

Unraveled: Trusting Others Onto a New Path

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Acts 9:1-20

“Why doesn’t God ‘speak’ to us today like God spoke to people back in Bible times?” Have you ever wondered about that? The Bible’s full of passages proclaiming, “Thus saith the Lord....” Folks like Noah... Moses... Abraham & Sarah... Samuel... David... the stories of those folks feature instances where God “spoke” to them: *“Build an ark... Lead your people to the Promised Land... Become the father of many nations... Pick the youngest son to be king.”* And prophetic leaders like Elijah, Jeremiah, Amos and Habakkuk... their calling to be prophets was based on the assumption that God was telling them what to say to the Israelite people: *“Stop worshiping other gods! Return to me!”*

But nowadays, God “speaking” to people? Not so much. Oh, sure, there are some who claim to have heard the Almighty’s dulcet tones in their ears on a regular basis. Often we think these folks have a mental illness instead of thinking God is actually speaking directly to them.

Let me suggest that people today don’t actually “hear” with our ears an actual voice from God. What’s more, people in ancient times didn’t either. But that’s not to say that they didn’t receive inspiration from God, or that we don’t.

And we need that inspiration just as much today in this season of coronavirus on top of all the other stuff. Most of us are dealing with the real challenges of life – and for some of us, the dark times can feel like punishments of a God who does not care. When crucial relationships falter, when our jobs turn out to be awful, when our yearning for a thriving life seems stymied, we wonder whether our God is a God we can trust – and usually by trust we seem to mean – who can and will fix it all.

In these past couple of months we’ve had to change our ways of living and push us to really decide what and who we will trust. When we find ourselves in such times, we have a choice whether we will hunt for the next quick short-cut that might lead us out of this challenge, or are open to the potential of the thunderstruck moment that can change how we see our lives.

Those times when we yearn for the God of the quick short-cut usually involve what I call the Fairy Godmother God – who with a wave of her magic wand will remove the troublesome parts of our lives with little lost.

The Fairy Godmother God is not the Christian God, the God of the Old and New Testaments. In the Bible, we get the Lord, the Adonai of Judah and Israel, the God who instead of magically fixing it for us walks with us, comes down to earth to be with us in Christ Jesus, who suffers with us and for us, and never leaves us alone, but allows us to be transformed into something new.

Job is a prime example of how hard this can all be. He loses everything, and folks try to tell him why, and none of makes sense. Back when I served a church in San Jose, there was a guy in our neighborhood, Herbert, who was a private security guy who hung out on the corner of the church to provide light security to the city workers walking to the parking structure down the block. And it turned out Herbert goes to church and knows his Bible pretty well. One week we talked about the dry bones of Ezekiel 34 that are breathed into by God to become living again, and also about Job. He raised a problem in the text, one that I hadn't noticed (or maybe forgotten). At the end of Job, when he gets back his land, and wealth, Herbert critiqued the text that said "all" was returned, because, he said, "people [who?] died – they didn't come back."

Isn't that true today – we're at 100,000 plus and counting deaths in our country from COVID, those people aren't coming back. Even the nursing home deaths have robbed people of many years of life – I saw one study that estimated 11-13 years of life cut short for that group. And of course, we don't want to forget the associated losses of businesses that are permanently shuttered, dreams of college deferred, relationships going volatile under the stresses of today.

We know that there will be losses that can never be fully restored, relationships broken that can't be fixed. Some can, to be sure, but knowing that healing and restoration does not mean things go back to the way they were is looking at where we are with clear eyes.

Job isn't the only Biblical figure to walk similar journeys of emptying themselves out to experience life-changing moments.

Maybe we will think of Moses, who fled from Egypt after killing a man to the desert of Midian, wondering what his life would now look like? Or perhaps our thoughts will turn to prophet Elijah, who encountered a majestic God on the mountain after he has

conquered over the priests of Ba'al and fled for his life and found himself spent and exhausted.

Maybe we will remember Ruth, who decided to cast her life with Naomi, her mother-in-law, to travel to a new and unknown land after all the men in their lives have died and left them without a way to live.

The disciples of Jesus had their own encounters that changed their lives – whether it was Jesus healing the sick by the power of his own authority, or Jesus stilling of the storm on the sea, or by his confrontation with religious leaders, shrewdly showing the latter's hypocrisy.

Could we be like Saul on the Damascus road who had an experience of God that caused him to become blind and dependent on others? Or David who could be king who had to flee from the current king Saul's wrath, or Naaman the Syrian who found himself given humble instructions to bathe at a river at the bidding of a prophet of a foreign-to-him God, or maybe we will remember a group of women standing at a crucifixion, watching their spiritual leader die a stigmatized death at the hand of empire?

What does it take for us to be moved in the moment by God?
How might we today hear God's voice to us?

As in other places in scripture, the voice of God is poetically linked to thunder, the wisdom of God as blazing light. The ancient Jews used the language of poetry to describe in part what cannot ever be fully known – instead of being literal, they were masters of metaphor to describe a God who can never be fully described or known.

If you think about it, even today we use expressions rooted in the physical senses to try to capture the experience of brief moments of inspiration or insight. We say things like:

"The lightbulb went on...."

"I saw the light...."

"That was a flash of brilliance..."

"Something resonated deep with me..."

"My world was rocked..."

And how do the people hear the voice of God? They stop, look, and listen. It means finding the time and space to do this in a busy world. 20th century contemplative Thomas Merton noted how hard it can be to find this space and place:

“The problem is today there are no deserts, only dude ranches.”

You see, acknowledging that our plans have failed is one crucial moment of recognizing our Unraveled experience; but learning the faith-filled way out of there is another, and it begins with being attentive to the voice of God.

In our story today, Saul finds that his dependence and blindness open him up to become more attune to what God is doing in the world and does a 180 degree turn for the people along the Jesus Way.

What encourages me about the story of Paul is that while he had this period of complete disorientation when confronted by Christ on the road, he was not left alone. His fellow travelers, presumably also others who were persecuted the followers of the way, took him to Damascus, where he sat for three days without seeing.

The rest of the story is up to another person who took a big risk – a guy Ananias, who actually argues with God about going to Saul because he was arresting people. But Ananias does go see Paul, and does something very Jesus-like – he lays hands on Saul and heals him in the name of Jesus.

The transformation is dramatic, just like the rest of the story – Saul is healed in his sight, but all the more, he gets baptized – hence the name change to Paul. In a line reminiscent of the gospel of Mark, the text says that Paul *immediately* began to preach about Jesus in the synagogues.

Like our forefathers and mothers in faith, we will have to walk a while in that place, and perhaps doubt whether life will feel normal again. In the middle of this time, we may find brothers and sisters who will walk with us, not to tell us about their experiences, but to keep us company. I pray that we will discover brother and sister pilgrims in our midst who will travel with us, journeying around to the next part of the journey until the new reality we are called to by God makes its appearance.