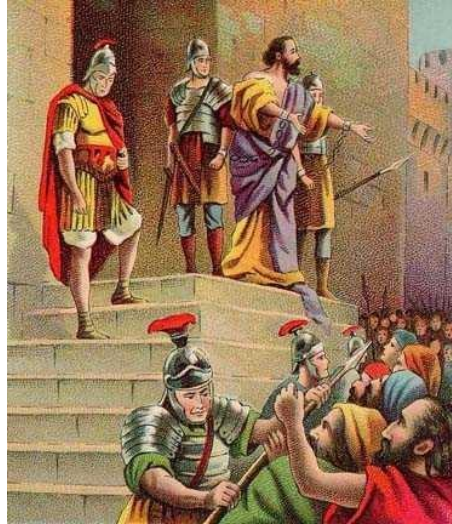


Sermon – July 14, 2024
“Who are you, Lord?”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Acts 22:6-22

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill our open hearts anew, anoint the sharing of these words, and bless your people with them. Fan into flame our continuing transformation into Christ's image and lead us to fruitful labor as we go into Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you and brings us together in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! Let me continue to encourage us to wear our summer attire and brighten the sanctuary each Sunday as we journey through summer. Let me also encourage us to read the book of Acts this summer. We are currently working on chapter 22, so there are several more weeks for us to read through Luke's account of the early church. Each chapter is filled with new ideas and challenges that Luke saw in the early church as they moved out into Jesus' mission to all people, and they are as real today as they were then.

Have we ever had a really bad day, one of those days that seems to last all week because it is so long? A favorite book for our young kids was titled *Grover's Bad, Awful Day*. It was a day when pretty much everything goes wrong for Grover. He even drops his ice cream from his cone on the ground. Paul also has one of those days when everything seems to go wrong. Here he

is in Jerusalem, getting ready to quietly complete the purification rites in the temple, and he is falsely accused of bringing a Greek into the temple, an offense which calls for the death penalty. He is drug out of the temple court and beaten. Then he is rescued by Romans who can't understand what the crowd is yelling at them. He is misidentified as a notorious wanted criminal, chained to two Roman guards, and is carried up the steps to the Roman barracks for questioning the Roman way, which involves torture. Paul is having a really bad day. And in the midst of all of these issues and challenges, what do you think Paul does? Yes, he sees this bad, awful day as an opportunity to give his testimony to an angry crowd of Jewish men who want to kill him. I have to confess that I don't think giving my testimony would be at the top of my list if my day were going like Paul's. Let's look together at how Paul shares his testimony and see if we can pick up some pointers so that when we have the opportunity, hopefully not chained to prison guards, we are prepared.

As we hear Paul begin his speech, which he does in Aramaic, the language of the people and also a language the Romans would not understand, we should recall Peter's speech at the first Pentecost when, after he spoke, thousands of Jews became followers of Jesus. As Paul begins to share his story, we should anticipate the possibility that once again Holy Spirit will stir the hearts of those listening and bring forth a harvest from those who seek to follow God through the keeping of the Law. Paul begins his speech as he heard Stephen begin his, with the words, "Fathers and sons." Paul then begins to share his testimony of how he met Jesus. We also want to catch what Paul does as he shares about Jesus, speaking in the language of the people, Aramaic. We too will need to learn to speak the language of the people we are speaking to and use examples that are familiar to those we are addressing. Our "church language" will not be understood. We have to speak in a manner that people in the world understand.

Paul begins by sharing some of who he is and how he is like those listening, establishing that he is a devout Jew as are they. He shares with the crowd that he was raised at the feet of Gamaliel, a famous teacher of the Law in Jerusalem. He reminds them that he diligently kept the Law and was blameless under the Law. He claims he made no errors as he lived as a devout Jew. He also reminds them that he was one who persecuted the followers of Jesus, first in Jerusalem, and then he traveled to Damascus with letters in hand to the leaders of the Jewish community there so that he might imprison and bring back any Jews he found there who were following Jesus so that they could stand trial. Can we see how Paul establishes a connection to the devout

Jews in the crowd? He is telling them he is like them, a keeper of the Law, one who worked to remove those who did not follow the Law. He makes the point that he has a lot in common with those to whom he is speaking. We will want to do this as well. When we speak, we will want to identify common ground or goals so that those to whom we are speaking can relate to us and what we are sharing.

Next Paul moves into the heart of his testimony, which happens as he is traveling to Damascus. Notice Luke tells us the time of day when Paul is close to Damascus, the time when everything in Paul's life changes. It is about noon, a time when the sun is high overhead, shadows are short, and the brightness of the sun is at its peak. Suddenly, in the midst of the brightness of the noonday sun, a brighter light surrounds Paul, and he falls to the ground. The light is the Shekina glory of God. It is brighter than the sun and is seen not only by Paul but by those with him. When Peter, James, and John witnessed Jesus' glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, they also fell to the ground when they witnessed the light of heaven. Even with the fear he experiences, Paul is able to talk and hears a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Paul responds with, "Who are you, Lord?" a question that acknowledges that some great visitation has come to Paul. In reply to Paul's question, the voice from heaven sounding forth out of the light tells Paul, "I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting." The doubling of a person's name gives a sense of urgency for the one being addressed, communicating that there is some critical action Saul needs to take. Jesus was a common name in first century Israel, so the addition of Nazareth gives Paul the information he needs to recognize the owner of the voice. This is the voice of Jesus who was killed and placed in the tomb. This is the voice of Jesus whom Paul did not believe in, who he denied was God and whom he knew to be dead. Paul knew Jesus as a false teacher whose disciples were being led astray from the only true religion of the devout Law-keeping Jews. Paul was seeking to worship God by bringing the followers of this dead man to justice. Yet here was the voice of Jesus speaking to Paul out of the bright light from heaven. Here was Jesus alive and in heaven. Here was Jesus speaking to Paul. Hearing a dead man speak from heaven must have been an incredible moment for Paul. The one whom he denied is alive speaks to him from within the bright glory of heaven. Jesus is alive and Paul has been persecuting him by rounding up his followers. Only God can speak from heaven. All that Paul has held as true is undone. Paul has received undeniable evidence that Jesus is alive and in heaven with the Father. Paul's entire life

changes in this instant. Can we grasp what Paul is confronted with in this instant? All that Paul knows is set aside. Jesus has appeared to him in glory and spoken to him personally. Jesus is alive! Paul has seen Jesus and heard him speak. This is the moment when Paul comes to faith in Jesus. We also have such a moment in our lives, a time when we encounter Jesus and realize that he is alive and loves us enough to die for our sins. Paul describes his encounter with Jesus well, and this will be our challenge: to describe our encounter with Jesus in a manner that those to whom we are speaking can understand.

I cannot imagine the total submission with which Paul speaks his next words to Jesus. Paul is transformed. He cannot deny what he has experienced. He is guilty of persecuting Jesus by persecuting those who follow Jesus. Paul deserves to die; he can only believe in and submit to Jesus while hoping for mercy. And so, he responds with the only words he can, words of one in total submission to God: “What am I to do, Lord?” Paul does not tell us what flashes through his mind in this moment or in the days to come, although I think we can find his thoughts in his letters. All he does is submit to Jesus, place his trust in him, and ask, “What am I to do, Lord?” These are the words of one who knows he has sinned against God and deserves to die. This is the response of one who has persecuted the children of God and should receive death, one who suddenly realizes that he is in the presence of a sovereign God and needs mercy and grace. When we encounter Jesus, we should have this same response. We turn to Jesus in full submission and simply ask him what we are to do. With submission, we begin to follow Jesus into his mission.

What is the answer to Paul’s question? He is told to “go to Damascus and there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do.” Paul is alive. Paul has met Jesus on the road to Damascus and his life is transformed. Paul does not know everything that will happen, only that his next step with Jesus is to go on to Damascus and wait there until he is told what he is to do, what has been assigned to him. Don’t miss that when Jesus is gone and Paul is alone with his fellow travelers, he is blind. The devout Jews would recognize Paul’s blindness at noon as one of the curses for those who do not follow God’s Law. To be blind at noon was a promised curse for those who turned from God. (see Deuteronomy 28:28-29) Paul gets up and is led by hand into the city to wait to hear from Jesus.

Now step back a minute from Paul’s speech and realize that Paul has spoken of Jesus plainly as God and the crowd is still listening. They do not object to hearing about Jesus and his appearance to Paul. They are listening. Our anticipation should grow that when Paul is finished

speaking that just as when Peter spoke to the Jews at the first Pentecost, here also close to this later Pentecost, there will be a turning to Jesus by these Jews. As we share our own testimony, we may find that people are interested in hearing how we have encountered Jesus and what we have done in response to his direction.

Paul continues sharing his experience with Jesus with the crowd, telling them that a devout Jew came and prayed for him in Jesus' authority and his sight was restored, his blindness was taken away. When Paul shares that his blindness was healed, he becomes more focused on telling the crowd who Jesus is in terms they as devout Jews will understand. Paul tells them Jesus is the Righteous One revealed to him by the God of their ancestors, Paul's and the crowds'. Paul also shares that he is told he will be Jesus' witness to all of the world, sharing what he has seen and heard as he has just done. Paul is still being heard by the crowd. They are still listening, processing what he is sharing. They are still open to learning about Jesus. Paul may still have hope that he will be heard and there will be many in this crowd who will accept Jesus, as Paul did on the Damascus road. As we find opportunities to share our own testimony, we also may find people who will listen as we share our experiences with Jesus. Our goal is to tell our story of how we have encountered Jesus in terms and examples that those we are sharing with will understand. Paul uses Old Testament language that his crowd knows to help them grow in their understanding of who he encountered on the road to Damascus. This is our goal: to use examples our crowd understands.

Let's think for a few moments this morning about what Paul has done here and how it applies to us today. Are we surrounded by angry crowds who want to beat us and kill us because we have desecrated their temple? As we interact in the world, we are increasingly challenging people's beliefs; we are desecrating their temples. I have not been beaten, but as I watch the changes occurring in our culture, I do so with growing concern and, like all of us, feel the growing offense the culture is developing for Christians as we seek to bring Christ's love into the community, as we seek to follow Jesus. The day may yet come when we will be openly persecuted in our country as Jesus promised his followers they would be. We need to learn to share the love of Jesus in a manner that can be heard by the crowd we are speaking to.

Paul's testimony is an excellent example of how Jesus changes people, transforming us from who we are in our false selves, following God as we think it is right, into those who have met Jesus, experienced the love and grace of the Father through him, and are transformed into

new creations in Christ. Paul is transformed from a devout Jew persecuting the body of Christ to a devout Jew who has encountered Jesus and is now sharing that experience with all who will listen. Paul is transformed from a zealous persecutor of the body of Christ to one who will stand before an angry crowd and let Holy Spirit give him the words needed to share the Good News of Jesus in spite of the consequences.

We may never stand on the steps of some high place and address a crowd who is set on having us killed, but we are to be exceptional people doing the extraordinary through ordinary things. We have been with Jesus, know his will, and are seeking to share him with all we are sent to. We are those who should be telling others what it is like to live with God not in the future but right now, every day living with the king of the universe. We should be ready to tell others, not only the Good News that Jesus died for our sins, is resurrected, and sits at the right hand of God the Father, but we are to be those filled with power from on high who are now witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the world.

Not many of us have been knocked to the ground and blinded by a light brighter than the noontime sun. Yet all of us have experienced Jesus' love. We are those guided by Holy Spirit into the word of God to learn about Jesus and to allow him to transform us more fully into his image. Think about how we can answer a simple question, "What is it like to live with God?" Can we answer that question? "What is it like to live with God?" Can we find those simple moments each day when Jesus touches our lives and share them with each other and those around us? Each day when we rise, we should thank God for letting us live with Him the day before and be open to live more fully in Jesus' presence in the new day we have been given. Our testimony of transformation may not be as radical as Paul's, but we should be able to speak to others, sharing what God has done in our lives in the past as he transformed us from one who did not know the will of the Father to one who does. We should be able to speak to living with God in the present as those who each day see the hand of God in our lives and praise Him for what He is doing. And we should live as those who have hope that in the future on the last day when the last trumpet sounds and we are all changed that it will be for us a time when each of us will stand before the judgment seat of God and be claimed by Jesus as one of his own, a sheep of his flock. We hope for the moment when Jesus will claim each of us as one for whom he died and paid the price in full for our sin debt so that we might live with him for all eternity.

Let me encourage us each to practice sharing with each other our testimony by sharing what it is like to live with God in our lives. Oswald Chambers in his devotional book, *My Utmost for His Highest*, describes Jesus' followers as exceptional people doing ordinary things. Share with others how we are living with, experiencing, and being transformed into Jesus' image as we do ordinary things with God. Let us seek to become those who are willing to share the joy we have received during the week as we live with God each day. Let us be those filled with power from on high who seek to share how we are living with God with each other and with those who live around us, who are in the crowds listening to us as we are before them as a witness to Jesus.

Pray with me. Jesus, we open our hearts to you to hear your voice and to see your glory in the ordinary things of life and then to become those who will share the ordinary as extraordinary people who are following you. Guide us to be those empowered with Holy Spirit and at work sharing the ordinary moments of our lives as your witnesses transformed by your love. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Linger before God in this place, wait for power from Jesus, and then go out as one sent to walk the Long Road.

Go forth into Jesus' mission to all people. Amen