

“Not Beyond Redemption”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

John 21:1-19
Acts 9:1-20

What is the last *awful* thing you have done? We’ve all done terrible things, surely some worse than others. And we’ve all been in that shameful place of wanting things to be right again, but not sure how to find our way back to healing what has been broken.

The writer Debie Thomas shares about the devastating impact of shame in her household growing up. As she describes, “I didn’t grow up in a home or culture that practiced restoration. Despite my family’s best intentions, we never found our way to a language of grace. We never said or heard, “I forgive you,” or, “It’s okay,” or “I still love you.” Instead, we abandoned the wrongdoer in our midst to a thick, damning silence. We withdrew affection to reestablish honor. We avoided eye contact, shut down authentic conversation, and rendered the offense and the offender invisible.

“Eventually, after hours, days, or weeks — depending on the severity of the sin — the ice thawed, and life returned to a bruised normal. But a wound still festered below the surface. A thick, hot shame that filled my body and assured me that I was unfixable, unlovable, and wrong.”¹

Now when we look at the person Saul, before he became Paul, had been up to the point Jesus encounters him on the road to Damascus, we can find many reasons to shame him. He stood there watching as people stoned Stephen, a new Christian proselyte; even held the coats of those who hurled stones. As the scriptures report, “And Saul approved of their killing him.” He goes on to ravage the church, pulling Christians from their homes and sending them to prison.

Saul, you should know, was part of the Jewish diaspora. He was born in Tarsus, which is in modern day Turkey— far removed from Jerusalem and Judea. I wonder if, as part of the Jewish diaspora, he felt a special calling to preserve what he understood to be the Jewish faith, considering he had already spent his life practicing it in opposition to the cultures around him.

At the beginning of today’s reading from Acts, Saul is on his way from Jerusalem to the synagogues at Damascus, in Syria— again, a place outside Judea, but a place where the good news of Jesus had already taken hold. Saul he is breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. In his satchel, or maybe gripped in his clenched fist, are letters he requested from the high priest, letters that allow him to arrest any followers of The Way— men or

¹ Debie Thomas, “You Know Everything” in *Journey with Jesus* blog, April 28, 2019.

women— and bring them bound to Jerusalem. We're not sure what would happen next to them, but having seen what had just happened to Stephen, we might guess.

I want to note that Saul's *intent* was in line with the teachings of his faith and of the prophets. Jesus was not the only one of that time period whom people proclaimed to be the Messiah. There were others too, and those who were committed to preserving the faith did not believe that the Messiah promised by the prophets had yet come. They did not want these various leaders, whom they sincerely believed were false leaders, to fracture the Jewish community which was already fragile under Roman rule. And so, Saul carried letters with the intent to keep the faith pure.

However, I've learned that *intent* does not always excuse actions. We fail in our intent for religious purity when our zeal for faith relies on violence and authoritarianism. Holy intervention was necessary. With a heavenly light flashing around him, Saul hears the voice of Jesus saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Now, it doesn't happen often that a holy voice speaks a name *twice* while calling a biblical character. It happened to Moses, when Moses encountered God at the burning bush: "Moses, Moses!" And Moses replied, "Henini"-- in Hebrew, "Behold me; here I am." It happened to the boy Samuel, when God called him in the temple: "Samuel, Samuel," to which the boy called "Henini," "Here am I!" – it took a few times before the boy actually realized the voice was God's, but he was ready to respond, regardless. When God uses the name of Abraham— great patriarch of faith— twice, it is in a moment when Abraham has gone too far with his zeal for following God. He has bound his precious son, Isaac, on the altar, and is about to strike him with a knife to sacrifice before God when a voice interrupts him: "Abraham, Abraham!" "Hanini— Here I am" Abraham replied. Then God forcefully commanded, "Do not lay a hand on the boy or do anything to him."

I think the fact that Jesus speaks Saul's name twice is similar to God speaking Abraham's name twice— Jesus needs to get Saul's attention to prevent him from doing something horrendous in God's name. "Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me"

But unlike Abraham, unlike Samuel, and unlike Moses, Saul does not reply with a "Here I am!" Instead he asks, "Who *are* you, Lord?" He does not yet have a relationship with the one who has called him. But that does not stop Jesus from grabbing hold of this man and changing the path he will follow. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he says— then gives directions for Saul to find the people in Damascus who will receive him into Christian community. Saul gets up, and though his eyes are open, he cannot see anything. For three days he experiences blindness and fasts. In that period of blindness, he becomes better able to see how Jesus will come to be the center of his life and his call.

As it turns out, Saul became Paul, and he ended up sending out different kinds of letters: these letters tell the good news of Jesus Christ, and the wildly inclusive church formed through him, which included people of all genders, slave and free, Jews and Gentiles. His letters make up most of the New Testament beyond the gospels. As it turned out, a Jewish man who knew what it was like living out a faith while in diaspora provided some skills Jesus needed to stretch the

church to the corners of the earth. This awful, violent man was not beyond redemption; Jesus could see that, and after a period of blindness, Paul could see that too.

This incredible story resonates with me today in a few ways. First, we have to realize that the holy can break into our lives at any point, and call us toward transformation.

I have a friend, also named Paul: Paul Stetsenko, who was the music director at the church I served in Alexandria years ago. He is a Juilliard graduate, a genius not just in music but in his immense knowledge on just about any topic. He has an oddball sense of humor, and I remember him as a real cynic. He is also from Ukraine. A couple of years ago, he left the church we had both served, and I can see from social media that he is now living as a brother in an Orthodox monastery in PA. I believe this might have been the last place I would imagine Paul. I can see from what he posts on social media that he paints the most beautiful religious icons— these populate his Facebook feed, along with rare pictures of Paul, whose blond hair and beard are getting longer and longer in each photo. We haven't been close enough over the years for me to hear the story of his transformation, but I'm sure there is a story there. However, he did say in one of his social media posts "painting is the same as what I did at Westminster, but this time in paint and colors. In a hindsight, while in service at Westminster Presbyterian, I was painting icons, only in sound." So, we never know what might be happening in Renée's mind while she's sharing her music with us in worship.

I've learned that within Orthodox Christianity, there is painful division right now. The Moscow Patriarch Kirill has aligned Russian Orthodoxy with the will of Putin, in support of war against Ukraine. Years before the war started, a fundamentalism was brewing in Russian Orthodoxy, called *Russkii mir*— meaning "Russian World" ideology, which teaches that there is a Holy Russia, or "Holy Rus" which includes Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, and sometimes Moldova and Kazakhstan. It teaches that Russia is the center of this world, Moscow is its political heart, Russian must be the common language, and the Russian Orthodox Church and its leadership must dictate the common spirituality, morality, and culture. This Russian World stands against the corrupt west, which it teaches has fallen too far into liberalism, globalization, Christianophobia, and homosexuality. However, Orthodox leaders across the globe have written a theological rejection of this way of thinking. I think they are like the German Confessing Church movement, which courageously took a stand against the teachings of Hitler and Naziism — some, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, lost their lives due to this resistance. *to read more about this, see "A DECLARATION ON THE "RUSSIAN WORLD" (RUSSKII MIR) TEACHING", March 13, 2022.*²

Interestingly, the teachings in this *Ruskii Mir* ideology have attracted admiration from evangelical political leaders here in the United States. I see glimmers of this thinking in the ways people who aren't even educators are trying to assert control over what is taught to children in schools, regarding race and gender. Those in the US who have publicly spoken of their admiration of Russian religious leadership are in a bit of a bind, as the world witnesses the atrocities toward which this thinking leads, as demonstrated by Russia's horrendous war against Ukraine.

² <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/>

It's different millenia and different locations, even different religions, but I can imagine Saul fitting right into this thinking, before his transformation happened. We need to keep our eye on those who have become so certain of their beliefs that, in their sense of rightness and religion, enact violence and oppression on people. They are actually persecuting the Body of Christ. We also need to keep an eye on ourselves, so that we do not fall into those ways, either.

But I do find hope in this passage, which is that no one is beyond God's redemption— and I pray that the holy will break through to those who are persecuting Jesus Christ right now as they kill people whom Jesus loves: women, elderly, children, sometimes with added atrocities to their bodies.

I don't know how God can possibly bring about redemption in all that has been lost and terrorized in war. That's just too hard for me to wrap my head around— that is God's to fix, not mine— I am more interested in supporting the lives and resilience of the victims. But I can start smaller. A young man who grew up as a child of our church was just released after spending more than 2 years incarcerated in Bergen County. I wonder what our church can do to support his new life. There are so many like him, who yearn for pathways toward redemption in their families and community.

Even smaller than that, I can remind those close to me that in God's eyes and in mine, that they are never beyond God's love or redemption, and that they have a goodness that God sets within them that never becomes unreachable. There is something about treating others that way that helps us to recognize our own belovedness and our own capacity for goodness.

Jesus took a pretty daring leap with Saul. Things could have ended really badly for the early followers of The Way. But Jesus taking that chance with Saul encourages me to try again, in some places where I have given up, in calling out goodness and even love in relationships that have been broken. It is risky, and I wouldn't ask anyone to do this at risk to their physical or mental health. But I do believe we need to find more bridges than chasms if we are to move forward as a people who work for the transformation of God's kingdom, here on earth.