

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, June 16, 2024

So, this morning we will continue our summer long series that we have entitled Theology 101: Back to the Basics of Faith. Each week we're exploring a different doctrine of our Reformed tradition. Some of them you might be really familiar with; others might give words to you to describe an experience that you have had...that maybe you...the words you did not have before. And so this morning we will explore together Revelation. Revelation. If you haven't been with us, we encourage you to go back and listen to the sermons on Trinity and on Sin and on Salvation; and next week, hopefully, you'll join us as the Reverend Dr. Steve Haynes will proclaim for us God's word about Justification. Friends, this day we will read from the book of Acts, the ninth chapter. Before we do, though, it's important for us to have a little bit of background on the main character of this text—or, actually, I should not call him the main character—on one of the characters in this text, okay? His name is Saul, and Saul you might be familiar with from some of his later work under a different name. But where we meet Saul this morning is in the ninth chapter, and it is in the midst of what we might call the kind of pinnacle of his work against those who follow in the way of Jesus Christ, okay? So Saul is known for the ways in which he is creating resistance to those who, in the midst of his faith tradition, the Jewish faith tradition, have begun to follow in the way of this Rabbi named Jesus, okay? And so the text will kind of frame for us the state of mind that he is in, but we just need to know that to this point in the story he is known for the way in which he is the antagonist in the story of the early Christian movement.

Before we read from the text together, let us join our hearts in prayer.

Gracious Spirit, move once again amongst us this morning. As you moved across the waters of creation and drew forth life, we pray that you would move once again amongst us and draw forth from us something brand new. Let your peace fall fresh that would disturb us and comfort us, transform us and make us your new creation. For we ask it in the name of the crucified and risen one, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

So, the Acts of the Apostles, the 9th chapter, beginning in the first verse.

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; [a] so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight and neither ate nor drank.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

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So when we speak of Revelation in the Reformed tradition, we need to kind of understand what we are speaking of. The Greek ‘apocalypsis’ would be translated for us as an uncovering or a laying bare of something, and so then for us when we speak of Revelation in the the sense of theology, then we are speaking about the way in which God uncovers God’s self in the world, lays bare God's presence and God's power amongst us. The conviction would also hold that God does indeed reveal God's self in the world, in the scriptures that we read about in the past and also today. In our lives both personally and communally, God reveals God’s self—that is the revelation of which we are speaking. To give it a little more helpful boundaries for you, in the Reformed tradition we are talking about two general types of revelation. We have General Revelation and we have Special Revelation. You might have a couple of different terms to describe those two general areas that we're speaking of. Our children just learned a bit about General Revelation. If you've ever sat up at the river and watched the sun go down over Arkansas, and you've simply sat in amazement and awe of how beautiful this world is. If you've imagined to yourself that this world could have been constructed in its beauty by none other than a thoughtful Creator who lovingly prepared it for us and for all creation, then you have experienced the general revelation of God—these things that are available to us all around us all the time that speak to the presence and the power of a creative force of the universe that we call God. I remember being in an Old Testament survey course. I told this story before too. I told an old story last week. I'm going to tell a few old ones this summer. I don't really care. I like them. Old Testament survey course. We're in the time where we get to study First and Second Kings—you all read First and Second Kings every Sunday morning, I'm sure. It's one of the...for us, one of the drier areas of the Old Testament. And so my professor brought in a visiting Professor, a fellow by the name of Walter Brueggemann, perhaps you are familiar with some of his work; and he when he gets teaching and gets really riled up, right, he gets sweaty, and he spits a little bit. You don't sit in the front couple of rows, you sit back a little bit, okay? He gets really into it. He is engaged in this faith journey that we are on. And so in our Old Testament survey class he comes in to teach us about 1 and 2 Kings, and he says...he asks us a simple question. “Why do you believe in God?” And then he goes one by one around asking us why we believe in God, and each of us has a different answer, and none of us gets the hint, since we're in an Old Testament survey course where we're studying scripture, none of us gets the hint that he might have a particular answer in mind. And so all 30 of us answer, and then he comes around, and he kind of sits there quietly. He doesn't have a beard, but you can imagine him doing kind of this, right? And he says, “Not one of you, not one of you people who are going to go out and Pastor our churches, teach our people about the love and the grace and the hope of Jesus Christ, not one of you named scripture as the reason that you believe in God.” And he didn't say ‘shame on you,’ but it sure felt like he did. Scripture is a particular, but also a general Revelation to us. There’s specificity of course in scripture, but it's also accessible to each and every single one of us; and so in that way, it's a general revelation of the love and the identity and the power and the purpose of Our Lord in our midst. It's specific in the particularities that scripture was revealed to each of the authors, but it's general in the way that we can consume it.

Then there's Special Revelation. That would be the revelation of God that comes in a particular way at a particular time to a particular person or even to a small group of people. Special

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Revelation, as we learned in the text this morning, doesn't often announce itself beforehand. It doesn't allow us to prepare. It also, more often than not, meets us exactly where we are on our journey. It is God revealing God's self, laying God's self bare to us in the particularities of our life, wherever it is we find ourselves. What we get this morning in the text from the ninth chapter of Acts is a special revelation to Saul. It's a revelation that is beautiful and powerful, and for him it will become transformational; but it starts as he is making his way to Damascus with some ill intent. Saul is not just some run-of-the mill antagonist of the movement of the way of Jesus, okay. He is so fervent in his belief in his calling that he has gone, scripture says, he has gone to the leaders, to the high priests and has said, "I'm going to Damascus to do this thing. Send a letter so that they know that if I find anyone in their midst who is following in the way, I can bind them up and bring them back here." Saul is not, he is not, okay with simply trying to persuade these followers of the way to be drawn back to their tradition. He wants to bind them and bring them back to the high priest. And so then this story reveals for us kind of the other two dimensions of revelation, that is that revelation can be and is beautiful, and it can also be dangerous. The beauty of revelation is that when we experience it, whether it be on a sunset or when the Word of God seems to go down right through the top of our heads to the bottom of our feet, when it...when we're struck blind by the light on the road that we are traveling, the beauty of it is that we get to commune with the God of all creation. And I'm not sure that there's anything more intimate that we can experience in our lives and in this world than to connect with the one who knit us together, the one who gives us breath every single day. There's a humble beauty to experiencing that revelation.

Another dimension of the beauty is that a revelation of God can actually change us. It can change our hearts, it can change our minds, it can change the direction and the road that we are traveling down. It can move it to another one. This past week I was checking my credit score. AMEX lets you do that now. Do y'all do that? It says once a month, it's like "Do you want to check your FICO score?" And I'm like "I do want to check my FICO score." So I go on AMEX, and it'll tell you, you know, all the different backgrounds that you have. Nothing normally changes for me, but one of the things that caught my attention this week was that, something I hadn't noticed before, it listed out for me on the right hand side of the column all the addresses that are related to David J Powers according to the internet, that safe place of the internet, okay. And so what I got to do while I was checking my FICO score was also go down and remember a little bit about each of those addresses and the time I had spent at them and the way in which they had impacted my life. And there at the very bottom—it's interesting, it only keeps a certain number, right? So when you get past 10, you might have lived somewhere else, but those go away, right? The very last one, the bottom one for me was 1228 Butler Street in Columbia, South Carolina. And the reason why that was important to me particularly this week was because I was reminded of what happened to me the second weekend December of 2004, when I was reapplying to law school. Some of y'all have heard this story too. And I was on the phone with a buddy of mine on the front stoop of 1228 Butler Street in Columbia, South Carolina, and it was a chilly day, and I was complaining to him about my reapplication process to the University of South Carolina. It was the only law school I wanted to go to, the only place I imagined that God wanted me to be. I was going to wear sear sucker and bow ties, and I was going to be a lawyer and then maybe even

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a politician back in my home state of South Carolina. Thank the Lord for saving me from that, right? And I was complaining to him, and he said, uh, he said, “David, why don't we just stop for a second.” He said, “I want you to just think with me for a bit.” And he went through this laundry list of all the reasons why I should have already been accepted to the University of South Carolina law school. I'd been accepted to a bunch of others. I had a number of awards, this GPA, this LSAT score, yada yada yada. And those didn't change my heart, but what changed my heart was the next thing that he asked me. He said, “Do you think that God might have anything else in mind for your life than being a lawyer in South Carolina for the rest of it?” And it was as if a lightning bolt went through the top of my head all the way down to my feet, right? And he said nothing about being called to ministry. All he did was introduce into my consciousness the thought that God might have something else in mind. And when I tell you that that moment in time has been enough to sustain for me the next 20 years of this thing that's now Ministry, I guess, I'm telling you the God's honest truth. When we have a revelation of God, it can be sustaining and transformational. It can change our hearts and our minds, and we will feel as if—because we have—we will feel as if we have had a Divine experience, because we have. The beauty of revelation is that it doesn't announce itself beforehand. It meets us where we are.

Another dimension of its beauty is that it can come through the voice of a person that you've spoken to a 100 times or maybe you're speaking to the first time. God uses all sorts of different channels to reveal, to lay bare God's presence and power in our lives. That's the beauty of it.

Yet there's also danger in it, and Saul is an example for us of what that danger looks like as well. Saul has had before this moment what he believes to be a legitimate revelation of God who has, and that Revelation has made him terribly committed to the path that he is on. It is in his mind his faithfulness that leads him to go to the high priest to get a letter of validation and to make his way to Damascus in order that he might bind and bring back to Jerusalem any of those who are followers of the way. Here's the thing. Saul is devout and faithful by his estimation. He's gained a reputation actually for how fervent he is in his faith. He is committed to his belief that God revealed God's truth once and for all. And, therefore, Saul is committed to it, and you should be too. I was reminded this week, as I was thinking about Saul, of some words from Barbara Brown Taylor that are probably important for us to hold this morning as we imagine together the dangers of revelation. She says, “Jesus was not brought down by atheism or anarchy. Jesus was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which are always a deadly mix. Beware of those who claim to know the mind of God and are prepared to use force if necessary to make others conform. Beware of those who cannot tell God's will from their own.” And the church said together, amen, because Saul is just that. He is religion allied with law and order. He is dotting every i, crossing every t, to make sure that he is perfectly aligned with what he believes the true revelation of God is, and he is prepared to use force to make sure that others conform to it as well. Saul illustrates, then for us, both the beauty of being struck blind and hearing the voice of Jesus and also the danger of when we commit ourselves to a way of faithfulness that threatens the lives of others. His life is both changed by God in this moment, and the danger of the way in which he's moving through it is loosed. If we hold together the beauty and the danger of revelation, then we ought to do so through the lens of our Reformed

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faith. That's what we're trying to do. We're going through these doctrines, right; and so our Reformed tradition, I think, throughout its history, has understood both the beauty and the danger of the revelation of God. And so it's provided us, wise faithful people over time have provided us, with guard rails for what revelation looks like. Now some would say there ought be no guard rails to the revelation of God. We don't say that, not in our Reformed tradition, and really not in even Saul's tradition. okay. Revelation for us is something that we experience. We can experience communally and personally. But even our personal revelations—we experience those, and then we—a good word might be we vet them, we validate them through community. What does that mean? It means that when that lightning bolt shot down through my head and into my feet at 1228 Butler Street back in the second weekend in December of 2004, I was grateful to the person, my dear friend who spoke that word of life into my life, that word of purpose and different direction for me; but I didn't then take that truth and hold it for the next 20 years. I talked about it with other people who were important in my life. “You know Matthew said to me the other day that I might need to imagine that God has a different future for me. What do you think?” And one after another after another said, “What are you thinking?” And I said, “I think I might, I think I'm supposed to go to Seminary.” And they would say, “Oh good, we're glad you figured it out.” We never talked about going to Seminary, never talked about doing Ministry, none of that, right? But over and over and over again, these people who love me, were committed to relationship with me, would validate and then...and also question that special revelation of God, right? I put it through that cypher, if you will, to determine what was true in that revelation and what might lead me astray once again. And that's what, actually, we do in our Reformed tradition. When we have an experience of God, we bring it into community and we wrestle with it there. We find people that we trust along the journey, and we wrestle through that revelation with them. I think that's the beautiful thing about this story in the book of Acts. Saul is not by himself on the road. He is not the only one that saw the light and heard the voice. He's the only one who's been struck blind, but he is not the only one who has had a revelation of God on the road to Damascus. He has other companions that are with him. And when he is instructed by Jesus to go into town and he is told that there you will be told what you are to do, he is not being told that he will hear another voice from on high necessarily. He is being told that there will be other voices that will speak into your life the truth and the revelation of God for you. Part of the guard rails that we put up in our Reformed tradition is a guardrail of a community of love and grace that helps us understand God's revelation in a deeper and more meaningful way for us, in a way that we can then trust along the journey. We have communal validation of that which God reveals and lays bare. But here's what I have to tell you this morning. You may be someone seated in the pews who has had a particular revelation of the Divine to you, or maybe you haven't. Maybe there's never been a lightning bolt go down through your head, down to your feet. Maybe you've never been able to say, “I heard God speaking to me,” without shrinking from the person you said that to, okay? If that's you, you're not alone. In fact, in our tradition I would say we are more apt to ignore that voice or be afraid to speak about that voice in company beyond even our closest circle. We don't want to be seen as crazy people who hear voices in our heads. Although we all are, okay? We don't want to be seen that way, and so we...we are timid in the ways that we claim the revelation of God in our hearts and in our lives. What I love about

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the book of Acts is that Saul doesn't is not afforded, he is not afforded that luxury. I think that's a beautiful and important thing for us to pay attention to. When God speaks, when Jesus, the Risen Lord speaks to Saul, he has no excuse and no other way than to deal with it.

God is still revealing God's self. That's what the road to Damascus reminds us of. What I need you to know this morning is that that same God who was at work on the road to Damascus, that same Christ who spoke into Saul's life, that same power is at work in you and in your life this very morning. And it is beautiful for us to hold that truth, and it can also be scary, because the revelation of God doesn't announce itself beforehand, doesn't make sure that we are ready for it. But what it does promise to do in the scripture is meet us exactly where we are and give us the exact revelation that we need to find the new road, to find the road that will not lead to danger for ourselves or others but to life and life abundant. This experience of Saul on the road, while his name will change a little bit from now, what it does for him is it commits him to a way of moving through the world that is committed to grace, committed to hope, committed to peace, committed to the belief that death does not have the last word, but God does in giving new life. It's going to make him so committed, this revelation is, to this new way that he will go to jail, that he will be martyred. It will make him so committed that his entire life will be changed.

Here's my hope for you. If you've had a revelation of the Lord, I pray you would be unembarrassed of claiming it. And if you haven't, I pray you might be open to the word that God is speaking to you. God meets us exactly where we are, and that is good good news, my friends. And the greater good news is this—that the God that spoke to Saul speaks even now to you. May you know it to be true in your life. May you experience the revelation of Jesus Christ this day and always.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.