

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace from God our Father
And the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Great scripture lessons this morning... We have a resurrection story from the gospel of John, Jesus cooking breakfast for the disciples.

We also have a great story from our reading in Acts; the story of Paul's conversion; an amazing story of unlikely change and transformation. And that's what I'd like to focus on today...

I had a seminary professor who always asked us to be specific when we used the language of being saved. He would always ask, saved from what to what? He was more interested in the content of the change than that change occurred. And I appreciate that, sometimes in the Christian vernacular, we make assumptions about what "being saved" means.

In the story of Paul's conversion, the change is dramatic. It was not a little tap on the shoulder... the change is so deep, it's almost like rearranging his molecules. It's about fundamentally changing the very way Paul thinks; about God, the world, other people.

This is a conversion that affected him so deeply, he would never be the same person. A conversion so deep that his identity changed. Consequently, a new name, from Saul, to Paul...

There were many changes to Paul that we could talk about, fundamental to his conversion is his understanding of the use and meaning of violence. In particular, violence in God's name...

The first time we encounter Paul in the book of Acts, his name is Saul, and we hear about the stoning of Stephen. "They dragged Stephen out of the city, and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man name Saul." And two verses later the text says that Saul approved their killing him...

And at the beginning of Acts chapter eight, Saul is ravaging the church by entering house after house, dragging off both men and women and committing them to prison, and likely to death. Saul doesn't have any trouble using violence to get what he wants-- to get rid of the heretics, and will kill them if he needs to.

In Saul's theological mind, using violence to do God's work is just fine. In other words, God and violence are fully compatible. And this is something we should think about carefully. Might and right is something, that we as Christians have struggled with over the centuries. And particularly in today's culture...

Quick Story... I have to confess-- I like cop shows. Remember Adam 12, and of course I really liked Chips – cops on motorcycles—what could be better! And remember Hawaii Five-O-- that show was so great they had to bring it back a second time.

We had a lot of CSI shows-- CSI Miami, CSI New York, Los Angeles, Los Vegas, New Orleans, CSI cyber it just went on and on... Then there is the Law and Order series. That show has been evolving for 18 years! The show I've been watching lately is Blue Bloods.

All these shows basically have the same plot. We've got good guys, who are really-really good, and we have bad guys who are really-really bad, then we always have to have a big fight scene; lots of guns and fists. And, in the end the good guys always win.

Have you ever noticed how the bad guys are really bad shots? They all have big machine guns and still, they can't hit the broad side of a barn. But those good guys, they can shoot a whole gang of international terrorists, without so much as a scratch, and then go out for beer and pizza afterward.

There's always a really tense moment in the show, when it looks like the bad guys might, just, actually get away with their scheming destruction. I went to the Avengers movie this week, and oh my goodness, there's one place in the movie when it looks like the avengers are as doomed as doomed can be.

But just when everything looked hopeless, the good guy finds divine strength and they trounce the bad guys to a pulp. And we were all cheering! It felt so good for the bad guys to lose! Sorry if I ruined it for you...

In the end, the good guys save the day. Order is restored, everyone is happy and content. It's really the same basic plot, right? Good guys, bad guys, and fighting—we grew up with it in the cartoons, on TV, we see it in the movies, it's everywhere. The details are different of course, but the basic plot structure always follows the same formula, the same pattern.

Some theologians have noticed a disturbing message in this story line-- it teaches us, over and over again like a ritual, that violence saves us. And it makes violence sacred.

Theologians call this redemptive violence. It's the idea that violence is sanctioned by God. And the sheer volume of this plot line in the stories of our culture is testament to the fact that we all believe it deeply. I confess, I'm a product of the culture, I'm no different than anyone else...

You're probably wondering, what does any of this have to do with Paul's conversion? Well frankly, this plot line wasn't invented with cop shows; it is as old as violence itself.

In our reading today, Saul is still breathing threats and murder and rounding up Christians... From the perspective of the religious folks, he's the good guy, saving us from the barbaric heathens... We should be rooting for him! Go Saul, you go get em...

And then suddenly, the plot line twists completely out of normal. Saul hears the voice of Jesus, the innocent victim, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

He has blood on his hands... The blood of Stephen, other Christians, perhaps even the blood of Jesus... He becomes blind... His way of seeing God suddenly goes dark. He is led to Damascus, and Ananias, a Christian helped him get his sight back. And no doubt he saw God differently, he saw the world differently...

The plot had changed... Good guys, bad guys and fighting changed... Suddenly, there was only good guys and guys who haven't heard about Jesus, and violence is

replaced with invitation. Paul's understanding about God and violence changed. Paul would never again use violence in God's name.

In fact, the crucifixion became central for Paul's understanding of Christianity. He would write, "I only want to know Christ, and Him crucified."

There is a lot of violence in our world. We see it all the time. Shootings, and terrorism, and our politics, good grief, that almost seems like a blood sport... All the name calling... apparently, we're in an era where anything goes.

Looks to me like the Democrats and Republicans are just circling the wagons and shooting each other... They seem so single mindedly focused on winning; they'd rather destroy the whole country than lose. Can you see how that plot line about good guys, and bad guys and fighting has entrenched our whole culture?

We often say Jesus died for our sins. And it's absolutely true, Jesus died because of our sin... And when we see Jesus blood on our own hands, we change. In a world marked by violence, we are marked to be peace makers. In a world marked by bullying, we are marked to be reconciling. In a world marked by self-righteous judgment, we are marked to be caring and compassionate. In a world full of hatred, we are called to love our neighbor...

The good news today, is that the God we worship, is the God who brings change and transformation. The God we worship, transformed Saul into Paul... The God we worship transforms violence.

I have a hope that one day we can all live in peace and harmony; it might not be next week or next month, and maybe I'll never see it, but that hope lives in me. And frankly, I couldn't get out of bed in the morning, unless I believed it to be true... The crucifixion and resurrection changes the world...

And I pray, thy Kingdom come, please, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...

Amen...