

FINDING THE WAY

The Acts passage presents events after Pentecost, before the formation of the Christian and church identity.

In those early days, the struggle of the believers in Jesus was both exhilarating and fearful.

The 11 apostles and followers were essentially a Jewish sect. They would teach in the synagogues and other public places in Israel. Yet, even though they were often on the run or hiding because of being severely persecuted, their message was spreading into the surrounding Gentile areas.

I suppose, at this point, they were in need of leadership help, and they could benefit from someone with more "Gentile" experience. Plus, they were short one apostle.

I can envisage how they would write out the "help wanted ad."

Immediate opening for a confident evangelist, teacher and preacher:

Ideal candidate will be devoted to God; a passionate, committed, high energy leader who is a Jewish scholar with strong Gentile connections.

Being multilingual and a Roman citizen is a huge plus;

Expect divine benefits, persecution, low pay and must be willing to relocate.

Their chief antagonist, Saul of Tarsus, was almost a perfect match.

Can you imagine if he applied?

That would be like the CEO of Suncor or the Minister of Natural Resources applying for a job with the David Suzuki Foundation.

I think the apostles would have instantly sensed that Saul wasn't their man. Malcolm Gladwell calls that the "Blink" affect.

Saul, also known by his Roman name--Paul, had a couple glaring deficiencies that would have been felt by the apostles.

Imagine if he applied for the position.

No one would have picked Paul, yet he did become the 12th apostle,... ..albeit after a modest makeover.

We Mennonites tend to Not idolize Paul, But we can't deny that he was extremely instrumental in the formation of the church.

He was a bit of a purist, and he was passionate about the notion of One church , one Gospel and one theological perspective.

He was an impact person, and his encounter while travelling to Damascus made a lasting impact on him. His awakening was so significant it is described in three different chapters in the book of Acts.

Paul/ Saul, he likely went by either name, was born in Tarsus. Tarsus was a cultural centre, home of a great university and the capital of Cilicia, which is in what is now southern Turkey. He was part of the Diaspora--Jews living away from Israel, he was also granted Roman citizen at birth. No doubt he had a privileged upbringing, and was well educated, which allowed him to receive advanced training at the Rabbinical Academy in Jerusalem. Paul was a progressive Jew and part of the Pharisee sect. He was grooming himself to be a very influential religious leader.

Why does all this matter?
Because this is who Paul was.....his entire life.

It seems that he wanted to be more than just a "good" Jew. He was driven to be a model Jew--one who got it right! He was totally committed to serving, pleasing and....defending God.

So, it is no wonder that he was outraged by Stephen and others who were proselytizing the Jews..... and teaching a heretical theology. He was tormented by their actions, and consumed with a obsession to destroy them.

In essence, Paul became a crusader against the followers of Christ, known as "The Way." He was like the head of Gestapo. He would hunt them down, capture the people of the Way, and often oversee their mock trial, and quick execution.

The mere mention of his name brought terror to those trying to follow Christ's way.

Today's text begins with Paul/ Saul getting authorization and men to round up the heretics outside of Israel. He was expanding his purge to Gentile area--to Damascus.

On "his" way there, suddenly a flash of bright light from above caused Saul to fall to the ground. He was laid low! This was more than his moment of Zen. Life, as he knew it, came to an abrupt halt. Shocked and dumbfounded, he heard voice, and so did the men with him. The voice said, "Saul,..... Saul,.....why do you persecute me?"

At that point, I think he was overwhelmed and tormented with intense fear,.....because..... he had a really bad feeling about the source of that voice. He knew it was of divine origin,..... and ... the "persecute me" part was truly problematic. So, with fear and trepidation,..... expecting the worst, he inquired, "Who..... Who are you.....Lord?"

That's a real good question to ponder: Who are you Lord?
In those low, low moments, consider asking, "Who are you Lord?"

The voice was direct and to the point:
I AM Jesus, whom YOU are persecuting.

This was not a happy moment for Paul. Life, as he had known it, was crumbling and crashing down.

He was a little ant in the shadow of a mighty boot.
He was in big trouble, and his mind was in overdrive.
Yet, before he could explain himself, defend himself and beg for mercy,.....the voice of Jesus told him to go to the city and wait for instructions.

That is a peculiar twist--no reprimand, not even a lecture,.... just a simple directive to go and wait, with the added incentive of being blind.

Paul...went on his way, as he was told, yet the way was not the same.

I wonder if God, with the voice of Jesus, still stops people in their tracksor was that a onetime event?

I wonder how that would work, today, if someone was driving down the road with sunglasses and music playing.

I wonder if we'd just keep going?

I suppose God would have to take a different approach, but even so, would we stop, listen and ask questions?

I think most people would, but could we handle the time of torment and struggle--of figuratively being blind,..... and waiting in faith for clarity and relief?

We tend to want quick answers, quick solutions, so we can continue on "Our Way",..... but maybe that's not God's way.

Taken by the hand, Paul goes to Damascus in the state of personal blindness, doubt and fear.
He doesn't eat or drink for three days, and has a dream about a man named Ananias laying hands on him to bring back his sight.

Meanwhile, Ananias, who was a believer in Christ, is going about his normal life, when He has a vision. In the vision, he hears his name, and astutely replies, "Here I am Lord."

(Reminder this: if you ever hear a voice and no person is there, it's prudent to answer as Ananias did.)

God then gave Ananias directions and instructions to go to "THE" Saul of Tarsus, who's waiting for him, and lay his hands on him,... in order to bring back Paul's sight.

Of course, Ananias flinches and quivers at the knees when he heard the command, and with a shaky voice responds to God, "At the tone, please leave your name and number, and I'll call you back as soon as the coast is clear."

Well,.... his reply was more like: "You've got to be kidding me. I know this guy; all the believers know and fear him. He has come here to capture us. He has done evil and terrible things to Your saints in Jerusalem. Are you sure you have the right Ananias?"

God answered, "GO", and then explained God's plan... which must have hit Ananias like a flash of light. God was recruiting Paul to be new the apostle, Paul of all people.

Paul didn't even apply for the job; he was drafted.

Sometimes, the "way" that God works is very strange.
There's this flashy encounter that leaves Paul dazed and blind, but that's it..... for the time being?
One would think, God could have explained it all to Paul then.
Why is the "way" so slow, risky and surprising?

Actually, when you think about it, this is very clever.
For one, we humans are slow learners. We can't grasp enlightenment, new insight,..... until we are ready.

No matter how tempted you may be to tell or force someone how to change, don't bother,..... It doesn't work that way.
Change / awareness needs to be processed.
Each of us need to find our own way.....with God, and that journey will likely include others inspired by God.

This scenario is also clever because it allows for a wonderful way for Paul to meet his new family, and good old Ananias will vouch for him and introduce him to the others on "the way."

Paul is weak, afraid and very open to help..... He was ready for grace.
When Ananias came to him, Paul was ready for Grace.

Ananias' hands on Paul's head was a divine touch. It was a holy moment of two individuals,.....scared beyond understanding,.....following God's way to each other.

It was an ideal recipe for redemption: submission, brokenness, hope, trust and the presence of God.....through the gracious touch and words of another.

Ananias called Paul "brother", and confirmed his purpose and intent for being there -- it was all God's doing.

Paul was in the dark, but Ananias knew what was happening.
He felt the moment.
Ananias sensed God was in the moment. He told Paul: "The time is Now. The Lord Jesus who interrupted Your way.....has prepared you to see, to really see. I was sent to be with you, to touch you in faith,.... so that you will be filled with the Holy Spirit."

And, immediately, Paul's old way full of anger and violence fell from him.

He was still himself: passionate, focussed and devoted to the cause, yet.....now filled with grace and love.

Was he converted?

No one convinced or persuaded him to think differently with sound arguments or foolproof logic.

Instead, there was an encounter with Jesus, a time to ponder one's darkness, a gentle touch from a faithful follower..... and unspoken forgiveness.

Sometimes grace is most profound when it is never defined.
Maybe that's part of God's way.

After Paul was baptized, he embraced and was embrace by the community of believers.
We all need community,.....we need each other, and sometimes a touch may be surprising.

And, then Paul joined the Way.
He proclaimed that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.
Jesus is the Alpha and Omega.....and the light along the way.