

SERMON: "ENCOUNTER WITH THE SPIRIT"

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 16:13-23; ACTS 9:1-9, 17-19

DATE: AUGUST 30, 2015

Matthew 16:13-23 (NIV)

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

¹⁴ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

¹⁵ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.

¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ²⁰ Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Acts 9:1-9; 17-19 (NIV)

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.

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.

A woman was out walking in the fields when she fell through some boards and tumbled down an abandoned well. In fear she called out for God to save her. The Lord heard her cry and saved her body and soul. The lady was thrilled. She loved to share her new found faith with

others. The only problem was her method of witnessing was to go around and shove people down wells.

The way---the method---the style in which we come to Christ in faith, is usually the way of witnessing we use and are comfortable with. Different people are touched by God---brought to God in different ways. We are too often suspicious of the methods other people use if they are unusual to us.

The way we come to faith and the way we share our faith has a lot to do with the Holy Spirit. We don't talk nearly enough about the Spirit.

The Spirit is the third person of the Trinity and has a ministry all His own. It's through the Holy Spirit that we are able to carry on effective ministries. The Spirit strengthens us---teaches us---directs us---shapes us.

It's through the Spirit that we come to Christ. The Holy Spirit works in our lives to bring us to the special relationship with Christ that sets us apart as Christians. There is no one way that the Spirit uses to bring us to faith. There is no one means whereby we experience conversion to Christ. The Holy Spirit works differently in all of us.

An example of this occurs in our two Scripture lessons.

Acts 9 is the story of the dramatic, spectacular conversion of Saul, who was to become the Apostle Paul. Saul, before his conversion, was the fiercest enemy the Early Church had. He was a zealous Jew who had dedicated his life to wiping out the Christian Church. On the way to Damascus Saul had an encounter with the Risen Christ. This was a thunder and lightning experience. Saul was knocked off his high

horse, literally. His life was turned totally around. He went from the Church's greatest enemy to its greatest missionary.

When Christians talk about earth-shaking, life-changing conversions we often say they have had a "Damascus road experience."

Matthew 16 tells about the time Peter saw the light. Peter was one of the original twelve disciples who spent three years with Jesus. During those years the disciples wondered, questioned, doubted and believed in the Lord. Their coming to Christ and having faith was a long process---a journey with ups and downs. They didn't always have a grasp on who Jesus was and what He was called to accomplish. Sometimes there would be insight and the light would go on. Other times the disciples acted as if they were the thickest twelve men on the face of the earth.

In our lesson from Matthew, Peter's confession of Christ and then Christ's rebuke of Peter is a prime example. Peter, perhaps more than any of the other disciples, had an up and down conversion experience. Confessing Christ as the Son of God and later, as Christ was to be crucified, denying he knew Jesus three times. Being called the rock on which the Church would be built and being labeled as a stumbling block put in the path by Satan himself.

Peter's conversion wasn't dramatic and instantaneous like Paul's. Peter's conversion was long and slow---nurtured by the ups and downs of life and the presence of Christ throughout the journey.

There is no one way to become a Christian. Many Christians are brought to Christ through a dramatic conversion---a Damascus road

experience. Something happens in their lives that completely turns them around and faces them in a different direction. One day they have nothing to do with God---the next day, after some startling event---they're eagerly seeking to grow in their new found faith.

Many other Christians have no startling, dramatic experience. They grow up in the Church and are nurtured in the faith for years and years. They have a special relationship with Christ but couldn't begin to tell you when it actually started. It's been taking place for years. They cannot offer a time, place and date of conversion like those who have had a dramatic experience.

Each conversion method is real and acceptable to God.

The Holy Spirit brought it about no matter how it occurred. The Spirit knows us and what we need to come to Christ. If we need to be startled and shaken out of old ways then the Spirit will touch us with drama. If we need to be nurtured along the slower path, the Spirit will walk the path with us. It doesn't matter to God how we get there---only that we arrive in God's love. The Holy Spirit will help us any way we need to come to the Lord and make Him our own.

While both ways of conversion are appropriate, both have their problems.

Often someone who has had a Damascus road experience strives to recapture the moment. They jump from mountain top experience to mountain top experience seeking to feel the rush of God's presence the way they felt it before. These people can find themselves seeking emotion rather than growth. They can place an expectation on others that precludes any kind of conversion unless it is like their own. If you haven't fallen down the well, then maybe you aren't a Christian.

People who have come to faith dramatically need to experience long, slow nurture afterward. They need to grow in knowledge, wisdom, and maturity rather than simply seeking higher and higher mountain tops.

On the other hand, those who have had a nurtured conversion sometimes take for granted what they know. The Church has always been a part of their lives but they need to grasp the truth of the Gospel and make it their own on a personal basis. Often they have a warm, special relationship with Christ but it has been there so long, they have taken for granted what it really means for their lives. They need to claim that relationship as something they truly want, not just as something that has always been there.

Sometimes the relationship is there but it's a head faith rather than a heart faith. They need to establish their connection with God as a love relationship and truly feel that love going both ways.

People with nurtured conversions also need to be more deliberate about showing their faith. The assumption is too often made that everyone else has this cozy, comfortable faith, so why talk about it?

And so those, with a dramatic conversion, need nurture in order to be balanced. Those, with nurtured conversions, need some moments of emotional commitment and recommitment where they can feel God's touch.

Neither conversion experience is exclusive of the other. The Holy Spirit seeks to bring us to Christ and then help us to grow.

We always need to be aware of the Spirit's invitation and continuous care. The Spirit doesn't seek to make Christians who feel superior to others because of their personal experience. The Spirit does seek to develop mature, balanced, accepting and tolerant Christians who realize that all their faith and growth comes, not from their own abilities, but from a continuous openness to the will and nurture of the Spirit.

A young couple had a daughter who was 10 years old. For a long time they had wanted a second child. Adoption was the only answer to their prayer and, when the arrangements were finally settled, the new little one fitted in very well.

The 10 year old was particularly impressed and was a great help in caring for the baby.

One day the mother mentioned how pleased she was with the help from her daughter. The wise little 10 year old replied that her baby brother was special. Since he had arrived so suddenly she realized just how special her parents were. She wanted to do whatever she could to be of help.

The adopted child arrived suddenly and dramatically. The baby was loved and nurtured. The natural child had always been there but needed a dramatic moment to truly realize and give thanks for the blessing of her family.

Dramatic or nurtured---that which we need, God offers.

As we open ourselves to God, we can count on the Holy Spirit to touch our lives.

What the Spirit starts in a personal, individual way, the Spirit seeks to grow in a personal, individual way.

How understanding and how wondrous is our God!!