

Interrupted by Grace

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, amen.

Have you ever been absolutely sure you knew where you were going, only to discover you were on the wrong road? Back in August of 1998, when we moved to Ohio from Anchorage, Alaska, we arrived at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base tired from the long trip and ready to get settled in. We found out the temporary lodging on base was full, so the billeting personnel directed us to some local hotels. We also asked for directions to officers' base housing, because until our house in San Antonio sold, we needed to stay in base housing. After traveling all the way from Alaska to Ohio, we were pretty confident we knew how to follow a few directions and would soon see if Base Housing would meet our family's needs. (SLIDE) Unfortunately, somehow, we made a wrong turn. As we drove along, we passed a medium-sized Lutheran church. We noticed the name, the service times, and the address. That church was Abiding Christ Lutheran Church in Fairborn. At the time, it just looked like a wrong turn, but it wasn't. That "wrong turn" led us to the exact place where God was quietly at work. Abiding Christ became our home congregation. Pastor Craig Fourman was serving there, and he was on the Southern Ohio Synod's candidacy committee. Pastor Craig became my mentor and Abiding Christ ended up playing a major role in my path toward ordained ministry. What looked like a mistake turned out to be grace. I think Saul would understand

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that better than most. In our reading from Acts, Saul is also on a road. He also thinks he knows exactly where he is going. He is certain, focused, and determined. He has official papers in hand, a mission in mind, and a future all planned out. He is on his way to Damascus to bind up followers of Jesus and drag them back to Jerusalem. Saul is not wandering. He's not confused. He is not searching. He is full of confident certainty... And that's what makes him so dangerous.

Sometimes the deepest and darkest kind of blindness is not when we cannot see anything at all, but when we are absolutely sure we already see everything perfectly clearly. Saul thinks he is serving God. He thinks he is defending truth and doing the faithful thing, but he is dead wrong... (SLIDE) That's when Jesus interrupts him. A light from heaven flashes around him. Saul falls to the ground as he hears a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" That question cuts right to the heart. Jesus doesn't ask, "Why are you persecuting my people?" He says, "Why do you persecute me?" In other words, what Saul has been doing to the church, he has been doing to Christ himself. The risen Lord is so joined to his people that to wound them is to wound him. Saul thought he was acting for God. Instead, he discovers he has been fighting against the very Lord he claimed to serve. And then comes the great shock of mercy. Jesus doesn't destroy Saul on that road. He could have. Jesus doesn't cast him off forever. He could have done that too. Instead, Jesus stops him. He confronts him. Jesus blinds him for a time

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so that he might finally learn to see. What looks like judgment is already the beginning of grace. Saul, the strong one, now has to be led by the hand. Saul, the one who came to bind others, must now depend on others. Saul, the man with a mission, now sits in darkness waiting for someone else to tell him what comes next. That's the trouble Saul finds himself in. He's blinded by his certainty. There's plenty of trouble in this story to go around...

While Saul is sitting in darkness, the Lord speaks to a disciple named Ananias. (SLIDE) Let's be honest here, Ananias is not excited about this call. The Lord tells him where to go, whom to look for, and what to do. Go to Saul. Lay hands on him. Pray for him. Ananias basically says, "Lord, are you sure? I've heard about this man. I know what he has done and why he's come here." I mean, you can hardly blame him. Saul isn't just on vacation, he's dangerous. He and his cohorts have terrorized the church. Saul is the kind of person from whom faithful disciples would flee. So, Ananias has his own road to walk. His road is not the road of violent certainty like Saul's. His road is the road of fear. His problem is not hatred so much as reluctance. He knows exactly why this is a bad idea. Yet, when the Lord says, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen," Ananias goes.

I think that may be one of the quiet miracles in the whole story. Ananias goes, not because Saul has earned it... Not because Saul has apologized yet. Not

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because all the danger is gone. He goes because Jesus said go. When he arrives, Ananias says the most astonishing words in the whole passage, “Brother Saul.”

(SLIDE) He calls Saul his brother... Not enemy Saul. Not dangerous Saul. Not former persecutor Saul. He calls him brother... That is grace... Before Saul has preached a sermon, before Saul has planted a church, before Saul has written a letter, before Saul has proved anything at all, the church speaks to him a new identity. Brother.

That is what Jesus does. Jesus interrupts the old story and gives us a whole new one. Jesus takes the man who came breathing threats and violence and begins making him into a witness. Jesus takes the one the church fears and places him inside the family of faith. I used to think that was about all this story had to offer, Saul’s conversion to Saint Paul... It is about Saul’s conversion, but so much more... This is really more like the whole Church’s conversion story... It’s about Ananias being converted from fear to obedience, from suspicion to welcome, from self-protection to trust. (SLIDE) Maybe that’s exactly where this text meets us, because most of us are probably not persecuting Christians on the road to Damascus, but we do know what it’s like to travel with a great deal of certainty. We know what it is like to be sure we’re right, sure our judgments are sound, sure we know who people are, sure we know what kind of future lies ahead. We can become very confident in our “Righteous anger.” Overconfident in our opinions

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and way too trusting in our assumptions about other people. In our self-deluded state, we think we get to decide who belongs and who does not. We decide who is worth our time and who is not. We decide who is too far gone, too messed up, too dangerous, too wrong, too difficult for grace.

If we step back and look at this story as the Church's conversion, we just might discover we may be the ones who cannot see. We all have a little Ananias in us too. If we're honest, there are people we don't want Jesus sending us toward. There are people we would rather keep at a safe distance. There are people whose reputation gets there long before they do. There are wounds, histories, fears, and suspicions that make us want to say, "Lord, surely not that person. Surely not now. Surely not me." Jesus has a habit of interrupting our tidy categories. He interrupts our confidence. He interrupts our fear. He interrupts the future we thought we had planned. Sometimes he does it with a blinding light. Sometimes he does it through a wrong turn. Sometimes he does it through a crisis. Sometimes through a conversation. Sometimes through a person we never expected to matter. Sometimes through a congregation, a calling, a moment we almost missed. Only later, in hindsight, do we realize: what looked like interruption was grace.

(SLIDE) Dear friends, that's good news for us, because it means our wrong roads are not beyond Christ's reach. Our blindness is not beyond his healing. Our fear is not beyond his call and our past is not beyond his power to redeem. The risen

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Jesus is still meeting people on the road. He's still stopping us in our tracks. He's still tearing down old identities and handing out new ones. He's still taking sinners and making saints. He's still taking enemies and making siblings. He's still taking frightened disciples and sending them with healing in their hands. Most of us know exactly what that feels like. Maybe you can look back on your own life and point to a detour, a disappointment, a delay, a loss, a road you never meant to take. At the time, it seemed like everything had gone wrong, but looking back, you can see Christ was already there--already working--already redirecting--already calling--already pouring out grace.

One final word of caution... Just because God may be directing your wrong turns, doesn't mean every wrong turn feels good. Saul was blinded. Ananias was terrified. Grace is not always comfortable. Sometimes grace knocks you to the ground before it raises you up. Sometimes grace takes away your illusion of control before it makes you a new creation. Sometimes grace sends you toward the very place you would rather avoid... But it is still grace. So, if you feel a little like Saul this morning—forced to admit you don't see as clearly as you thought—take heart. Jesus is not done with you. If you feel a little like Ananias—fearful, reluctant, unsure—take heart. The same Lord who sends you goes with you. And, if your life today feels like one big wrong turn, take heart. In the hands of the risen Christ, even detours can become holy ground. Amen.