

Extreme Makeover

The Rev. Dr. Peter G.
James

Acts 22:6-16

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

*Why don't you
just talk about
God and leave
Jesus out of it?*

I sometimes officiate at Jewish-Christian weddings. Most people, both Jew and Christian, hope I won't say much about Jesus at the ceremony, so as not to offend Jewish people. Why don't you just talk about God and leave Jesus out of it? They want me to ignore the elephant in the room.

More often, I employ a different tactic in Jewish-Christian weddings. Rather than avoiding the issue, I like to come at it straight. At the outset of the ceremony, I will say something along the lines of: These two religious traditions share a lot in common. We both worship God whom we call Yahweh. We revere the same 39 sacred writings, which Christians call the Old Testament and Jews call the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh. We abide by the same Ten Commandments. We happen to disagree about whether or not Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed One of God. Christians claim Jesus to be the Messiah; Jews reject his messianic mission. I am convinced we can be more authentic and real with one another when we are honest about our differences as well as the things we hold in common.

We cannot read the book of Acts without these Jewish-Christian issues coming into play. Paul, the foremost Christian

missionary, is a case in point. Paul, or Saul, his Jewish name, has impeccable Jewish credentials. He is educated at the feet of Gamaliel, the most renowned first century rabbi (22:3). He is so zealous for the Torah that he persecutes Christians to their deaths (22:4). Saul has it fixed in his mind that anyone who is on the side of God must be against Jesus. His commitment to Judaism is evident in the week it takes to travel to Damascus to arrest Christians. Saul wants to ensure that this dangerous fringe group doesn't bring dishonor to his beloved Judaism.

Saul is on a mission to arrest Christians in Damascus when he is dramatically knocked to the ground by a blinding light from heaven (22:6). He hears a voice, "Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?" (22:7).

"Who are you, Lord?" Paul asks (22:8).

"I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting" he replies (22:9).

"What shall I do, Lord?" Paul asks (22:9)

"Get up and go to Damascus," Jesus answers. "There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do." Saul is led by the hand to a prophet named Ananias, who restores his sight and leads him to faith in Jesus Christ.

When I read this account of Paul's transformation from a Jesus

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hater to a Jesus follower, the TV show *Extreme Makeover* comes to mind. It was popular a few years ago. The show featured ordinary looking people who submitted themselves to a total makeover. Exercise gurus, plastic surgeons and fashion consultants were called in to work their magic. And Voila! These plain-looking people were changed into attractive people in the eyes of the world.

Then, a few years later, *Extreme Makeover, Home Edition* came along. It featured families that couldn't afford to remodel their homes. The ABC network sent them on an all-expense-paid vacation for a week so contractors and builders could move in and perform a total home makeover.

Paul's conversion is an extreme makeover. He goes from being a bad guy, persecuting Christians, giving them the Tony Soprano treatment, to being God's good guy, preaching the Word and spreading the good news about Jesus Christ.

Paul's conversion may be the most celebrated Christian conversion in the annals of Biblical history, yet some people are troubled by it. People tell me with cynicism or wistfulness in their voices, "I've never had a Damascus road experience."

Neither has anyone else, for that matter. Paul's conversion is singularly unique. No one else has met God in quite the same way.

Paul's younger protégé in the faith, Timothy, has no Damascus road conversion experience. The only reference to Timothy's con-

version is the legacy of faith handed down from his mother and grandmother. There are no blinding lights or booming voices from heaven in Timothy's faith story.

Some people, like Paul, come to faith in Jesus Christ all at once. Others, like Timothy, come gradually, over time. Some never see a flash of light or hear a James Earl Jones voice from heaven.

If you ask me, Paul had it easy. First, he gets the proof and then comes to faith. Most of us come to faith and then spend the rest of our lives looking for the proof. Many of us here cannot pinpoint the day and time when we came to profess faith in Jesus Christ.

So what are we to do with a story like Paul's? Author Flannery O'Connor said, "I reckon the Lord knew the only way to make a Christian out of Paul was to knock him off his horse." Some need a strong push and a swift kick, others need a gentle nudge and the still, small voice of God.

Okay, some people come to faith in Christ all at once; others come gradually over time. But there's another takeaway from Paul's conversion story. Paul's conversion is a testimony to God's relentless pursuit of people. How ironic that Paul is on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians when Jesus Christ arrests him. We think of ourselves as the ones pursuing God, when, in fact, God is the one pursuing us.

I have often reflected on my coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Did I choose Christ or did Christ choose me? Jesus said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (Revelation

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3:20). Now, did I open the door or did he? Sure, I opened the door, but it was only on account of his persistent knocking. He made it possible, maybe even inevitable.

I've been rereading lately C. S. Lewis's spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*. When Lewis used the word "joy," he meant more than the mere pleasure of worldly pursuits. Joy is the sublime experience of knowing and entering into relationship with the transcendent God.

Lewis was an avowed atheist until the middle of his life, when suddenly he became aware that God was pursuing him. He likens God's pursuit to a great angler with a fish on the line, or a cat stalking a mouse, or a pack of hounds closing in on a fox. Lewis felt like a fox on the run with the sound of hounds coming closer. He felt like a mouse cornered by a cat, or the catch of the day being reeled in by the great angler.

Lewis's final metaphor is one of a divine chess player who maneuvers the opposition into checkmate. In the end, with no more moves to make, Lewis concedes checkmate. That's why the penultimate chapter is titled "checkmate." He writes, "All over the board my pieces were in the most disadvantageous positions. Soon I could no longer cherish the illusion that the initiative belongs with me, my adversary began to make his final moves."

At the end of the chapter, Lewis writes, "I gave in and admitted that God was God and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the

most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."

God is not out to get us, to wreck our fun and steal our joy. Quite the contrary, God offers us true joy. Lewis writes, "His compulsion is our liberation."

Another story of God's relentless pursuit comes to mind. Francis Thompson was raised in a devout, strict Catholic family. He entered seminary in 1870 with aspirations to become a priest. But he left a few years later, convinced that he lacked the disposition necessary for the priesthood. At the urging of his physician father, Francis enrolled in medical school. He hated it so much that he refused to apply himself and flunked out of school. He moved to London and became addicted to opium. He begged for food and did odd jobs to support his habit. He also wrote poetry. One of his poems he sketched out on a soiled scrap of paper and sent to a London paper. The editor recognized Thompson's poetic genius but had no way of contacting him, so he published his poem in the hopes that Thompson would contact him. They made connection, and this editor and his wife, a devout Christian couple, took Thompson into their home and helped him kick his opium habit. Despite his relapse several times, Francis Thompson pushed through to become an accomplished poet.

His most famous and recognizable poem is autobiographical in nature. Its arresting title, *The Hound of Heaven*, likens God to a type of bloodhound, hot on the scent of a hare, drawing nearer and nearer in the chase. When the poem was

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published, some were offended with the reference to God as a relentless hound. But there are good hounds and there are bad hounds. If this seems too severe, you might imagine God as a Border Collie, which is so adept at herding sheep. Thompson's poem begins with the memorable words:

I fled him down the nights and
down the days,
I fled him down the arches of
the years,
I fled him down the
labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind, and in the
midst of tears
I hid from him.

This poem expresses, with searing insight, people's endless capacity to evade God, our Divine Lover. But we are kidding ourselves if we think we can give God the slip. Wherever our poet runs, God follows close behind. God pursues our fleeing souls, not to punish us, but to love us.

“Still with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy, they beat—
And a voice beat more instant than the feet,
'All things betray thee, who betrays me.'”

The refrain of this poem is repeated again and again. You are not merely pursuing God. God, with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace, is pursuing you. God, like the proverbial Hound of

Heaven, wants to give you joy and peace beyond your wildest dreams.

Are you on the run from God? It is possible to attend church and still be on the run from God. Stop running and come home to God. If Jesus is knocking on the door of your hearts, open the door.

God, like the proverbial Hound of Heaven, wants to give us joy and peace beyond our wildest dreams.

