

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – September 19, 2021 – Welcoming God
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a and Mark 9:30-37**

In the year 1601, Italian painter Michelangelo Caravaggio offered what has become the most famous artistic rendition of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. There lies Paul, his back to the roadside. Vulnerable and visibly shaken, he is reeling from his encounter with the divine voice. There is no mystery regarding the origin of this summons, and no mistaking its purpose. "This is Jesus," the voice maintains, "the one whom you are persecuting."

Temporarily blinded by a heavenly light, and hastily thrown from his horse, Paul comes face-to-face with the errors of his ways amid the terror that now binds him. And as his mighty steed hovers above him, we are left to wonder if Paul will be trampled to death by a four-legged beast of divine judgment. Yet, just as quickly as his life is spared, it is transformed. And Paul soon receives a new, urgent mission, in which he is instructed to cease his campaign of targeting and singling out the followers of Jesus. No longer shall he persecute and imprison members of this emergent Christian community. Instead, he is tasked with defending, and encouraging, and leading them.

It is a radical reversal for one who, just a short time earlier, was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” Steadfast in this stated intention, Paul “went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogue in Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”

Now I don’t know if you have ever taken notice of this detail in scripture, but Jesus’ earliest disciples were not actually called Christians. Instead, they referred to themselves, and were often known by others, as followers of the Way. And unlike the adherents of some other religious traditions, these followers were not rooted in any particular location. Rather, as the name implies, one could just as easily journey with God on the Way to a desolate outpost, or a bustling city center, or to the very ends of the earth. And God would be with them.

In other words, it wasn’t a physical location but a spiritual destination that the people were seeking. One in which they would be steeped in knowledge, abounding in wisdom, and immersed in practices of faithful service. For these are signs of discipleship that long to welcome the welcoming God.

In our own journeys, we each have preferred methods of welcome. And we open ourselves up to the possibility of God's presence by means that the faithful have been utilizing for some 2,000 years. We devote ourselves to prayer and to study, to service and to worship, reliant upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Then, it comes as some surprise when God appears not only in moments of contemplation and self-giving, but on those occasions when our own, personal agenda is at the forefront of our minds.

And there, too, as we lose ourselves in the rhythms of perpetual motion, God appears. As we make our way to school and to work, into moments of crisis and long-awaited celebration, God emerges to disrupt our thoughts, to reorient our perceptions, and to speak words of challenge and comfort. For these are signs of the in-breaking reign of our incarnate God.

As one scholar reminds us, "God's greatest desire, that plan to which God is relentlessly moving us, is simply for God to be with us, now and for all eternity."¹ To be attuned to this plan is to observe God's presence among us wherever we are on the way. And it is to be willing, as the situation demands, to change our focus, or our direction, or our purpose without hesitation and without second-guessing.

¹Will Willimon, *Lectionary Sermon Resource, Year B, Part 2*, (Abingdon Press, 2017), 172.

In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus has just shared some very sobering news with his disciples. They are traveling along the way when Jesus tells them that he will “be betrayed into human hands,” that he will be killed, and that three days later, he will rise again. Still, the disciples “did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

Peter Paris, one of my professors at Princeton Seminary, writes, “a key dimension of all learning is to ask questions, which requires courage to risk embarrassment by revealing one’s vulnerability in the presence of others. By not asking questions we live into a lie by giving the impression that we understand when we do not. Unfortunately, the disciples fell into that trap.”² For “they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

What follows is a shocking account in which the disciples argue with one another about which of them is the greatest. They deflect the sad news that he had shared with them about his pending death. And they shift their focus, instead, to an argument “about who would gain higher status afterwards. In other words, they were discussing which one of them would assume leadership.”³

² Peter. J. Paris, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 333.

³ Paris, 333.

Jesus responds by telling them that anyone who wants to be first must be the very last and the servant of them all. And then, to make his point even clearer, he takes a child in his embrace and says that whoever welcomes the child welcomes him, and whoever welcomes him welcomes the one who sent him.

Today, we have received new members into the life of our congregation. Mike, Penny, Bob, Dottie, and Marta have professed their faith in Jesus Christ, and have stated their desire to journey with us on the way. We, in turn, have rolled out the welcome mats to encourage their friendship, to celebrate their gifts, and to grow in faith with them as members of the body of Christ. Together in this common calling, we affirm our intention to live as servants of the servant Lord. May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.