

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“The Turning Point”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, May 5, 2019

Acts 9:1-20

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. 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?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’ The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ He answered, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ The Lord said to him, ‘Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.’ But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.’ But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’ So Ananias went and entered the house. He 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.’ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’

Psalm 104, selected verses

*Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honor and majesty,
wrapped in light as with a garment.
You set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind,
You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills,
giving drink to every wild animal;
You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
plants for people to bring forth food from the earth,
and bread to strengthen the human heart.
The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly,
In them the birds build their nests, they sing among the branches.
You have made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows its time for setting.
You make darkness and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there, both small and great.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.
May the glory of the Lord endure forever;
may the Lord rejoice in his works
I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.*

*I rejoice in the Lord. Bless the Lord, O my soul.
Praise the Lord! Amen.*

Will you pray with me? Holy God, Your Living Word is one that moves among us, challenging, inspiring, encouraging, teaching. Be with us this day as I share what You have put on my heart and as we gather in the presence of Your Spirit. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

About 10 days ago, I went to Louisville to attend a conference called The Festival of Faiths. It's my third year going and I really find it very meaningful. Each year, people of all faiths and many ages come. There are high school students, university students, and then there are the rest of us and we gather to hear scientists, artists and theologians speak. This year, the former surgeon general spoke. Last year, Karen Armstrong, who is a well-known religious writer, spoke. This year's focus was Sacred Cosmos: Science Through the Lens of Faith. Being the daughter of a scientist and a granddaughter of a scientist, we'd had many conversations over the years for both faith and science were important to them. I know my grandfather's favorite psalm was Psalm 8, our call to worship this morning. Because of these relationships, I found that I was drawn to this year's presentation in a deep, new way. I found it to be very profound. The speakers talked about issues such as the increase of loneliness and depression in our society, about reconnecting with the earth, about the ethics of brain cell research, and about climate change. In the face of all the news that we get daily that's very negative and hopeless, I really appreciated these people speaking from a sense of hope. I found myself wondering if there are connections that are very deep between the impact of climate change and pollution and the matter of depression and loneliness, anxiety and tensions in our culture.

The more I thought about this, I saw the threads and the fault lines and the connections that ran between them, and I sensed that we are at a turning point: not the point of no return, but a turning point about the importance of the connection between community and creation. That we are to be concerned not just about people, but all of it together. We know that 500-year floods are occurring more often than 500 years. We know that hurricanes are more intense. We know that forest fires are more devastating than ever and we know that islands in the ocean are literally disappearing. But at this conference and the work that people talked about that they are doing, they called us to think in new ways and new directions.

As I sat there, taking notes at the conference, and a pastor's only good from one sermon to the other I was already thinking about this Sunday and I thought that Paul was facing a turning point in his life, a new way of looking at the world. As David shared in the reading, Paul, then known Saul, is on his way to Damascus. He has letters from the temple priest in his back pocket. He is literally on a mission to hunt down those who are following Jesus and bring them back as prisoners to Jerusalem. Paul is well-known for his acts of persecution and he is seeking out people that he thinks are corrupting the faith, those people following the Way. But then something very unexpected happens. A light flashes. He falls to the ground, and he has a vision. He hears Jesus saying to him, "Why are you persecuting me? Why do you attack those who follow me?"

Now, those who are with him are really startled because they hear the voice, but they don't see the vision. And they find that Paul is now blind. He is able to get up, but they had to lead him to a home to recover. Meanwhile, in another part of town, a man named Ananias also has a vision and it is also from Jesus. Jesus tells him, "You go find Saul and help him regain his sight." And Ananias says, "You want me to go see who?" He knows what Paul's been doing. He doesn't want to be anywhere near him. But Jesus convinces him to go. So Paul, once Saul, is the one that he goes to find. Ananias heals him and helps him to recover. We find out that Paul recovers not just his literal sight but the way he sees the whole world. His life changes.

I think we tend to think that Paul just then left, and went out beyond the synagogues to all those cities and began evangelizing. But in the Tuesday morning class, we're reading a book on Paul by NT Wright and his research leads him to conclude that Paul actually spent a lot of time studying. He went back home to the family business, which is tent making. (It took me a while to figure out tent-making ministry and Paul are related) So he goes back to tent making, and he also studies scripture. He wants to see how Jesus fits into the faith. He looks at the stories of Moses, of Exodus, the prophets, and he begins to see things differently. He sees that perhaps this man, Jesus, is also connected to the way God works in the world. And he realizes that the ministry of Jesus is not about creating a new faith. It's deeply woven into the roots of his Jewish faith. Because of this new insight, he seems to move from anger and persecution to a new world view shaped by hope and love. Think of Corinthians 13, "love is patient and kind."

Paul has a lot of energy, and now it's moving in a new direction. Paul is also a brilliant man who speaks many languages. He's at home with people of various backgrounds and cultures. He is multiculturally lingual or linguistically multicultural. This newfound understanding of faith makes him see the world differently. The death and resurrection of Jesus takes on a new meaning. It is no

longer a failure of a long-awaited Messiah. Rather, he sees it as an act of love that overcomes death and he wants to share that good news with so many people. The second thing he realizes is that Jesus didn't come only for his own people but for all people everywhere. That's a new perspective not only for him but for many in his faith at the time. For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus has the power to heal the world. It brings forth a new creation. So through study and reflection, he reclaims hope. NT Wright tells us that, for Paul, hope is not a feeling. It is a virtue. It's about having a long term view, for hope is the ability to realize that even if things are difficult now, that in the time to come, in God's time, Cairo's time, a new heaven and a new earth will come into being.

I found myself thinking about Paul's words in Romans about the creation groaning. "*We know the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*" I don't think he'd just talking about human beings with this. The origins of the Greek words creation and groaning are literal and very connected to the earth. I think Paul saw humanity as very much connected with creation. They weren't separate in his own mind. So what if we consider a deeper meaning of Paul's words for us today and we put together humanity and creation as one perhaps the way it was always intended in God's mind. So that while the whole of creation may be indeed groaning in our day, we're also being those called to help birth forth a renewed creation and to address these issues with hope.

One of the scientists at the conference said that he had to remain hopeful and he shared things with a sense of hopefulness because he said that's the way we have to go. That's the way we have new vision. He said new technology is evolving so fast, we leapfrog over past discoveries. Now we not only see things across the earth from the earth but from satellites. He said that the coal and oil energy enabled us to create new forms of energy, producing metals and glass needed to create wind turbines and solar panels. And then he said something very powerful. "We can use creation to heal creation." As examples he talked about farmers using methane gas produced by their animals as a way to use some fuel to be burned and burned cleanly. He talked about how planting trees is so important because trees take carbon out of the atmosphere and put them back in the soil because the soil has been depleted of so much carbon. He reminded us that all the issues are connected; faith, climate change, and economic justice.

He and others also talked about the Encyclical from the Pope about creation. He and others told us it's being used by corporate leaders all over the world because it's such a profound paper. It talks about water, the poor, climate, and the impact of the loss of species. The paper also speaks to matters of faith saying, "We are told that we have dominion over the earth, not domination." That the undermining of the well being of creation can undermine the whole being of humanity. Other people understood the fact that if we are going to be shifting from one industry focus to another, economic justice is about training people to take on new jobs if their old jobs fade away. And I was reminded that creation and the economy are connected. The word in Greek that economy comes from is *oikonomía*, It's literal meaning is household. This is about the household of God.

Those at the conference also talked about how some people of our faith have a different perspective. They feel that climate change is simply proof that the end times are coming. That in the end, the earth will no longer matter because there will only be heaven. I disagree. It will matter. Scriptures do not speak of a new heaven and no earth. Scriptures speak of a new heaven **and** a new earth. They are inextricably entwined in the *oikonomía* of God.

So my time in Louisville helped me to see that the more we distance ourselves from the earth and disregard caring for it, the more we are distancing ourselves from one another. I was at a recent fundraising event for Care and Counseling and the director, Amy Bertschhausen spoke. She said the agency has seen a 20% uptick in requests for counseling this year alone. They could hire two people and give them full-time work within a matter of weeks. Yesterday, I was driving by their building and I saw their new sign with their motto, "hope and healing" and I thought, what a powerful phrase for these times. Hope and healing. I think that's Paul's perspective. He has hope and he wants to help heal the world.

We may be at the point of whole creation groaning, but this is not the end. I think we are moving toward rebirth and renewal and reclaiming our connection to God's creation. That's why I love the writer from Psalm 104, because the writer sees everything as connected and in seasons and cycles, in beauty, in food, everything brought all together.

So may we remember that our relationship with creation is not about two different worlds, humans and the earth. It is about beings who are literally made from the earth and stardust and the breath of life. These are challenging times but I have hope. I heard from those that have hope that we can utilize creation to heal creation. So let us be those who share the good news about bringing healing and hope. To be those who are a part of recreating a new heaven and a new earth. Amen.