persecuting people on “The Way,” That's what they called Christians early on.
 - o Makes sense and sometimes I think we ought to go back to it.
 - First of all, it's very Biblical – Jesus tells us that “He's the Way” so to be on it immediately involves Jesus.
 - It also indicates an active, participatory calling, not something just intellectual for our minds.
 - Being on the way connects activity, movement and progress. You're heading somewhere, heaven by way of personal Holiness.
- Who was Saul really before this event?
- Philippians 3:4-6: *“If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.”*

- Here's what that would sound like in modern terms:
 - o "Listen, if anyone thinks they have impressive credentials, I have more. I was born into the best family, with deep roots in the most influential community. From my childhood, I was immersed in the finest traditions and education. It's like being born into a wealthy, well-connected family, attending an Ivy League school, and excelling in every aspect.
 - o I wasn't just an average student; I graduated at the top of my class. Picture someone with multiple degrees from the most elite institutions, who not only excelled academically but also was a leader in various organizations and recognized for their achievements.
 - o I was a member of the most exclusive circles, someone who adhered strictly to all the rules and traditions. Think of someone who follows every law and regulation to the letter, gaining a reputation as a model citizen.
 - o In my career, I was unmatched in my dedication and zeal. Imagine a top lawyer, a star athlete, or a leading business executive known for their relentless drive and passion. I was considered the best in my field, a rising star with a spotless reputation.
 - o When it came to defending my beliefs, I was fervent and uncompromising. I went above and beyond, working tirelessly to protect and promote what I believed in. It's like being a prominent activist or public figure, known for taking strong stances and making significant impacts.
 - o In summary, I had it all—status, education, reputation, and dedication. By any modern standard, I was at the pinnacle of success and sophistication."
- This was who Paul was.
- But despite his privileges, Paul was doing some horrible things, persecuting those on the Way.
 - o And we know he loved his job. Damascus is 150 miles from Jerusalem.
 - That makes it a week and a half travelling time, one way.
 - Saul was travelling great distances in his persecution of the church.
- So, what exactly was Paul doing?
 - o He tells us later in Acts 26:9-11
 - *"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests, I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities."*
- Paul was a bad guy who thought of himself as the savior.
 - o Likely we've all met people like that.
 - o Maybe we've even been that person ourselves if we're honest about it.

And Yet

- And yet this is the person that God chooses to do something BIG through?
 - o If you trace your faith backwards in time, you'd find its roots run right through his man and the churches he planted on behalf of the Lord, Jesus Christ.
- Yet, this is the person that God chooses to have pen a great portion of our New Testament by.
 - o This person.
- Really???
- And it's just God showing off.
 - o He can take the worst possible material and create the best possible ending.
 - Just think about the Cross.
 - Is there anything WORSE humanity could have done to the Son of God?
 - o And yet God uses the cross to save us through.
 - What we intend for bad, God used to His Good.

- In the same way, God takes this terrible example of humanity and glorifies him in such a way that we'll be talking about him forever.
 - o God has that kind of power.

What does this episode teach us?

- First of all, it reinforces the idea that we proclaim.
 - o "Christ is ALIVE!"
 - By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is as present among us today as ever.
 - He lives, as the song goes and, because of it, I can face tomorrow.
 - Sometimes we can look out on the world and it looks pretty bleak.
 - Remember this episode when it does.
 - o Because it reminds you that God is still at work even when things look dark.
 - o He is still converting people to his love and grace.
 - o Things will get better by these people.
- Secondly, God can and does choose even the worst among us to rehabilitate.
 - o Personally, I thank God for that.
 - While I was no Saul, I was a terrible person, lying cheating, stealing.
 - Somehow God got me caught up in all of this wonderfulness for whatever reason I'll never know.
 - Like yesterday, Bible School.
 - What a great day under the sun!
- God's power is not limited, He can change ANYBODY.
 - o That mean there's hope in the world for everybody.
 - No one is out of luck when it comes to faith.
 - I here think of Augustine, another important Christian from early on.
 - o His writings were very influential in the rise and development of Christ's church.
 - o He was a bad dude, especially using women.
 - But God changed him, too.
- Third, it teaches us that Jesus is in UNION with His church.
 - o This is important.
 - o Jesus CARES about what is happening at His church.

Jesus cares about what is happening at Cook's.

- Jesus cares.
- Jesus sees us.
 - o Big day yesterday. I wish you could've been here.
 - Volunteers, kids, MESSY THINGS AND WATER BALLOONS.
 - It was a majestic day in which we got to teach little kids about the power of God!
 - o This is a good thing and Christ rejoices with us.