

Sunday, January 22nd, 2017

PRELUDE "Let All Things Now Living" - John A. Behnke **Dr. Elizabeth Davis**
CHORAL CALL TO WORSHIP "Rejoice in the Day!" - Dan Dykema **The Choir**

After the Prelude, the liturgist should step to the lectern and say,

"Would you join me in reading the responsive call to worship adapted from Psalm 63 and printed in our bulletins?"

CALL TO WORSHIP

(adapted from Psalm 63)

May God be merciful to us and bless us,

May he show us the light of his countenance and come to us.

Let your ways be known upon earth, O Lord,

And your saving health among all nations.

Let the peoples praise you, O God;

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,

For our God will judge the peoples with equity,

And guide all the nations upon earth.

Let all the peoples praise you, O God!

Let the earth bring forth her increase!

May God, our own God, give us his blessing.

May all the ends of the earth stand in awe of him & praise his name!

Let us worship God beginning with prayer....

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

Come to us as a light from heaven, Lord. Pierce the shadows of doubt & despair, anger and scorn, that we allow to rule in our lives. Turn us from ways that deny your rule among us. Awaken us from dull routines to worship that is alive with awe and wonder, spontaneity, and joy. Surprise us with a presence we cannot avoid, a summons we dare not evade, a mission we may not escape. Gathered by the love of Christ, may we be inspired and empowered to feed others as we have been fed, in Christ's name. Amen.

Would all of you who are able please stand with me and join in singing our opening hymn, "Shine, Jesus, Shine", number 477 in our *Sing the Faith* Hymnal supplement.

The liturgist should step back from the microphone for the hymn.

*HYMN OF PRAISE "Shine, Jesus, Shine" *Sing the Faith* #2173

After the hymn, the preacher will step into the pulpit and say...

*CALL TO CONFESSION

We have been blinded and deafened by sin. Let the scales fall from your eyes and your ears to be unstopped. God is reclaiming you as his own be-loved child. Surrounded by so many brothers and sisters who share not just our failings, but our hope for a new and purpose filled life, let us confess together our sins using the prayer of confession printed within our bulletins taking a moment at its end for a moment of silent prayer. Let us pray...

*PRAYER OF CONFESSION

(In Unison)

Almighty Father, we confess the cowardice that we display when we are called upon to stand alone in defense of our faith or to walk the narrow way along which you lead us. Forgive us for believing that our own experience with you is normative for all and deliver us from the mistaken notion that our call to service in the name of Christ is "one size fits all". Make us to understand that our call is uniquely ours, and that the call of others is special to their own circumstance. Forgive our blindness that fails to recognize Jesus' presence in the ordinary people and events of our lives. Open our hearts and hands to share freely of all that we have received from you build up the body of Christ and share his gospel with the world. Amen.

*SILENT CONFESSION

*THE ASSURANCE OF PARDON

As far as the east is from the west, so far does our Lord remove our sins from us. Friends believe the

Good News!

In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven! Thanks be to God!

*GLORIA PATRI

The Hymnal #579

*Glory be to the Father, & to the Son, & to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be,
World without end. Amen, Amen.*

*PASSING OF THE PEACE

Brought near once more to God, let us draw near to one another and share the peace of Christ. The peace of Christ be with you.

And also with you.

Share the peace of Christ with others as you will.

After a few moments, liturgist will step into the lectern and say...

“At this time I want to invite all of our younger friends to come forward for a Word from the Lord brought to them by Ms. Karen.”

The liturgist will take a seat.

CHILDREN’S SERMON

(All Singing)

**Jesus friend so kind and gentle, little ones we bring to thee;
Grant to them thy dearest blessing. Let thine arms around them be;
Now enfold them in thy goodness, from all danger keep them free.**

As the children leave, the Liturgist will return to the lectern and say...

“Would all who are able, please stand and join in one voice to sing our next hymn, “Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine!” hymn #341 in our *Hymnals*.

*HYMN OF PREPARATION

“Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine!”

The Hymnal #341

After the hymn, the liturgist will return to the pulpit and say,

THE INVITATION TO THE OFFERING

Please be seated. . . Our offerings involve all who give. They empower those who serve. They express our praise and thanksgiving while witnessing to the power of God's love at work in our midst. Let us continue our worship with the presentation of our tithes and offerings...

The liturgist will sit down until the Doxology begins to play.

THE OFFERTORY

"Aria: My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less"

Dr. Elizabeth Davis

*DOXOLOGY (In Unison)

The Hymnal #592

***Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him all creatures here below;
Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.***

After the Doxology, the liturgist will return to the lectern and say...

*OFFERTORY PRAYER

Let us pray... Our Father, we make this offering for your continuing work of bringing about the glorious day when your reign is fully established upon earth. We hope and pray for that new world when justice will prevail for all, and the healing of the nations is complete. Bless these gifts, and we who desire to faithfully work with you, to the glory of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

THE AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

"The Apostle's Creed"

Let us remain standing and reaffirm our Christian faith using the traditional words of the Apostles' Creed printed in our bulletins. Let us say what we believe...

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.

Invite the congregation to... “Be seated,” and take a seat.

After the choir finishes, the Liturgist will return to the lectern & say....

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Our first lesson this morning is taken from the first chapter of Paul's Letter to the Galatians, beginning at the eleventh verse. You are encouraged to follow along and you can find the passage on page 1012 in your pew bibles. Listen now for the word of God...

"For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel. ¹²For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹³For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it; ¹⁴and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, ¹⁶was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, ¹⁷nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus."

The liturgist will return to his seat either on the chancel. The preacher will step to the pulpit & say...

Our sermon text today is taken from the twenty-sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, beginning at the ninth verse. You are encouraged to follow along and you can find the passage on page #973 in your pew bibles.

Listen once more for the word of God...

"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰And I did so in Jerusalem; I not only shut up many of the saints in prison, by authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme; and in raging fury against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

¹²"Thus I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining round me and those who journeyed with me. ¹⁴And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.' ¹⁵And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶But rise and stand upon your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, ¹⁷delivering you from the people and from the Gentiles—to whom I send you ¹⁸to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

"Wherefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those at Damascus, then at Jerusalem & through-out all the country of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and perform deeds worthy of their repentance. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

THE SERMON

"The Light Upon the Way"

Before he encountered Christ, Saul had been somewhat of a hero among the Pharisees. You might say he was their Wyatt Earp. He saw it as his call to go where there was no law, and use every means at his disposal to establish it. He kept the law and order- or, better said, revered the Law and gave the orders.

Good Jewish moms held him up as an example of a good Jewish boy. He was given the seat of honor at Jerusalem's Rotary Club every Wednesday for lunch. He had a "Who's Who in Judaism" paperweight on his desk and was selected "Most Likely to Succeed" by his graduating class at

Jerusalem's Gamaliel High, and quickly established himself as the heir apparent to his teacher, Gamaliel.

If there is such a thing as a religious fortune, Saul had it. He was a spiritual billionaire, born with one foot in heaven, and he knew it.

If anyone ever had reason to hope that he could save himself, it would be Saul. If others could be saved by what they are, certainly he could! He went through the Jewish rites of initiation when he was eight days old. He had been born into a pure-blooded Jewish home that was a branch of the old family of Benjamin-- the favorite son of Israel. He was a **real** Jew if there ever was one! Even more, he was a member of the Pharisees who demand the strictest obedience to every Jewish law and custom. If the Sanhedrin had had an ethics oversight committee, Saul would have been on the ethics oversight committee's oversight committee. His religion was the most important thing in his life-- a true matter of life and death, and because of that, he persecuted the new church of Christians; he tried to obey every Jewish rule and regulation down to the very last point, and worked hard to make sure everyone else did too.

Saul, the wild-eyed young zealot was hell-bent on keep the kingdom pure-- and that meant keeping the Christians out. He scoured the countryside like the SS demanding that backslidden Jews salute the flag of the motherland or kiss their family and hopes good-bye.

All this came to a halt, however, on the shoulder of the highway to Damascus. He was going equipped with subpoenas, handcuffs, and a posse. This was Saul's idea of personal evangelism. His Damascus Crusade was going to be his most successful ever.

Then out of no where the Sun fell on him-- or at least that is what it felt like. It was the brightest light he had ever seen. He thought he was going to die, and his life passed before his eyes. He didn't like what he saw-- a life of hate, the demands of the law stacked one on top of another until he felt he would be crushed beneath them. He was lonely-- oh, he had admirers, but that gave him no warmth on a cold night. His life until now had been one without joy, without peace, just unending emptiness.

Then he heard the voice. When he found out whose voice it was, his jaw hit the ground, and his body followed. He braced himself for the worst. He knew it was all over, He felt the noose around his neck. There was a sickeningly sweet smell of flowers in the hearse mingled with the sulphurous smell of burning brimstone. He prayed that death would be quick and painless. he thought that things could get any worse, but they did. The only answer he got to his most fervent prayers was silence, blindness, and the first of a lifetime of surprises.

When the shock wore off, he found himself blind and bewildered in a borrowed bedroom. God had left him there a few days with scales on his eyes so thick that the only direction he could look was inside himself And he didn't like what he saw.

He saw himself for what he really was-- to use his own words, the worst of sinners. A legalist. A killjoy. A braggart who claimed to have mastered God's code. A dispenser of justice who weighed salvation on a pan scale.

That's when Ananias found him. Saul wasn't much to look at-- haggard and groggy after three days of turmoil. All the fight in saul was gone. He was ready to surrender unconditionally. And when he did, God stepped in, and the result was a roller-coaster ride straight into the kingdom.

Saul knew better than to strike a deal with God. He didn't make any excuses; he just pleaded for mercy. Alone in the room with his sins on his conscience and blood on his hands, he asked to be cleansed.

Ananias' instructions to Saul are worth reading: "What are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized & wash your sins away, call on the name of the Lord."

He didn't have to be told twice. The legalist Saul was buried, and the liberator Paul was born.

He was never the same again. And neither was the world.

Stirring sermons, dedicated disciples, and six thousand miles of rocky roads and dusty trails.

If his sandals weren't slapping, his pen was writing. If he wasn't explaining the mystery of grace,

he was articulating the theology that would determine the course of Western civilization.

All of his words could be reduced to one sentence. "We preach Christ crucified".

It wasn't that he lacked other sermon texts; it was just that he couldn't exhaust that first one.

The absurdity of the whole thing kept him going. Jesus should have finished him on the road. He should have left him for the buzzards. He should have sent him to hell. But he didn't. He sent him to the lost.

Paul himself called it crazy. He described it with phrases like "stumbling block" and "foolishness," but chose in the end to call it "grace".

And he defended his unquenchable loyalty by saying, "The love of Christ leaves [me] no choice".

Paul never took a course in missions. He never sat in on a committee meeting. He never read a book on church growth. He was just inspired the Holy Spirit and punch-drunk on the love that makes the impossible possible: salvation.

When today's reading from Acts takes place, he is in jail, on trial for proselytizing. He stands before the Great Herod Agrippa the Second in the court of the Roman Procurator Festus. He is bent and frail, shackled to the arm of a Roman guard. He has grown old in the service of his Lord. What little hair remains on his head is white. He spends his nights sleeping on the floor of his cell. His eyes are milky with cataracts. He is dead broke, disowned by the family of which he had once been so proud. There are no adoring crowds, no casseroles or crocheted comforters brought by fellow church members. It is easy to understand why he would, just a short time later write, "What a miserable man I am! Who will save me from this body that brings me death?"

He doesn't look like a hero. Doesn't sound like one either. But if you invite him to tell his story, you do so at your own peril. Give him permission to speak as Agrippa did and his cataracts are suddenly gone, replaced by a raging fire burning brightly behind them. He now stands straight. His voice is strong, and his mind is as sharp as a razor as he begins to tell his story, or more accurately his story of living in the grace of God. This is what he lives for-- to talk about Jesus and his grace. To share how God was always with him even before he knew it. How Jesus reached into his darkness, shine a light upon his way, and nothing, thank God, would ever be the same again.

Agrippa is convinced of Paul's innocence, but not of his faith. He walks away from the light, back into the darkness. He probably thinks that Paul's name will blow away like the dust of his bones will one day soon. He will be dead and forgotten before his head ever hits the floor. No one will remember him when he is gone. And no one will remember his God.

If that's what you think, then you don't know Paul, and you don't know his Lord Jesus. Paul will change the course of history. Nero's fame will fade in his light. And those letters that he writes-- they will be written in thousands of languages and impact every creed and constitution in the future. Every major world figure will read them-- every one!! And it's all because a light once shown upon his way.

Charles Hadden Spurgeon the greatest preacher in Britain saw that light on a snowy morning when he and an old deacon were the only ones to show up for church near his home.

Dwight L Moody, the greatest American evangelist of the same period saw the light in the back room of a Boston shoe store.

Billy Graham saw it and heard the voice on the 18th green of the Temple Terrace Golf and Country Club", in front of Florida College.

I saw the light and heard the voice in February of my last semester at Baylor in 1975 on what I thought was a God-forsaken dirt road outside of Waco, TX. The lights as it happened were red, and blue and white on top of a local constable's patrol car and the voice was little more than a whisper. But I knew where they both came from.

After so many years, I have come to understand that Christ is always there. His light is always shining on my path even when I am too preoccupied or self-absorbed to notice. His voice is always speaking, even when I am deafened by the noise of the world or my own excuses.

We have all seen a light upon our way at some point. Some of us have forgotten it because it

wasn't dramatic-- no fireworks, no miracles, no cannons or brass bands or heavenly choirs. But some have seen it.

It showed you who you really were, a sinner. But it also shown the light of love on you. That's important to remember. When God shines a light on our way, it can scare the hell out of us by showing us what we are. But it can also fill us with hope and joy by showing us who we can be if we are willing to follow Jesus.

Show folks their failures without Jesus, and the result will be found in the roadside gutter. Give them religion without reminding them of their filth, and the result will be arrogance in a three-piece suit. But get the two in the same heart-- get sin to meet Savior and Savior to meet sin-- & the result just might be another Pharisee turned preacher who sets the world on fire.

THE PASTORAL PRAYER & THE LORD'S PRAYER

Would you pray with me...

We thank Lord Jesus, that you do not leave us alone; that you do not leave us where or as we are, but in love are ever calling us onward, turning us, returning us, and sending us. Thank you for giving us spiritual gifts, and for shining your light upon our way to help us exercise them boldly, wisely, and fruitfully to the glory of Jesus.

For those of us who would settle into the security of being ourselves saved, but who fail to hear your call to share the love of Christ, and serve others, shatter our complacency and get us off the Damascus Road and onto the way that leads to you. Disabuse us all of the notion that it is ever too late to change; too late to start again, too late to be forgiven, too late to build a new life, or to have new hope; even as you pour out your grace and blessing upon all who need a new beginning and who wait upon you. Help us to trust in your future, especially when following you calls us to let go of familiar things that we may reach out to others with the love of Christ.

Shine your light of truth and mercy upon all those who would be enemies to you and to your church. Bring them, as you brought Paul, to a deep love for Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray saying...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Let all of us who are able stand and join in one voice to sing our hymn of dedication, "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus", #2129 in our Sing the Faith hymnal supplement.

*HYMN OF DEDICATION "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus" *Sing the Faith #2129*

*THE BLESSING

*CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE Tune: Londonderry Air (O Danny Boy) Psalm 139

O Lord you know my laughing and my weeping.

You see my thoughts and deeds from every side.

Before my birth, my life was in your keeping.

I can't escape, no matter where I hide.

For if I flee from you, through joy or sorrow,

To heaven or hell, I find you waiting there;

Or ride the wings of morning till tomorrow,

Yes, even there, yes even there, I'm in your care.

*POSTLUDE

Dr. Elizabeth Davis