Paul’s Testimony and Our Ministry

For installation service of Adeline Hazzard at Winsted UMC

# Scripture: Acts 26:12-23

# Key idea: Paul's testimony helps us understand Christian ministry.

# Intro:

I count it a high privilege to be asked by Pastor Adeline to speak to you this morning. It has been my privilege to be appointed by our district superintendent as her mentor. In that capacity it has been my joy to meet with her and Mark once a month since early summer to discuss the goals and challenges of ministry, to encourage one another and to pray together. I want you to know that I foresee good things for Winsted UMC through Pastor Adeline’s ministry.

I was deeply impressed by the Emmaus skit, weren’t you? The players in the skit represent us all asking a similar question. “What is the best road?” “Who or what is to be the focus of my life?” The players in the skit represented us all seeking the answers to life’s questions in different ways. They represented all kinds of answers to life's dilemmas; all kinds of sources for ultimate meaning and happiness. It is as if the girl at the center was asking of each pretender - Are you the lord of meaning? Are you the source of joy? Are you worth giving my life to? Finally, in her despair, she hears the answer –the same one that Paul heard, ‘I am Jesus!”

It so powerfully tells our human story. God takes the initiative to seek for us, but we have our own agendas, sometimes one and sometimes another.

# Our human Question; "Who are you Lord?"

As I studied this passage, I was really struck by the question that Paul asked. “Who are you, Lord?” Paul whose pre-Christian name was Saul had been a zealous follower of Judaism. He thought he know where he was going. But in the crisis moment, he found himself confused.

Saul’s question, “Who are you Lord?” is our question too. You could sense the moment in the drama when the person stopped to ask that question. Many of us can point to the time or maybe more than one time in our own lives when we had to stop and reflect in a similar way.

Saul had thought he had it right in his zealous pursuit of his definition of religious works even though it involved persecution of Christians. But when the light from heaven shone around him on the Damascus road, he was confused. Maybe what he had bought into so heavily was not the best way. Maybe it would not deliver happiness and joy. Maybe it was a false hope. So, his question was "Who are you Lord?"

Asking the question was actually a good thing for the man who became Paul at that moment. It meant that he was seeking and open to a new answer. It meant that he was willing to truly listen for God to reveal himself to him. Stopping to ask such a question could be a crucial moment for you and me as well.

Amid our searching and our questioning, God is searching for us. God is the shepherd whom Jesus described leaving the flock and searching for the one lost sheep. He is also like the Father in another parable Jesus told. He is looking for us, ready with arms outstretched to welcome us home.

But we need to come to our senses and face our situation ask the question honestly, “Who are you Lord?” and then be ready as Paul was for God to give us the answer in Jesus.

# God's quest

In his testimony to King Agrippa, Paul is describing that transforming moment in his personal journey. What happened to Paul on that life-changing day becomes a parable for all of us. His retelling of his dramatic conversion for King Agrippa helps us immensely to understand God's hopes and plans for us. It describes God's quest for us, what God has in mind for us, what God wants to do for us all. According to the original record of the story found in Acts chapter 9, as Paul journeyed on the road to Damascus, he was blinded by the supernatural light that he saw. This physical blindness was a fitting parallel to the spiritual blindness he was already experiencing and evidencing in his behavior. Luke's record tells us that Paul, then called Saul, in his closed-minded zeal had been going from house to house dragging out the Christians, persecuting them and even imprisoning them (Acts 8:3). Those who stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr, laid their clothes at Paul’s feet. He gave his approval to their deed (Acts 7:58; 8:1). It was a dark time in Paul’s life, but he was unaware of his blindness.

How does Paul describe what God did in his life and what God desires to do in our lives as well? He explains four transforming actions, things that God undertakes on our behalf.

## To open our eyes -- to turn us from darkness to light

God wants to take away our spiritual blinders and help us to see the truth about ourselves and about Jesus. This is not often a pleasant moment for us. We tend to hate any information that contradicts our current version of reality. Why? Paul tells us:

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 2 Cor. 4:4

But in contrast, Paul realized that God’s agenda had been to help him understand, to give him the perspective that he needed to grow into a better person and a true child of God.

For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. 2 Cor 4:6 NIV

God’s first order of business is to shed some new light on our spiritual situation. God’s Holy Spirit will help us understand our spiritual reality more accurately. And we will see how Jesus can help us.

## To rescue us from Satan's influence.

The second purpose of God that Paul mentions is to rescue us from our spiritual enemy.

Now, we don’t think of ourselves as having a spiritual enemy or being under the influence of Satan. That is because our troubles most often begin with our own selfishness and willfulness. We simply choose to go our own way, choosing as the skit depicted, whatever we think might work for our pleasure and benefit at the time. But the spiritual truth behind the scenes is that we are succumbing to the temptations of a real enemy. If Jesus himself was tempted by the spiritual enemy in the desert, how much more are we tempted. Jesus did not give in, but we do. The apostle Paul warned us often that our situation without Jesus in our lives is worse than we think it is. Paul discovered that fact for himself. People that we meet every day need to discover it. That is the reason why the church is so needed in this world today. Paul wrote to the Ephesians and said to them,

You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.
Eph 2:1, 2

But God is at work to rescue us from our selfishness, from our sinfulness, and, yes, from the enemy of our souls. The apostle Paul in his testimony before King Agrippa had a strong and vivid sense that God had entrusted him to be a part of that rescue mission.

## To offer us forgiveness

Next, Paul told Agrippa that God’s agenda is to offer us forgiveness through Jesus. Once the light dawned upon Paul, there was, no doubt, a heaviness in his soul because of the things he had done. At one point in his writings he called himself the worst of sinners (1 Tim. 1:16). But Jesus had an answer for his burden.

Jesus himself, as he taught two disciples on the Emmaus road on that first Easter afternoon said,

The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations. Luke 24:46-47

The way the Christ figure in the skit enfolded the wanderer near the end is a message to everyone one of us today. God desires to forgive us, if only we turn from our sins and turn toward him and ask forgiveness.

That was the message Jesus announced. That is the message Paul preached. That is the message we bring to you today. That is the Good News pastor Adeline Hazzard will faithfully bring to you as well.

## To give us a place among the sanctified

There is one more point that Paul makes concerning God’s intentions. Let me explain it this way.

One of our deep human desires is to feel that we belong. At our church in Copper Hill, we just held a Special emphasis on Sept 16 with the Theme, "You Belong Here." I think about the fact that all the terms and concepts describing Christ's church in the NT are collective terms – the body of Christ, God's family, a chosen people, a royal priesthood, the Greek word, “ekklesia,” which could mean -- the assembly of the called. All of these are descriptions of a group, a blessed group of people. God was saying to Paul, "I am sending you out so that people can have a part, a place in the church I am gathering.” God wants you and I to be blessed by being a follower of Christ united with other followers in his Body. He does not want us to be alone or outside the fold. He does not want anyone to be left out by neglect of the message or failure to answer God's call, or unbelief. He wants each one to have a place among his people.

Paul had found a place among the people of God and he offered the privilege to everyone who would listen. That is our job too as disciples of Jesus.

# A Minister's Answer

Those four brief points summarized the vision Paul had received of what God wanted to do. But Paul also wanted Agrippa to know had he had caught the Vision. He had adopted it as his own. Jesus had said,

The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Luke 19:10 NIV

And before he ascended to heaven he transferred that responsibility on, saying to his disciples,

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. John 20:21 NIV

Paul understood that God was calling him to join in Jesus’ work. So, he told King Agrippa, ""I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision"

Today Adeline Hazzard is being obedient to the same heavenly vision. She also, as Paul, has caught the same vision of God to help others. As a result, she also will, "preach repentance." She will encourage people to "turn to God" for help and strength, for salvation, for deliverance, and for life eternal. And she will, as Paul did, urge us all on to holy living, admonishing us to "prove our repentance by our deeds."

But I truly hope that she is not alone in this quest. One of the reasons for such a service as this today is to remind all of us as members of the family of faith, as followers of Jesus Christ that in some way this testimony and this proclamation is also our job. It is our assignment also to "make disciples" for the transformation of the world. It is not just the job of clergy! This declaration of faith, this task of witness, is every Christian’s job. Frankly, if the local church depends upon the pastor alone to do the work of ministry, it will fail. But if the people of God accept their part in the mission, and accept their pastor as a leader, a guide, a teacher, as an equipper for lay ministry, as well as a shepherd, then the church will flourish.

# A minister's trust: "God has helped me."

One final note; there is an essential and encouraging "how-to" mentioned in this passage. Paul says frankly and bluntly, “God has helped me." So must it ever be! Whether as pastor or as laypersons the words of Paul in another place are fitting,

Our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant." 2 Cor 3:5-6 NIV

With God’s help, Pastor Adeline and her husband Mark and you all working together here at Winsted UMC can accomplish immeasurably more than you can ask or imagine to make disciples for the transformation of the world.