

Sermon ***The Blinding Enlightenment of Christ's Call***
A.K. Sutherland April 22, 2007

It was the spring after my second year of university. I had entered into studies with one goal clearly in my mind: 'Explore the possibilities and settle into the career where who I was fit in with what I wanted to do.' I knew, for certain, that I would be doing God's work. At first this was police work. A bit of psychology, and then add in a minor in criminology and then what academy would not wish to have me as an officer. That changed even before then end of my first semester of studies: the world had changed from the time I entered the front door of the university to when I was getting ready to put in an application to the RCMP or the regional force. I was then a white, English-speaking, male and the opening for me had closed fairly tightly with affirmative action initiatives. On top of that I was beginning to really question whether I could enforce a government policy of law when it might contrast with what I believed to be true and right.

Marshalling myself I felt that perhaps I would be happier working with people before they became hardened criminals, perhaps in a preventative position like that of a school counsellor. I had always enjoyed working with youth and I was at the time involved with youth ministry in the region where I was living. I found my self in good company as so many of my peers that I had respected were entering into education and looking to the years ahead I felt that I would enjoy working with them in the different schools, but that avenue soon narrowed, and even though I had been certain I was right in my pursuit of a counselling career, I was out of step because of the studies I had taken for criminology, and the more scientific side of psychology that went along with it.

Saul was certain too. He knew what it was that God would have him do. The main reason that there was so much trouble for God's people is because they had aligned themselves with all sorts of wrong beliefs. Now there were these followers of Jesus, running around the countryside stirring up trouble for the good believing Jews in every corner of the middle east. So, knowing what was best, Saul set out to track down these wrong beliefs and set them to right, even if meant killing these followers of Jesus.

Saul was so sure of what he believed to be true that he helped stir up a mob to hunt down and capture and then kill a man named Stephen. Admittedly all Stephen was doing was feeding the poor and the widows, not really a bad thing, but many of these poor people were so vulnerable and hopeless that they would believe and even share the strange things that Stephen was saying; that, "Jesus healed many people, and raised the dead and was himself raised from the dead."

And so, Saul, sure of what he knew to be true brought together a crown of 'real' believers, and confronted Stephen and even then Stephen spouted out the stories about this Jesus, that every good Jew knew to be a criminal. And so, in righteous anger, Saul saw that Stephen was stoned to death, looking on proudly to know that he was doing God's will.

A quick glance at a roadmap and then out the door to your destination. Follow a few of the standard road-signs and soon you are well on my way to the place you set out to go. Then suddenly you come to a new development, something that was not written on the map, but surely you had seen the construction signs up for months. And

now you are lost, because the landmarks you always followed have been changed and the road that was always in that certain place seems to have disappeared.

And so, just like Saul, so sure of the way that you were going, you were blind to the truth of the destination. In truth, you could have gone right by the right way to go, and probably roared right past. High self confidence can be blinding.

Bill Cosby tells a story in one of his albums about nocturnal journeys where self confidence [arrogance really] can be blinding. Though having the option to turn on the light to travel through the hallway of his house, he says, the mind shouts out "Don't turn on that light!", while the rest of the body comes to a halt, "Don't turn on that light! I know my way around here!" Meanwhile the toes as whimpering, "Please, No, don't put me through that again. Not again!"

The light-switch can be right in front of you, and the gas station with a knowledgeable attendant with a dozen recently updated maps [not like the good ol' map you've trusted for thirty years now] can be there on the roadside; God's own disciple, active in the service of the lost sheep of Israel can be right in front of you and you can plough on through without a second glance because you are sure about what you are doing.

One of the things the bible study of this church has been exploring, as it has worked through the book 'Purpose Driven Life' by Rick Warren, is that finding the purpose for our life as a Christian believer means pausing to take a good hard look at what we want to do, and whether or not it is the right thing to do, given the circumstances. In some cases this is something that may require some education; to humbly stop and ask for some direction, to find a better map than we have been using to examine scripture, and apply its teachings.

Let us try and recognize today that Saul was not acting maliciously, and trying to circumvent God's will. He really honestly thought he was doing the right thing. He turned to the leaders of the church, to the established teachings of his faith, and pursued his course against the followers of Jesus with the fast-paced zeal of a race-car driver rushing to the finish-line. That zeal did not end after the confrontation with the risen Lord on the Damascus road either. In one of his letters to his pupil Timothy he states indeed, "I have run the race, and fought the good fight." These are not the words of someone who is going to slow-down because he has a new destination in life. It was not in his nature to do things in half measure. He boldly states that in all was he is a very 'full' believer: "I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers [Galatians 1:14]"

And so, though I believed in God, and was active in His church, at that time I felt that I knew best the right way I should go in service to him. I was blinded by my self-assurance at that time as to what I should be and was seeking to fulfill myself in what I wanted to do. But God stopped me and eventually blinded me from all other possibilities but fulfilling His goals for me, in me. I was not taking the bus home and was blinded by some light, but instead sitting with my friends one day, a comment was thrown across the lunch table where we all sat that had the same effect on me as the appearance of the risen Christ had on Saul on the Damascus road. Somehow the subject had arisen – by God's will in my retrospective opinion – concerning 'what we would do if we could do anything', and though many people saw me in much the same role as I saw myself an atheist friend of mine [with whom I had many debates, over a long time about religion]

she said, "Sandy, you should be minister or a priest, or something like that!" There was a certain potency in her words and I was taken aback because of what it caused to happen in me; even more it echoed through the circle of friends, and sat there quite stunned. I do not think I will ever get that moment, where in the words that seemingly to me came out of nowhere, and yet spoke to the very core of who I was then and who I was to become.

And though my eyes were not blinded, such as Paul's were my mind was wiped of everything else that I had been thinking about, and my memories of that day are centred on only that moment, as if that moment was the whole day. I was blinded from everything that had been distracting me from the truth about who I was and what I was meant to do. I may not have been the most focused student in my studies since, but my purpose has never lost its potency.

You may feel you know your way in life, but be assured that if your direction needs to change in order to serve God's purpose, God will blind you with the enlightenment that comes only from Him. You can know that you are already of God's eternal plan for His church, because of the simple fact you are here right now. What becomes of that is going to be between you and your Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer.