

Message for April 25, 2021

Acts 9:10-19

A young man named Leonard Waggoner was backpacking through the Rockies with two friends, and when they came to the summit of one mountain they noticed a large boulder perched near the edge. Without giving it much thought, they decided that it would be fun to push it over and see what happened. They sent it rolling down the mountainside and to say that they were shocked by what happened would be an understatement. The boulder steadily picked up speed and when it hit some rough patches of ground it bounced up to fifty feet in the air. Then when it hit the tree line, the pine trees snapped like match sticks; long after the rock was out of sight they could still hear the noise as it continued its destructive path.

The next day the three young men retraced the boulder's path and were shocked by what they saw. On its way down the mountainside, the rock hadn't just destroyed a large number of trees but had also sent other smaller rocks on their own paths of destruction. And to think that they had brought about so much damage through one thoughtless act! And then it occurred to Waggoner; suppose there had been someone in the boulder's path? Or suppose that someone up above them decided it would be fun to do the same thing? As Waggoner later said, it was then that he truly realized that choices and decisions, as small as they may seem to be, have consequences. A decision made by one of the characters in today's scripture passage certainly had consequences that are still with us today.

The background to today's passage is the famed conversion experience of Saul when he was literally blinded by the light while on the road to Damascus. Saul, or Paul as he is better known, hated the Christian faith in his early years. Paul for example was the one who stood by and urged the mob on when Stephen, the first of the martyrs, was killed. In fact Paul's great ambition in life was to rid the world of all of its Christians and this explains why, when he had finished persecuting the church in Jerusalem, he decided to move on to Damascus. As he journeyed there though he had a most dramatic experience when he was blinded by a tremendously bright light and encountered the Risen

Christ himself. Jesus called upon Paul to follow him and told him that he was to carry on to Damascus where he would be given further instructions.

Turning to today's scripture passage itself, there was a man in Damascus named Ananias. Ananias was a Christian who had been forced to flee from Jerusalem because of Paul's persecution. One night Ananias had a dream or vision in which God told him to go to a particular house in the city where he would find Paul; he was to lay his hands upon him and cure him of his blindness. Well, quite naturally, this command filled Ananias with dismay. He wondered if God had forgotten who Paul was and what he had been doing. Why Paul was the one who had persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem and had come to Damascus to do the very same thing! Did God really want Paul cured? Wouldn't it be better if he was left blind and helpless? God's answer however was to say that he had special plans for Paul. And so off Ananias went. He entered the house, greeted Paul as a brother in Christ and then healed him. Upon being healed Paul was baptized and we all know what followed. Paul became one of the greatest missionaries of all time and even wrote a large part of the New Testament.

This then is what happened when Paul was converted, and quite understandably it is Paul's being blinded on the road to Damascus that usually captures our attention. I sometimes wonder though if the story of Ananias is really the more meaningful for us.

To start with, it took a lot of faith for Ananias to go and heal Paul. To be sure God had told him to do this, but how could Ananias ever be certain that it was God who had spoken to him in the vision? It might have been some sort of test because the instruction to heal Paul certainly defied all common sense and logic! The simple truth is that Ananias had no way of being absolutely certain that it was God's will that he heal Paul. All he could do was have faith, and as it was with him so it is with us.

Like Ananias, we may sometimes wonder about what is right and what is wrong. Likewise, we might also wonder how we can know what God's will for us is. Life would certainly be easier if God would just tell us what to do by putting a great big flashing neon sign up in the sky, but he doesn't. Instead God leaves it up to us to figure things out and often there is no easy or straight-forward

answer. Indeed, it often comes down to faith and doing what we in our heart of hearts believe is right. One way of doing this though, and perhaps the best way, is by asking ourselves the simple question; what do we honestly think that Jesus would do if he was in this situation? Keeping our eyes fixed on Christ lessens the odds of our going wrong. Consider this analogy.

It was a Sunday night years ago when we lived in Colborne and I got a phone call from the nearest hospital, which was in Cobourg, asking me to come in; it was a pastoral emergency. It was a very rainy and foggy night and while it was a bad drive going to the hospital, it was even worse heading home. Part way home though, I caught up with a stream of cars. We followed one another through the fog and the trick was to keep close enough to see the car in front but not too close in case something went wrong. I have no idea how fast we drove but it seemed as if we raced through the night. Indeed I did not even dare look down at the dashboard for fear of losing sight of the car in front of me.

Now this so-to-speak is the way it is with us. As we make our way through life's storms and disorienting fog, we must seek to keep our eyes focused on Christ and his teaching. As the disciples of Christ, we should always ask ourselves what Christ would do if he were here right now? Ananias in fact may well have asked himself this very question. If Jesus had been in Ananias' shoes, would he have cured Paul or would he have left him blind? We know the answer of course. Faith demands that we follow the example of Christ, even if it leads us to do the most improbable and perhaps even the most distasteful of things. The story of Ananias however doesn't just illustrate the demands of faith, it also reminds us of the importance of the little things.

As I have already said, it is usually Paul's being blinded by the light that captures our attention but while God can, and sometimes does use the dramatic to achieve his aims, more often than not he does the opposite. Paul for example was blinded by the light but God used Ananias to cure him. And what if Ananias had refused; would Paul have ever been healed, baptized, and then become the greatest missionary of all time? Quite possibly not. Rather than through the spectacular, God more often achieves his goals by working through ordinary people like Ananias and even us as well. That is why it is so important that we use our faith and try and follow the example of Christ. Who knows what God is

trying to achieve through us? This is something that Willard Scott, best known for being the weatherman on NBC's "Today's Show" years ago, once discovered.

Scott happened to be in Washington D.C. during the riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. as he was to play the role of Ronald McDonald at the opening of a new McDonalds restaurant. The police advised him not to go, warning him that they could not guarantee his safety as a white man in a black neighbourhood with racial tensions being so high. Scott however decided to go anyways, and then forgot all about it. Then, about twenty years later, Scott was back in the city. He got into a cab and the driver thanked him. Scott asked why and the driver replied that twenty years earlier he'd been a member of the Black Panthers and had hated all whites with a passion. He had taken his son to the opening of the new McDonalds. The boy's shoelaces were undone and when Scott came up to the boy in the crowd, he had knelt down and tied them up. It was a little thing and Scott never remembered doing it. Even so, that small deed of kindness had changed the cab driver's outlook on whites and even on life itself.

And so I wonder, what impact have we, knowingly or unknowingly, had on the lives of others? What impact will we, knowingly or unknowingly, have? Make no mistake about it, all of us do have an impact. To return to Ananias, did he ever realize that by striving to follow Jesus, even if it meant doing something that he really didn't want to do and that seemingly defied all common sense, he was going to change the very course of history and the destiny of thousands, millions, or even billions of people for the better? Probably not, but he did.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, we give you thanks that you have, in the words of a hymn deigned to make us thy co-workers, in the kingdom of thy grace. Too often perhaps we think of our lives as being of little value, purpose or meaning but the things we say and do do matter, even if we don't always realize it. With this in

mind, help us as best we can, secure in your love and forgiveness, to try and live the lives and be the people that you have called us to be.

This past week, even though it was overshadowed by other events, we marked Earth Day. We give you thanks for this good earth with all of its beauty, praying that we may use it wisely and well, that your creation may be all the better for our being a part of it.

We pray this day for this world in which we live, for the safety and well-being of all as the pandemic continues. Grant wisdom to our leaders, strength to those who care for us and provide us with what we need, courage and comfort to all whose lives are in a state upheaval or worse.

We pray that the day may come when this scourge will be a thing of the past. We ask this in your Son's name.

Amen