

The Way
Acts 9: 1-20

Here is the question for the day: How did you first meet Jesus? Keep this question in mind as we go along in the meditation.

Some people are born into the faith, like being born into a family. For instance, I was “born” a Methodist. Both of my parents’ families belonged to Methodist churches in central Pennsylvania and as an infant, I was baptized in a Methodist church in South Jersey, where they had moved to and settled. We went to church just about every Sunday, I to Sunday school and my parents to their classes and then to worship. I heard Bible stories and memorized verses, sang in the youth choir, was active in MYF, and confirmed in the eighth grade.

You might say that I inherited a way of believing in Jesus and practicing the faith. I would guess that many of you could tell the same kind of story. But you can’t take believing in Jesus for granted. Inheriting the faith does not necessarily guarantee actually meeting him yourself ... although you are well along the way.

So...think about how you first met Jesus.

The people of the early church, the ones Saul was persecuting, had actually met Jesus, or came close enough. They were the people of “the Way” because Jesus himself was identified as the way. In Matthew, the Pharisees addressed him as *the way of God in truth*. Those who followed Jesus were described as walking the *way of peace* (Luke 1:79). And of

course, in the Gospel of John, Jesus himself says, “*I am the way and the truth and the life.*”

In his new book, *The Future of Faith*, Harvard theologian Harvey Cox notes the significance of describing Jesus’ early followers as people of the Way. “During the first two centuries, a period of unparalleled growth and vigor [for Christianity], the only “creed” Christians had was not an inventory of beliefs [as would be developed later in the church]. It was a straightforward affirmation: ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’...It meant, ‘I serve Jesus, not some other sovereign.’ This also meant [that] Christians placed loyalty to Jesus above loyalty to Caesar, which eventually stirred up fateful trouble.” (Cox 77)

The first Christians met Jesus almost directly. They consorted with apostles who had actually known Jesus in the flesh. They were passionate about proclaiming their faith and it was risky business. They could be stoned, or killed somehow else, tortured, or put in prison for admitting that “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

How did you first meet Jesus? I’ll bet it wasn’t anything as dangerous, but it might be, in a 20th or 21st century way.

It was people like Saul who brought trouble for the first followers. But even Saul met Jesus.

First, he met him in a dramatic experience. *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? ...I am Jesus.”*

It is still possible to meet Jesus that way. Down through the ages of Christian history, many of the saints – and non-saints – have had visions,

heard voices, had sudden flashes of insight, epiphanies, mountain top experiences, Damascus road experiences like Paul had. I know individuals in this very congregation who have met Jesus in this kind of way, in personal appearance and sudden conversion.

But Saul's second way is more typical. He was invited by someone else who already knew Jesus. *Now, there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias...and the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to...a man of Tarsus named Saul..." So Ananias went and laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."*

There is something strong, immediate and personal about someone else's testimony and invitation. "I have to tell you what happened." "Won't you come with me?" "Let me introduce you..."

I bet many of you have met Jesus in this way.

The point is that God sends Jesus to meet us in a variety of ways so that we might become people of the Way. That we might become people of peace and justice, kindness and mercy, love and forgiveness, of blessing rather than curse.

But still, we have a choice about that. Consider Ananias again. He did not want to confront the fearsome Saul. He hesitates: *"Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem..."*

But Jesus simply says, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen." He doesn't assure Ananias that he will be safe and that it will all turn out well in the end. Saul's men could have beaten him up and kicked

him out. And for that matter, Saul had a choice too. He could have rejected Ananias, stubbornly persisted in his own course...and stayed blind.

Likewise, we do not choose to become disciples of the Way because it is safe or because it supports our own self-righteousness or because it will bring us success or because it is popular. **If we follow the Way, we do it because we believe it is what God has called us to do, because God has sent Jesus to meet us.**

Did you notice what happened to Saul after Ananias lays his hand upon him? *He got up and was baptized.* Baptism was the sign and seal that, as of that moment, Saul has chosen to follow the Way of Jesus. Saul is acknowledging that, as Alden read from the book of Revelation, a revelation has come to him: “Worthy is the Lamb – Jesus - that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

That is still what baptism is for us. What we choose and promise in baptism is to seek the Way of God in our lives. It is what parents promise for their child – as Joe and Gayle have promised for Gabrielle this morning- and what they re-promise for themselves. It is what the congregation, as the body of Christ, re-promises and what you as individuals in Christ’s body promise also.

Someday, someone may ask Gabrielle how she came to meet Jesus and she will say – at least part of her answer will have to be – she was born into it when she was baptized on April 18, 2010. She has here today met Jesus for the first time; she has hereby inherited the faith.

Gabrielle is now on the Way. And I hope and pray that she will encounter Jesus again and again. For God has many ways to bring us around to his Way.

Have you been thinking about how you first met Jesus? And perhaps more importantly, how Jesus continues to meet you – again and again on the journey of faith and life.

Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009.

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