

Encountering Jesus

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Acts 7:54-60; 9:1-9

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

At the same time, we urgently pray that God will help us grow as a people who humble themselves before the Lord and who have a heart to serve.

I love the 4th of July weekend—picnics, fireworks, remembering the birth of our country, rejoicing in the greatness of our country while aware of the many wounds and hurts within our country. God has been exceptionally good to us. To our Lord be the credit and the honor. At the same time, we urgently pray that God will help us grow as a people who humble themselves before the Lord and who have a heart to serve.

One of the great gifts God has given to our country is our leaders: George Washington, Dolly Madison, Abraham Lincoln, and so on down to our present day. Yet, if you ask people today what is our greatest need in America, you will hear the consistent reply—leadership—leadership with integrity, leadership with humility, leadership that can offer life-sustaining vision—leadership that has the will and the skill to make that vision a reality—leadership that is dependent on Almighty God for wisdom and for help. Where are we going to get leaders like that? Jesus said, “Ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers into his harvest field.” Let us pray for the leaders we do have and pray the Lord raises leaders among us in our homes, churches, communities, places of work and our nation—leaders of a dual citizen-

ship who understand they are citizens of this great land and citizens of the Kingdom of God through following Jesus.

In recent weeks, the book of Acts has been giving us a window through which we may see God's Big Story continue to unfold. Last week, we saw how the church chose seven people of good standing, full of the Holy Spirit and full of wisdom, to solve a squabble that had developed between the widows of the local Jews and those who were from out-of-town.

One of those seven people chosen was Stephen, who is described as full of grace and power and whose words and wonders touched so many people that the religious opposition was jealous and found false witnesses, who claimed Stephen was speaking against the Hebrew faith. Brought before the council, Stephen offered a wonderful summary of the history of God's work (reported in Acts 7) with His people ending with the rather blunt, “...you stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do” (Acts 7:51). This did not charm his audience. In fact, they became so enraged that they ground their teeth, only to hear him say, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”

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Well, that did it. "...but they covered their ears [they literally didn't want to hear him one more second] and with a loud shout, all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul." [Here, Stephen has just affirmed the history of God's work among His people and the reality of Jesus as God, raised from the dead, and is being stoned to death, so this remark about Saul standing there may seem to be a minor footnote, but it is our first introduction to him who will play a major role in God's Big Story.] While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died. This ends the seventh chapter of the book of Acts. The eighth chapter begins with the remark, "...and Saul approved of their killing him," so we know Saul has a great abhorrence for Jesus and the followers of Jesus.

Today, we jump to the beginning of the ninth chapter, where we pick up the story of this young man, Saul, who approved of the stoning of Stephen. "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." As far as Saul was concerned,

Jesus Christ was not Jesus the living Christ-Messiah but just the dead Jesus of Nazareth, and his followers were not only delusional, they were heretical to the God of Israel and deserving of death.

"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?'"

That's such a great question! "Who are you, Lord?" We know the answer, but Saul is clueless. As far as he is concerned, Jesus is d-e-a-d dead. "The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'" Between those words of Jesus and his next words was probably a tenth of a second, but to Saul I'll bet the world swirled and froze. What? Jesus? Jesus? At least two stupendous overwhelming insights came crashing in.

First, clearly, obviously, irrefutably, Jesus is alive. The resurrection actually did happen. Jesus is God, raised from the dead.

Second, Jesus has said, "Why are you persecuting Me?" Wait a minute, thinks Paul, I haven't been persecuting you, Jesus, I thought you were dead, but I have been jailing your followers, and Paul realizes that Jesus is telling him of the intimate connection between Jesus and his followers. As Augustine put it, "It was the head in heaven [Jesus] crying out on behalf of his members here on earth." No wonder Paul spent so much time writing about the concept of the Body of Christ. As a believer in Jesus, Jesus

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becomes your head, you are a part of his Body. What happens to you, happens to him. When you hurt, he hurts; when you are persecuted, he is persecuted; when you are praised, he is praised; when you are loved, he is loved; what you do, he does, just as what your hand does, you do.

Saul had experienced a life-changing encounter with God. To encounter someone is to experience him or her as a person, as a personality. To encounter is to meet someone, whether face-to-face or perhaps through other means such as a phone call or a letter or even an email message. This week, as every week, life has been full of encounters. I had a pleasant encounter by phone with a sister recovering from surgery and a fun encounter with a Christian clerk at Panera Bread about the goodness of our Lord. To encounter is to experience another person and to have your life linked to this life in some way. Our greatest encounter in life comes when we encounter Jesus Christ. A little song by Ralph Carmichael, with the title *He is Everything to Me*, tells the story of a woman who didn't believe in God until she encountered Jesus, and she sings:

Til by faith I met Him face-to-face,
And I felt the wonder of His grace,
Then I knew that He was more
Than just a God who didn't care,
That lived away out there, and

Now He walks beside me day-by-day,
Ever watching o're me lest I stray,
Helping me to find that narrow way,
He is everything to me.

Some of us encounter God in fairly dramatic ways. "Martha Williamson, executive producer of the TV show, *Touched by an Angel*, tells of a startling experience in her own life. Her father had just died, and she was visiting a therapist in order to work through her grief. She spoke fondly of her father, a musician, whose favorite song had been *How Great Thou Art*. The family made sure it was played at his funeral. But even though the song speaks of a great faith in God, Martha was experiencing a tremendous grief, and she had a lot of questions, mainly how is my father right now?

"On her way out of the therapist's building, Martha encountered what she called 'a pleasant-looking man' in the elevator. As Martha walked out of the elevator, she heard the man begin to sing, 'Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee....' She turned in time to see the pleasant-looking man turning a corner and disappearing from sight. Quickly, she went around the building to talk to him. There was no one there. Martha found great comfort in that unusual encounter with the singing man, and it helped to ease her sorrow."¹

An angel? Who knows? But we do know that our God is the with-

¹Joanna Powell, "The TV Show That Works Miracles" (Good Housekeeping, April 1997, p. 108.)

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God who comforts His people, and there is no question that God sent that man to encourage Martha's heart. She encountered the Lord who loves her.

Some of us encounter God in fairly dramatic ways, and others of us find ourselves encountering God through more ordinary experiences of life and in conversation with others. A couple of weeks ago, I spoke about parents talking to their children about their faith in Jesus and about children talking to their parents about faith. Joan is a friend of mine who taught nursing at a major university. One day, she asked her small group Bible study to pray for her father. She said, "My dad is facing major surgery tomorrow. I'm concerned because, insofar as I know, he had never received Jesus Christ into his life." We talked for a while. Someone said, "We know you're going to phone your dad tonight. Why don't you simply ask him if he has ever received Christ?" So, that night, encouraged by her small group to witness boldly, she phoned her dad. They began to talk about the surgery, about the prospects for recovery and some of the physical dimensions of the recovery. After a while, she said, "Dad, I do have one question. Dad, have you ever received Jesus Christ into your life?"

There was silence on the phone for a few moments, and then her dad said, "No, I never have, but you know I've been planning on doing it tomorrow." So she said, "Dad, is there any reason that you should wait until tomorrow?" He

said, "Well, no." "Dad, would you like me to pray a prayer right on the phone and you could pray with me to ask Christ into your life?"

"Alright." She experienced the joy of leading her father to faith. He survived his surgery and lived the rest of his life a changed man. He had encountered Jesus through an ordinary conversation with his daughter.

Some encounters with God are dramatic, and others happen through ordinary circumstances and, yet, are no less life-changing. Some encounters with the person of Jesus are complete surprises to us, as it was to Saul on the road to Damascus. Moses was herding a flock of sheep when he saw the burning bush and heard the voice, "...the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). An encounter with God was the last thing on his mind. Or on the mind of a woman who went to a well only to encounter Jesus there, or two people walking to the town of Emmaus after the death of Jesus, who found their hearts ablaze in an encounter with Jesus, or a jailor just doing his job when he encountered the apostle Paul and, through Paul, he encountered Jesus. You may believe in God, be unsure about God, or deny the existence of God, yet our God is very capable of encountering you unannounced and unsought when you least expect it.

At the same time, our Lord invites us to seek him. I love the promise God offers through the prophet Jeremiah: "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I

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will let you find me, says the Lord” (Jeremiah 29:13-14a). If you want to encounter God, know that our God wants to encounter you. Jesus said, “I stand at the door—the door of your life—and I knock. If you hear my voice and open the door I will come into you.” Jesus seeks an encounter with you. All you have to do is open the door and invite him in!

A man by the name of John Aker boarded an airplane in Newark, New Jersey taking his seat next to another passenger. John was tired and hoped to rest on the flight to Chicago. He did, however, greet the man beside him, whose name was Richard. John could see from Richard’s face that Richard was seriously ill. “I have cancer,” said Richard, “and I am going home to Nebraska where I’ll live out the months I have left.” He told John how his wife had died in an automobile accident and how his elderly parents had been caring for his children.

John said, “Richard, do you mind if I tell you something that changed my life?” Richard said, “Okay” and listened intently as John wrote four sentences on a piece of paper:

- 1) God loves you.
- 2) We are sinners.
- 3) Christ took our sins.
- 4) Receive Christ.

John explained these points in detail. The two men joined hands about 10,000 feet over Chicago, and Richard gave his life to Jesus Christ in a simple prayer with John. After the plane touched

down at O’Hare Airport, the two men parted as brothers in Christ.

Months later, John Aker again boarded an airplane again feeling tired and hoping to get some rest. He greeted an elderly lady sitting next to him and asked her if she was finishing a trip. She said, “Yes, I’ve been spending some time with my son in Nebraska.” John said, “I flew in November with a man named Richard, who was from Nebraska.” The woman was silent a long moment, then she said, “You must be John. You led my son to Christ; the Lord filled him with strength, courage, joy and victory. He died a few days ago without fear. I praise God for what you did for my son. His enthusiasm for Jesus Christ sustained all of us. You know,” she said, “this wasn’t my seat. Just before you came on the plane a woman asked me to change seats with her!”²

Richard’s encounter with Jesus wasn’t something he prepared for or planned for or even sought after. But God chose to encounter him in a very direct way, through His servant John Akers. That same God wants to encounter you and me and has been preparing you and me for a new and deeper encounter with Him through our deepening embrace of Jesus Christ. As we prepare now to come to our Lord’s table for Holy Communion, remember that the very word communion means communication, intimacy and relationship. Communion is all about encounter. As you receive the elements of the bread and of the cup, open yourselves to a deeply personal encounter with Jesus.

² Decision, July-August 1986, pp.12-13.

