

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Signs and Wonders: Acts Chapter 9

Sunday, July 5, 2020 Sermon
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Friends, it is true our lives are always lived under construction, our lives are always changing. We know this truth today, in our nation and world, and within our church, because we have all been living through a significant time of construction or change in our history. Right now, none of us is certain what the future will look like, yet we know in ways both large and small it will be different from what it was in the past. I find hope in this time of change from God because God has always been powerfully at work in seasons of construction. From the construction of the early church we can see, even today, how God can take threats and hardships and turn them into a means of his grace. Nowhere is that clearer than in the life of Saul who would become the Apostle Paul. Saul was a real threat to the life and future of the early church, and yet by God's grace and through God's divine intervention, Saul was transformed. He was newly constructed to become the greatest means of the church's expansion and development. Clearly, God's grace was at work in his life and God's grace comes both in Saul's life and in our lives today in unexpected ways. We are going to hear about that grace and transformation, that construction process, as we turn our attention now to God's word from Acts 9.

Scripture Reading from Acts Chapter 9

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing. So, they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything.

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

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" ²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

Will you all please pray with me?

Gracious and loving God, your Holy Spirit is powerfully at work in the world, in our nation, in our church, and in our lives today. Bring needed transformation, we pray. Help us to be your faithful people, now and always. This we ask in Jesus's name. Amen.

Friends, when I was 15 years old, I accepted a babysitting job. It was the first time I had ever babysat for this particular family and they had two children under the age of five.

Given this family was from our church, I felt fairly comfortable going into the job. And I remained completely calm and comfortable until the power went out, due to an electrical storm. Now, these children that I was babysitting were too young to know where any candles or matches were. They were too young to know where any flashlights were, and being my first time in the house, I had no idea where to look or even where to look to find the telephone or the needed number so I could call someone. This was long before cell phones, and so we were left there in what seemed like utter darkness. I did the only thing you could do in a situation like that. I went to the only light available. Upstairs in the hallway in that house, there was a picture window, and through that picture window the moonlight shone. What I did was find a rocking chair, brought that into the moonlight, gathered as many children's books as I could, and put two children on my knees. We read and we read and read until all three of us fell asleep. Now when the senior pastor of my church came home and found us all asleep, I was a bit surprised. I was even more surprised to find that I was the opening of Sunday's sermon for him, where he talked about how, in darkness, we will all seek to find the light.

You know, that small insignificant moment in my life actually left a lasting mark, because not only was it probably the first sermon I listened to from beginning to end, it was also then that I realized that God is at work in our lives today, even taking what may seem like insignificant moments and leaving lasting marks upon us, that shape our lives. If you had told me at age 15 I would grow up to become a pastor, I would have laughed and probably fainted, as would have my family members. But God works in surprising ways and you never know what God will do next. If we need any more proof that God works in surprising ways, all we have to do is go to the pages of the Old and New Testaments.

You do not have to read far in scripture before you discover stories like Abraham and Sarah becoming parents at age 90. Plus, you don't have to look far to find Moses surprised by God as God spoke to him through a burning bush; or Joseph, whose brothers sold him into slavery, and yet Joseph has the opportunity to save the lives of not only his brothers but all the children of God. We could go on and on. As we move into the New Testament, we have stories of Zachariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds. In every instance God surprises his people.

Within the New Testament canon one of the greatest stories of surprise undoubtedly comes in the form of Saul who was out to destroy the church and yet became one of the great architects of the early church. Saul, who is transformed to Paul, would shape the history of the church forever. He wrote 13 of the New Testament epistles and the church today is shaped by the surprising way God worked in his life. Saul himself, as recorded in Acts chapter 9, must have been undoubtedly surprised that on the road to Damascus, as he was setting out with the intention of throwing into prison men and women who followed the way, he was met with a flash from heaven and a voice which said, "Saul. Saul, why do you persecute me"? When Saul asked, "Who are you?" he was further surprised to learn that the voice was none other than Jesus himself!

Saul the Pharisee may have been expecting to hear or see God, but he did not believe Jesus was any part of God, which is why he was persecuting those who followed the way. Imagine Saul's shock and surprise to find that Jesus was the voice of God. Imagine his shock and surprise at Jesus's words and suggestion saying that if Saul was persecuting anyone in Jesus's name, he was persecuting Jesus himself directly. I'm reminded, here, of the words from Matthew chapter 25 verse 40, "Whatever you did to the least of these, my brothers, you did to me". Saul was further surprised to learn that he was God's chosen instrument to expand the church, but Saul learned this truth only after finding himself, yet again, in surprising circumstances. He found himself blind, sitting in darkness, and depending on the leading and care of others for three days.

Like Ananias in Acts chapter 9, we are surprised to discover the God was at work through Saul. Imagine, if you will imagine, the most unlikely hate-filled candidate for being the next leader of the church. If you had to choose an individual today that you know, either personally or through the news; someone, whose lifestyle must suggest that they are so far away from God and so far away from God's plans for their lives. That is, in essence, what the choice of Saul was like in biblical times. I want to challenge you to start praying for that individual today. Start praying that God will be at work in their lives, because our God never ceases to surprise us in the way that he works. Pray that Christ will change their hearts, because it's Christ alone who can change enemies into brothers and sinners into saints. It's Christ alone who can bring new life and a new purpose to a troubled heart.

Ananias was not thrilled at first when he was asked to go see Saul. We understand that his response was, "Lord I have heard many reports about this man and the harm he has done to the people in Jerusalem. He has come to arrest everyone who calls on your name." God's response to Ananias is surprisingly direct. "Go", says God, "This man is the chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the gentiles, and to the Kings and to the people of Israel." Ananias ultimately obeys and he surprises Saul by approaching him with both love and grace. Ananias's first words to Saul are, "Brother Saul", and he takes his hand. Ananias says, "Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, sent me to you so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit". Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again.

Clearly, in Acts chapter 9, both Saul's and Ananias's lives are under construction in surprising ways. Saul is learning what it means to receive grace and Ananias is learning what it means to extend grace. Just as Saul and Ananias were under construction, so was the early church.

God the master builder who makes no mistakes knew exactly what he was doing when he chose Saul to be the lead architect of the church. Saul's education as a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee meant that he had the skills to outline the theology, structure, and government of the early church. Saul's strength, in writing and speaking, meant that the message of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection would carry on through Paul's epistles, and would stay an active part of our lives and witnesses, even today. Saul's history of persecution towards the early church in Jerusalem meant that, in order for Saul to be completely safe in his own ministry, he would have to move outside of Jerusalem and appeal to a wider audience besides the people in Jerusalem. This led God's word to go out in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. If Saul did not have this back story the church may not have moved forward in this engaged way. God used every aspect of Saul's upbringing for his glory and praise and God still works in the lives of his people today in surprising ways, bringing about fruit in this season of faith today.

Friends, we live in a heavy season of construction. The world, our nation, and our church are being transformed, and nobody but God knows what the finished product will be. I can tell you that the virus which has brought trial, and even death to some, has also been the means to move the church into the future. Phyllis Tickle is an Episcopalian church historian, and she's written a book entitled "Great Emergence". Within that book she outlines how every 500 years the church is moved forward by some event in history. Five hundred years ago was the Reformation and we are standing today on that historic line of 500 years where God dramatically shapes and changes the future of the church.

Friends, the title of our sermon series over these past weeks has been Signs and Wonders, coming out of the book of Acts, but the truth is that the signs and wonders are not limited to that historic biblical book. They occur still today in our lives, and my prayer is that we would have eyes wide open to see God at work powerfully through this on-going construction process and that we would trust God in the process even when we cannot see the finished results. I pray like Saul, who became Paul, and like Ananias that we, too, would be found faithful. May God help us. Amen.

Friends, as you have heard, we've just wrapped up our sermon series on Signs and Wonders as found in the first nine chapters of the book of Acts. Going forward, we are going to be looking at the Psalms and the way that they provide hope and the way they provide encouragement in our lives, recognizing that we truly are living in a unique period of extensive construction within the church, both physically and metaphorically. It's important that we realize that God's people at every point in history and through every change have experienced anxious feelings, feelings of excitement and anticipation, but also worry and anxiety. The beautiful thing about the book of Psalms is that it invites us to bring every emotion under the sun before God, and trust that God will use these emotions for our benefit and He will work in surprising ways. I hope you will stay with us as we summer together in the Psalms.