

Three Days

Acts 9:1-19a ~ May 14, 2017 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church

And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Here is one of those little details of a Bible story that is so easy to overlook. What happened to Paul immediately after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus? This was the time when Saul was neither a Pharisee nor a Christian. The Bible tells us that ***for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*** The concept of three days is a Biblical clue for us to sit up and take notice. The exact phrase, “three days” occurs 70 times in the ESV Bible. It appears throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. When the Bible uses the term “three days” it does not mean precisely a 72-hour period. Rather it means a flexible time that extends into parts of three consecutive days.

The term “Three days” is well known to Christians because of Jesus’ time in the tomb. And certainly, the three-day period between the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus has great bearing on the conversion of St. Paul. Paul knew that Jesus had been crucified. He had bet his honor, his career, and his very being on the belief that Jesus was still dead. But that was a bet he had lost. As he sat for three days in darkness, that loss must have sunk deeply into his being. He had met Jesus Christ alive from the dead on the road to Damascus. That was the last thing he had seen. His three days in darkness were profoundly connected to the sealed tomb of Christ.

However, in St. Paul’s case the three days may also have had further significance. They also tie him to prophetic tradition. Remember the Biblical reference to three days from the book of the prophet Jonah.

And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

While Paul sat cooling his heels in total darkness, the story of Jonah must have come to his mind. Commanded to go to Nineveh and preach to the gentiles, Jonah had run the other direction. The prophet’s mutiny was short lived. It ended in a self-sacrificing swim for the sake of the vessel’s crew in the face of a killer storm sent by God to stop him. A ride in the belly of a great fish for three days left him back where he had started. But now his rebellion was broken. God had his attention. Jonah went to Nineveh to preach to the gentiles.

Jesus spent three days in the darkness of his tomb. Jonah spent three days in the darkness of the fish's belly. Paul spent three days in darkness, without food or drink, waiting in Damascus. Can we even begin to imagine what that might have been like?

Like Jonah, Paul had run away from God. His will had been aimed directly against God's will. He led the persecution of the followers of Jesus who is God's chosen Messiah. Paul had rejected Jesus along with all the Jewish leaders. It seems likely that Paul knew Jesus. The gospel writers don't name the scribes and Pharisees that harassed Jesus. But it seems more than likely that an ambitious, up and coming Pharisee like Paul would have been right there with them. And in all the excitement around the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus it is very plausible that Paul was party to those events. With his burning zeal for the Jewish law, wild horses could not have kept him away. And when the Christians began to testify that Jesus was risen from the dead, Paul must have gone ballistic. He believed that they had gone too far with that lie. He was convinced that they had to be stopped at all costs. And so, Paul became the scourge of the earliest Christian church.

The book of Acts suggests that Paul nearly single handedly shut down the church in Jerusalem. He made the entire congregation disappear overnight. But soon reports came back, that even though the Christians had fled from Jerusalem, they were as determined as ever to spread the story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul became even more resolute to put a stop to it. He got authorization to travel to Damascus and drag Christians back to Jerusalem for trial. Could there ever been a more unlikely apostle. In a Jonah-like fashion Paul turned his back on the clear evidence that Jesus was the Christ and bent all effort to prevent any further mention of his name.

But on the way to Damascus:

...Suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ... And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

For three days Paul lived in the darkness of a sealed tomb. Without sight, he was confined the blackness of a fish's belly. There was no light, no food, no drink, for three days. He had looked upon the countenance of the risen Lord Jesus, the very Jesus he

had rejected, and that had ended his sight. It was the last thing he saw for three days. That was more than enough time for Paul to begin to believe that he would be blind forever. Along with the sudden realization of how wrong he had been, he had to come to terms with the new understanding that Jesus was the Messiah. He had to accept that Jesus had risen from the dead. Paul suddenly realized that his proud persecution of Christianity had made him the evil enemy of God. During those three dark days Paul began the journey of repentance that coalesced into a rejection of righteousness gained through the law. The only hope in those stygian days in Damascus was the grace offered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The rest of the story is straight forward. Naturally, the Christian community was suspicious of Paul. They were afraid that his conversion was nothing more than a ploy to gain greater access to the Church for his persecution. That was a reasonable assumption, given the circumstances. But like Jonah before him, the three-day experience had truly transformed Paul. He was no longer the fire brand of Pharisaic Judaism. He was now a believer in Jesus Christ. Over time Christianity came to understand and believe the change those three days had wrought in Saul of Tarsus, who we call St. Paul. In his letter to the Galatians Paul tells the story this way:

For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles ... And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

Like Jonah, Paul was called to preach to the gentiles. His three days of darkness energized his zealous preaching of the gospel of Jesus beyond the bounds of Judaism. He was the first Apostle to teach the opening of God's heart to all of humanity without the sign of the covenant. Circumcision and righteousness through the law fell away along with the scales from St. Paul's eyes. St. Paul brought a unique and vital

perspective to the Christian Gospel that focused it for the Kingdom of God. The twelve disciples had walked with Jesus, had sat at his feet, had given their lives to proclaim his word. Jesus had given them the keys to the Kingdom of God. But St. Paul was Christ's way of completing the Word of Christ. By the leading of the Holy Spirit, God used Paul's keen mind to clarify the message of the Gospel.

Yes, God does demand the righteousness laid out in the Law of Holy Scripture. As Jesus taught, "Not even the tiniest part of that law will fail to be enforced by God." God is righteous and he demands righteousness of all whom he saves. Paul had lived this truth with every breath of his life. He was a Pharisee's Pharisee. His adherence to the legal code was perfect. But that fixation of achieving righteousness by keeping the Law was precisely what had caused him to miss the coming of Jesus as God's messiah. In those three days of darkness, and the years of Christian mission to follow, Paul was guided by the Holy Spirit to sort out the truth. Even though, God demands a righteousness that is completely impossible for any human being, except Jesus, God saves us by giving us Jesus righteousness to replace our own.

You are saved, not by your own righteousness. You are saved by the grace of God who gives you the righteousness you need by means of Jesus Christ. In this way, Paul's three days of darkness has a direct bearing on you today. Paul's Gospel, the Gospel of the Christian church, bears God's own promise that you are saved through Jesus Christ. This is not just a future possibility. It is a present reality. You are set free from the consequence of the sin that seeks to bind you and destroy you. It no longer has any power over you. Your repentance is a rejection of its power and a clinging to faith in Jesus. It is this faith that makes you into the very children of God. You walk this day in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. His dignity, his love, his determination to serve is your path as you walk by the Spirit in his Grace. Like Paul you are being transformed by the Gospel. You are becoming a heaven bound creature destined for eternal life with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.