

On the Way  
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First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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**Acts 9:1-9**

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 traveling 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.

Did you know that we have more than five senses? Most people who study senses agree on anywhere between nine and twenty-one senses. The five basic ones are the most obvious, but then we have others that involve different systems in our bodies and tell our brain different things that we depend on to navigate this world.

Something like pressure is separate from the sense of touch, and so is the sense of an itch, or of temperature, or even pain. These are different systems that involve different signals in our brain. The sense of hunger and thirst are also separate senses. The sense of time is another. And then, there are two other senses that I want us to focus on today – the sense of direction, also called magnetoception because of the involvement of the earth’s magnetic fields, and the sense of proprioception, or the knowledge of where your limbs are in space. Without this sense of our bodies in space, we would not be able to walk without very purposefully watching our feet as they hit the earth. We would not be able to read and drink coffee at the same time. We wouldn’t be able to drive at all,

because we'd have to watch our arms and feet as they work the steering wheel and pedals instead of watching the road. A blind person would be completely disabled instead of being able to move about normally. Close your eyes right now. Touch your finger to your nose. You are using one of your senses – your sense of proprioception.

We navigate our world with the use of our senses. Without one of them, we depend on the others. When you lose one of your senses, the others increase in order to make up the loss. We are most aware of this phenomenon in our five basic senses, especially with the loss of sight. If you can no longer see, your hearing gets stronger. Your brain starts to use the senses of touch and smell in order to learn how you need to react to the world around you. It makes me wonder about those other senses, senses like magnetoception and proprioception. Do those also become more pronounced?

In our Bible story today, Saul loses his sense of sight. Saul is the same person as Paul, the man that Christians think of as one of the fathers of the church, who founded and supported many many early Christian communities, and whose letters to those communities we have in the Bible, the letters that continue to guide Christians today. Paul's disciples continued his tradition in teaching early Christian communities and writing letters, sometimes even using Paul's name to give those letters more authority, as was common in that time. Paul's Christian ministry begins as he is on his way from meeting with the high priest to Damascus, where he plans to hunt down followers of Jesus, or those who belong to the Way, and arrest them and bring them to jail in Jerusalem. The last we heard of the young man Saul in the book of Acts, he was going through house after house and imprisoning followers of Jesus shortly after he had stood at

the stoning of Stephen, another of Jesus' followers, and approved. Now he goes to Damascus to do the same there.

But, as he nears the city, there is a flash of light, and he falls to the ground. He hears a voice saying "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul answers, using the respectful term "Lord," "Who are you, lord?" "Who are you, sir?" And the response comes, "I am Jesus. Jesus who you are persecuting, because you are persecuting my followers. Get up and go into the city and you will be told what you are to do. And that was it. Saul gets up and is blind. His traveling companions have to lead him by hand into the city. There's more to the story that we didn't read this morning. So far we have heard that Saul is blind for three days, during which time he neither eats nor drinks. In the meantime... Jesus appears to another man, a disciple named Ananias who lives in Damascus, and tells him about Saul. He tells him that he must go to him and lay his hands on him so that he will regain his sight. Ananias does not want to. He has heard of Saul's persecutions. Jesus tells him, though, that he has chosen Saul to be his instrument for spreading his gospel to the Gentiles, to kings, to the people of Israel. So Ananias gets up, and goes to Saul.

Three days have passed. What has happened to Saul in those three days? The story doesn't tell us much. He has been blind, and has not taken food or water. From Jesus' words to Ananias, we know that he has been praying, and that he has received a vision that a man named Ananias will heal him of his blindness. And we know that at the end of those three days, he was ready to be baptized in the name of Jesus and to begin proclaiming Jesus' name to all. He has become a follower of Christ. Because of the

power of Christ, he has become a member of the Way, the very group that he came to persecute.

The Way. Another minister has pointed out that this story tells not only of a crucial turning point in the early church, but it also gives us a glimpse of the character of the discipleship of these early believers. Eric Barreto says, “Acts 11:26 will recount that it was in Antioch when the faithful are first called ‘Christians.’ How then was this group known prior to this? In chapter 9, these people are known as followers of ‘The Way.’ There is a rich irony, of course, that Saul travels great distances, traverses miles of road persecuting these followers of ‘The Way’ only to be struck down on the way to Damascus. Plus, Saul’s call will also be characterized by a life on the road in his many journeys around the Mediterranean.

“‘The Way’ is a powerful metaphor for Christian identity. Instead of being identified by a set of beliefs, these faithful communities were known by their character in the world. Christian faith was a way of life and one that impelled individuals and communities to leave the safe confines of home and church to walk on the road God had set out. ‘The Way’ suggests that faith is a living, active way of life.”<sup>1</sup>

We, too, are followers of the Way. Sometimes, though, we have to *choose* to actually walk on the Way instead of standing still in one spot, waiting to see what will happen. Instead of waiting, walking on the Way means taking steps forward, walking on a *journey* that does not give easy answers. A journey that takes active participation on an often unknown road instead of sitting on the sidelines watching the traffic go by, waiting

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1624](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1624)

for our own flash of light and message from God. Because you see, we often want easy answers, and for God to put us on the right path in a flash like he did for Saul.

Saul was traveling on a path that he thought was right, but it was not actually a part of God's desire for him. God had to come and snap him out of it, and then send Ananias to continue the process. We, who already belong on the Way, know that we need to continually seek God's guidance, continually check in with God. Saul thought that he was doing everything for God. Saul thought that he was striking against people who were *against* God. And then God told him that he was wrong.

And *that's* the really hard part about walking on the Way, following the journey, instead of accepting easy answers. Maybe you're following a God that you've made up in your head and *not* God's actual love. Maybe you've even done some hard work to search for God's desire, and are settled in that, and don't think you need to question anymore. But, it's a journey, and there is always new information. God never changes. God's love is always there, and we will never fail if we always choose on the side of love. However, the world is always changing, and as followers of the Way we must always be seeking God to make sure that we are still navigating the world with the love of God as our leader.

Saul had probably done a lot of hard work to make sure that he was following God. But the world had changed around him. God had changed the rules on him when Jesus *the Messiah* came into the world. And Saul hadn't checked back in. God *blinded* him, and I think it was not only the vision of Christ, but the loss of one of his senses that pushed Saul to finally rethink his direction.

We use our senses to navigate the world. Think about those two senses that I told you about, the sense of where our limbs are in space, proprioception, and the sense of direction. Let's think about these as spiritual senses, too. Proprioception - where we are on our path with God – and magnetoception – where we are going, using God's love as our North star. We all have those two spiritual senses. On our journey, walking on the Way, those are two of our most important senses. To actively walk God's path, we have to know where we are and where we're going in order to keep moving forward.

How do we do that? We continuously check in with God. We continuously seek direction. We do that through prayer. We do that through reading the Bible, learning about it in its context and what it means for us. And we do that through getting help and direction from other people, as Ananias did for Saul.

Learning about God is learning about how we can be a part of ultimate good. What will make the world a better place? What will spread and grow God's love?

Use your religious senses. We belong to the Way. It is an active following, not a passive receiving. Following God is a journey, and in that journey we should be constantly asking where we are and where we're going. We should be constantly making sure that we're following God's love and God's desires for the world. Those senses tell us if we being called to walk a new "way".

Where are you today? Are you, like Saul, being called to walk a new "way"?