



Liberty, Liberation, & Life After the Damascus Road

A Sermon for Northminster Church

Preached by Claire Helton

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Acts 9:1-20

Meanwhile, Saul was still spewing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest,² seeking letters to the synagogues in Damascus. If he found persons who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, these letters would authorize him to take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.³ During the journey, as he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven encircled him.⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice asking him, "Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?"

⁵ Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?"

"I am Jesus, whom you are harassing," came the reply.⁶ "Now get up and enter the city. You will be told what you must do."

⁷ Those traveling with him stood there speechless; they heard the voice but saw no one.⁸ After they picked Saul up from the ground, he opened his eyes, but he couldn't see. So, they led him by the hand into Damascus.⁹ For three days he was blind and neither ate nor drank anything.

¹⁰ In Damascus there was a certain disciple named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

He answered, "Yes, Lord."

¹¹ The Lord instructed him, "Go to Judas' house on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying.¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias enter and put his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³ Ananias countered, “Lord, I have heard many reports about this man. People say he has done horrible things to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ He’s here with authority from the chief priests to arrest everyone who calls on your name.”

¹⁵ The Lord replied, “Go! This man is the agent I have chosen to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

¹⁷ Ananias went to the house. He placed his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord sent me—Jesus, who appeared to you on the way as you were coming here. He sent me so that you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸ Instantly, flakes fell from Saul’s eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. ¹⁹ After eating, he regained his strength.

He stayed with the disciples in Damascus for several days. ²⁰ Right away, he began to preach about Jesus in the synagogues. “He is God’s Son,” he declared.

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Something happened on the road to Damascus, and Saul’s world turned upside down. The story picks up in the eighth chapter of Acts when we see, for the first time since Jesus’ own death, what it looks like to live the way of Love all the way to the grave. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, has followed Jesus’ example until it cost him his life. As he is stoned to death, killed by the religious establishment, a young man named Saul stands holding the coats of those who are participating in this ritual of death.

By the grace of God you and I live in a nation in which killing folks for their religious beliefs is not a legal means of settling our differences, and so there is a certain difficulty for us in trying to wrap our minds around what might have been going through Saul’s head as he stood there with that stack of coats in his hands. The storyteller makes a point to mention that he was in “full agreement” with what was going on. How did he make sense of the expression of pure peace on Stephen’s face as the stones began to fly? Or was he too caught up in the frenzy of self-righteousness even to notice? Whatever was going on inside his mind, it had nothing to do with building empathy for the man being murdered before his eyes. In three verses he goes from coat-check boy to full-on zealot, entering the homes of those who are known to follow the Way of

Jesus and dragging both men *and women* out onto the streets and into prison for the sake of purifying the faith.

He becomes known as something of a local terror for the Christians in Jerusalem, and then decides that as the cancer of Christianity is spreading, he too needs to spread his zeal for a purer faith. He gets permission from the high priest to travel to Damascus, where he intends to hunt down the unfaithful and bring them to justice. “Still breathing murderous threats,” Saul sets out on the Damascus road.

This energy that the character of Saul puts out is an energy that is familiar to me, having lived much of my life in the Bible Belt. Perhaps it is familiar to you, too. It is an energy that I have observed in the evangelical sub-culture that is so much a part of the air we breathe down here, and interestingly I find echoes of this narrative cropping up in two different, seemingly opposite ways. Given my particular cultural and theological location as I read this story, Saul’s fervor for purification at all costs smacks of the kind of quest to purify the culture that characterizes much of evangelicalism. On the other hand, it is often those same evangelicals who are featured annually in certain streams of media claiming persecution over things like red coffee cups at Starbucks in the winter. I imagine they would prefer to be identified with the Christians Saul was hunting down, rather than with the one doing the hunting. It’s an interesting paradox of interpretation.

The story that fuels this way of being in the world is a story that weaves together the histories of church and of state, and it is grounded in a particular reading of those histories. You’re familiar with it. It’s a story that goes like this: “We live in a Christian nation. Our forebears founded this nation on the principles of the Christian faith. The founding fathers were devoted Christians and would be appalled at the ways that our nation has given in to secular interests and allowed God to be pushed out to the margins.”

I hope it is obvious that I disagree with that way of telling the story. But, with a story like that informing your way of being in the world it isn't hard to see how you can move quickly from a sense of losing power to a reaction of defensiveness, of digging your heels in to hold on to what you've still got. It isn't even surprising to hear the militaristic language that emerges. If your perception is that you've got a war on your hands: a war on Christmas, a war on men, a war on Christians in general; you're going to respond by "mobilizing," by "gathering the troops," even if all that means is that you do your part each day to contribute to the war effort on social media. This isn't confined to evangelicals or to one political party, we all are familiar with the culture wars that come and go with each season, though we probably call them by different names depending which side we find ourselves on. I am far from the first to observe that our nation is perhaps more polarized than it has ever been.

I wish I were here to solve all of that. I'm not. By virtue of this pulpit, though, I am poised to offer some comments on the question of the relationship between Christians (or, "the church") and the state. This idea that we ever were a Christian nation because of the faith of the founders is easily challenged by some of the writings of the founding fathers themselves. Many of them were deists at best, at their most devoted they believed in a Higher Power who set the world in motion and that was about all. They did certainly make use of religious language as a rhetorical device, in order to communicate with a religious public, and to lend weight to the claims they were making for a government founded on the principal of God-given equality.

It might be helpful since we're walking a fine line here dealing with matters of church and state here in the church, and since we're still new here, for me to offer a few assurances. I believe it is never within my authority as a pastor to use this pulpit to tell you how to vote – not how God wants you to vote, not how a good Christian should vote. However, I also believe with my whole heart that our politics is and ought to be informed by our faith, and I believe that our faith is and must be informed by the political realities of our world. We are integrated beings, and to compartmentalize the political and the spiritual is to miss the point entirely. I believe in the separation of church and state, and I do not believe that means that politics are taboo in church.

I think it means we have to respect one another and the legitimate differences of opinion we may hold. And honestly, that shouldn't be hard to do if we are doing this thing right, grounding ourselves in the story of Love that has brought us all here in the first place, recognizing the image of the Divine in each one of us who walks through these doors.

The separation of church and state is a concept that holds great value for Baptists historically. Zach and I were out last week because we were in Washington, DC for the annual gathering of the Alliance of Baptists, which many of you know is our congregation's only denominational affiliation. I've heard the question more than once: Why do we affiliate with the Baptists even though we don't use Baptist in our church's name? Or put more to the point, what is it about being Baptist that is worth it when there is so much baggage that goes along with that label? Believe me, this conversation is not foreign to any pastor in the Alliance of Baptists; at the first Alliance gathering I attended there was an entire day of panel discussions devoted to the question, "Why Baptist?" (And it wasn't just a rhetorical question. There was a lot of soul searching going on.)

To answer that question, most folks in the Alliance will appeal to the earliest strains of Baptist life in the United States, a tradition born out of the convictions of liberty and freedom that are so much in the DNA of our nation, at least in principle; these are also at the heart of what it means historically to be Baptist. At the roots of our tradition is a desire to break away from the hierarchical structures in mainline denominations. We love and respect our mainline sisters and brothers, but our tradition is one that embraces the value of freedom. Baptists are a part of the free church tradition, and Baptist historians have characterized what it is to be Baptist by naming the four freedoms, often identified as four fragile freedoms, that Baptists affirm. (If I had a white board up here this would be a good time to use it.)

Those four freedoms are: Bible freedom, soul freedom, church freedom, and religious freedom.

Bible freedom refers to the freedom, and responsibility, of the individual to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, not relying on the interpretation of any preacher or priest or governing religious body. It's related to the second freedom, soul freedom.

Soul freedom is the affirmation of the individual's ability to deal with the Divine, without the need for any intercessor, without the need for any intermediary in confession, in prayer, or in relationship. It is because of this belief that Baptists have historically avoided the use of creeds, because we would never want to prescribe for another person what they must hold as their own personal belief.

Church freedom: This refers to the freedom of the local church to make its own decisions about who it will be and how it will be in the world – meaning, who can be a member, what it means to be a member, who can lead, who can be ordained; in Baptist life, traditionally, all these decisions are made at the level of the local church.

Religious freedom: Historically, the Baptist value of religious freedom meant the freedom of all people in this republic to hold whatever religion they choose without imposition from the government on their belief or their expression of that belief, so far as it brought no harm to another, *and* it meant the freedom of the government from having any religion imposed upon it in its decision making. The freedom of religion and religious expression for the individual must go hand in hand with freedom from religion in the government. And that is for the benefit of *every* member of this republic, because in a democracy you cannot know how long your faith will be in the majority, and on the day that you find yourself in the minority you will find yourself wishing that your government were free from religious interference.

On the first night of the conference in DC, we had the privilege of sitting at a table with our other Northminster representatives at a dinner hosted by the DC-based Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. This is an organization that devotes its time and energy to educating and advocating for the notion that religion must be freely exercised, neither advanced nor inhibited

by government. By their own description, they stand as a leading voice at the intersection of church and state, protecting the free exercise of religion while defending against its establishment by government. One of their most recent endeavors involved filing a brief in the Supreme Court case around the 40-foot cross on government property in Maryland, a brief that was referenced several times during oral arguments in that case this spring.

I am proud to support and learn from this organization that embodies our Baptist heritage in such tangible, concrete ways. When I first encountered the Baptist Joint Committee several years ago, it gave me a lens I had been searching for, a lens through which I could make sense of the culture wars that the evangelical subculture had cast as “ruining” America. The only way to ruin America in this arena would be to mistake our commitment to keeping church and state separate for a commitment to keeping the state out of the church and forgetting that we have a responsibility to keep the church out of the state, as well.

That’s because liberty is a two-way street. If there is anything I was convicted of during our time at the Alliance though, it was that liberty is no liberty at all if it comes at the cost of someone else’s liberation. The theme of the entire weekend was this question: “What is liberty without liberation?” We explored that question and its implications for each of us, for the ways our own lives and churches are bound up in systems that exist in the tension between realized liberty for some and unrealized liberation for so many others, past and present. What is liberty without liberation?

After Saul became the Paul we know and (some of us) love, he spent time with the theological questions of freedom and bondage. He also became the most outspoken opponent of his former self there could ever have been. Where he had once sought to purify his faith, to expunge those who were tainting the waters with their unorthodox beliefs, he now not only joined the ranks of the unorthodox but became a leader of the church and the most prolific writer in all of the scriptures. He shaped the theology of the church, for better or worse, for all time.

Something happened on the road to Damascus, and perhaps it wasn't so much that Saul's world turned upside down as that his world found a new center from which to draw its meaning. He found a new story to in which to locate himself, and it had nothing to do with his own ability to measure up or to prove his zeal. From now on he would no longer be charged with carrying the burden of playing the lead; he would be a supporting character in the story of Love. As he ventured down that Damascus road, still breathing his murderous threats, Saul was confronted with the Crucified Light of the World and what that light illuminated for him was that he was spending his one wild and precious life chasing after an ideal of religious purity that no one – especially God – ever really wanted in the first place. What he found was a better story, a story about a God who does not sit, removed, on a throne pulling strings and drawing lines but, rather, a story of a line-crossing, boundary-breaking God who has little interest in the pious-for-piety's sake but all the time in the world for the impious but pure of heart.

So Northminster: Where will we spend our time? Which story will guide our path? May the Light of the World illuminate the way as we seek to walk in faithfulness toward love and liberation for all creation.

Amen.