

Scripture Readings and Sermon

May 5, 2019 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Acts 9:1-9, 17-20 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

For those new to the story, the changing of Saul's name to Paul can be confusing. The fact is that Saul was always Paul. Saul is his given Hebrew name but in Tarsus Greece, where he was born, he would have been known as Paul which is the Greek pronunciation of Saul. The fact that the story begins with Saul but then later in Acts he is called Paul is a reference to his ministry with the Hellenized (Greek speaking) Jews outside of Jerusalem. His status as a Roman citizen and a disciple of Gamaliel allowed him to speak with authority in this community. Gamaliel, who persuades the council to stop persecuting Peter in Acts 5:33-40, is the grandson of Hillel. Hillel is one of the most important figures in Jewish history associated with the development of the Mishnah and the Talmud. The first version of the "golden rule" was credited to Hillel, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow." Despite the more moderate teaching of Hillel and Gamaliel, Saul is noted as being complicit in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58) and zealous in his persecution of the followers of Jesus (Acts 8:3). This explains Ananias' hesitation to be the hands of healing for Saul and why his early ministry was met with skepticism. It is interesting to note that Saul/Paul was only about three or four years younger than Jesus and would have just begun his ministry at the age of 30 when Stephen was stoned.

Commentary on Revelation 5:11-14 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

After John receives his message to the churches (Revelation 2-3), John is then given a vision of heaven very similar to Isaiah (6:1-4) and Ezekiel (1:4-28). Heaven is awaiting the Day of the Lord which will begin the sealed scroll is read but no one is found worthy until the Lamb appears. They sing "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered" referring to the crucifixion. The seven "perfect" attributes are given to the Lamb. The second attribute, translated "wealth", may at first appear not to apply to Jesus given His teaching about money. The Greek word that is translated as "wealth" also means riches and more importantly abundance. This word conveys the similar meaning as "my cup overfloweth" in Psalm 23. Jesus is rich in grace and abundant in mercy which he pours out on us through the Holy Spirit. The twenty four elders who fall down and worship are often described as the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles meaning all of the Old and New Testament proclaim the Lamb. There are a number of interpretations for the four creatures. Based on older religious traditions during the time of Isaiah and Ezekiel the four could be the four corners or directions of the earth or it could reference the four elements: earth, wind, water, and fire. The church after 180 A.D. begins to associate them with the four Gospels (Matthew - man, Mark - lion, Luke - ox, John - eagle) who record the worthiness of the Lamb.

Commentary on John 21:1-19 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

While the story of Jesus by the shore is very familiar, here are a few things to consider. John actually closes the book at the end of Chapter 20. This is a postlude to John. Both Nathanael and Thomas are named along with Peter and the sons of Zebedee. It is only in John the stories of Nathanael's call or Thomas' doubt are recorded. Even after he is sent out, the disciples are still not "fishing for men" but rather for fish. Peter is one of the few people who would put on clothes to go swimming. The clothes are most likely symbols of his shame at his rejection of Jesus like Adam and Eve's shame after eating the fruit. Note that the fish are being cooked over "coals" which not only indicate that Jesus has been watching them for a while but also could be symbolic of the coals used to purify Isaiah (6:5-7). Jesus purifies Peter with his three questions mirroring the three denials of Peter. In these questions, Jesus asks Peter two times if he loves him unconditionally (agape) to which Peter

replies that he loves him like a brother (philos). The third time, Jesus removes the "unconditional" and asks if he loves him like a brother to which Peter says yes. This sets up Jesus' reply that Peter may be taken where he does not want to go despite his "conditional" love. The book ends with a reference to John not being martyred which possibly points to his exile to Patmos and the writing of Revelation.

Sermon Summary (*Youtube [Sermon Video](#)*)

The John's epilogue of chapter 21 focuses on the redemption of Peter and the role Peter will play in the early church. Peter's shame is evident by his covering of his "nakedness" to jump into the water. The symbolism of the burning coals and Jesus asking him three times all point to bringing Peter back into relationship with Jesus. The section ends with Jesus pointing out that despite Peter's hesitance at fully committing (using "brotherly love" rather than "unconditional love" in his response) there will come a time when Peter will be forced to choose how far he is willing to follow.

For many people, the choice to follow is often predicated to the degree by which they trust the one they are following. The question most people ask is if the person or cause they are being asked to follow is worthy. In the Book of Revelation, all of creation on earth and in heaven proclaim that Jesus, the slain lamb, is worthy to be followed. In fact all of creation has waited throughout time for one as worthy as Jesus. For in the end, only God is worthy of our total trust and obedience.

Saul (Paul in Latin) persecuted the early church not because he did not believe that God was the only One worthy of obedience but because he thought Jesus was a false prophet leading the people astray. When Jesus' divinity was revealed to Saul on the road, he figuratively died to his old beliefs by not eating or drinking or seeing for three days as if he were in a tomb. Ananias did not want to go and heal Saul. There were in fact a number of reasons not to but, like Peter, Ananias was being asked to choose if he was willing to follow even to a place he was unwilling to go. In the end, we all need to ask ourselves is Jesus is worthy and if he is then why are we so hesitant to follow.