

Reflections for Cuba Sunday

Acts 9:1-20

Sermon notes for the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
Third Sunday of the Season of Easter, May 5, 2019
Matt Matthews

I'd like to begin this short sermon by giving you a road map about a long walk. We will begin on the Road to Damascus, and we will detour to Straight Street; we will get to Straight Street by way of Green and Wright streets on the campus of the University of Illinois. After spending a moment with Paul and Ananias on Straight Street, we'll sail above the ocean to the corner of Santa Felicia and Reforma streets to the Fellowship Hall of the Iglesia Presbiteriana Reformata Luyano/ Presbyterian Reformed Church of Cuba at Luyanó, Havana, Cuba. We will return by way of a dream to gather around this communion table.

Please fasten your seatbelts.

On Green Street. I had dropped my cell phone off at a repair shop that promised to install a new battery in one hour. Since I had two hours on my parking meter, I headed on foot toward the center of campus.

At the corner of **Green and Wright streets**, after strolling through a few shops, I instinctively reached for my phone in my front pocket. To my surprise, it was not there. Panicked, I thought, *Where did I leave my phone?*

Then I remembered the young man at the repair shop. All was well. But all wasn't well; I suddenly found myself feeling alone and wanting to text somebody, or check in with one of my sons, or call Rachel to tell her I had a night meeting and I wouldn't be home until late.

I was disoriented without my cell phone. For a moment I wasn't sure who I was without it.

Disorientation. We all have been there. I've been with friends waking up from surgery. They are swallowed in a mist of confusion. Where are they? How old are they? Who are they? They are disoriented.

I've been with people experiencing grief. I read with sadness that Rachel Held Evans died yesterday at 37. Many of us read her books. Her husband Dan, when he reported that his wife had died, wrote this: "This entire experience is surreal. I keep hoping it's a nightmare from which I'll awake. I feel like I'm telling someone else's story."

Unfortunately, he's telling his story. The shock will one day wear off. But now he's turned upside down. (Eric will pray for his family today.)

Paul knew what disorientation felt like. **On the road to Damascus**, Paul gets disoriented. Was it the flash of light from heaven that did it? Or was it the voice of Jesus, "Saul, Saul. Why do you persecute me?"

At one point Paul—formerly known as Saul—knew why he persecuted the followers of Jesus. He persecuted the followers of Jesus because they were followers of Jesus. These “Christians” were getting religion all wrong, and Paul, a devoted Jew, took it upon himself to set things right.

Now, on the Road to Damascus, he’s sitting, literally, on the road. Dust fills his nostrils. Darkness fills his eyes as he goes blind. And Jesus’ voice fills his head. Nothing is clear anymore. Nothing makes sense.

There are times in our lives when what used to be clear, and normal, and good no longer is clear, normal, or good. Confusion feels like a bad thing because it feels like it may last forever, but when confusion comes it affords an opportunity to pause. Take stock. To listen.

They take Paul to Damascus where he loses himself in prayer. Paul is taking stock. Pausing. Listening.

God sends Ananias to **Straight Street**. Ananias is afraid of Saul/Paul and suggests that God is mistaken about doing good for Saul/Paul. But God is not mistaken, and Ananias goes where he is told. He finds Saul. And Ananias does as he is told. He lays his healing hands upon Saul’s unseeing eyes. *Something like scales fall from Saul’s eyes*. Saul is baptized. He begins eating again. And for the first time, Saul makes Jesus the focus of his prayers.

Saul knows the gift of disorientation that leads to the greater gift of reorientation. Saul changes his name. He changes his life. Jesus and his disciples are no longer enemies, but friends. And Jesus is no longer a rebel-rouser but a savior.

The ocean is blue. The landing in Havana is soft. The drive to the corner of **Santa Felicia and Reforma streets** takes twenty minutes. Traffic is light. It’s 85-degrees but inside the Fellowship Hall of the Iglesia Presbiteriana Reformata Luyano their air is still and cool.

I want to show you some pictures. You’ll have to use your imagination.

This is **Daniel Izquierdo**. He’s the pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Luyano. He always talks with his hands.

This is **the church**. It’s the nicest kept, loveliest building in the whole neighborhood.

This is what the church does.

This is who the church is: The church is children, smiling, laughing, and looking forward to snack time. **This is more of the church family.** The whole congregation is posing for a picture at the front of the sanctuary. They are welcoming you to come visit them.

And this is who the church is called to welcome and serve: **The man pushing his cart** in the morning on his way to work . . . **The man commuting on his bicycle** to his job . . . **The mother walking her daughter to school.**

And here’s Jesus. He shows up everywhere: on Green Street, on the Damascus Road, on Straight Street, even in Cuba! This is one of the large paintings that dominate the cool Fellowship Hall. He’s got nail holes in the hands and a gash in his side. But this is not the hurting Christ; this is the glorified Christ. His head is wrapped in light from the cosmos. He’s wearing a smile.

Notice how Jesus stands on the earth and on his right hand is the smoky, grey city where there is much suffering. If you look closely enough, you will see the Luyano neighborhood. If you look really closely, you will see your own neighborhood.

Notice on Jesus's left hand is a redeemed creation. Green mountains are fed by a clean river that empties into the ocean. Jesus stretches his arms out as if to connect the whole world, the good and bad of it, the dark and the light. His outstretched arms say, "Bienvenidos, amigos." *Welcome.*

This is another large painting—the same size as the other, about four-feet by six-feet—that brightens the Fellowship Hall at Luyano. At first it just looks **children at a table filled with fruit**. But look closer. The boy extends the Easter lily; isn't that what tradition says that the Angel Gabriel brought Mary when he announced that she would bear God's son into the world?

This picture doesn't have a Mary. But the boy is looking right at us. *AT US*. Are we to assume that he's announcing to us that we will bear Christ into the world? That we will tell the world about Jesus? That our hands will be the hands of the Savior? That our hearts will beat with God's heart?

If that's possible—and I think it is—then this table becomes a blue print of the tables we will be called upon to spread for others. As these children have brought their best, we will bring our best, too. We will dress the table in white. We will bring the finest bounty we can find. Our hearts will *become* the table. And will take this table where ever we go. And God's Spirit—like a white dove—will bless the communion that happens around this table. And we will welcome all people. We will allow no barriers to divide. Bienvenidos, Amigos. El mundo entero es bienvenido. The whole world is welcome. Bienvenidos. Friends. Amigos.

Here's the **dream** part of our sermon.

Cuba Dreams (Havana Town)

A song by Matt Matthews

Cuba sun
Cuba stars
Cuba ocean
big cigars
sugar cane
and old, old cars

Cuba smiles
are sugar sweet.
Children playing
in the street
kicking balls with happy feet
and smiles all around.

Havana town . . .

Playing songs
late at night.
The band is cooking
they're out of sight.
The dancing crowd
is clapping right, clapping right along

The preacher's praying
for his flock.
The sinner says,
"God loves me not,"
while Jesus is knocking, knock- knock- knocking
on the church's door.

Havana town . . .
Who could ask for more?

The children giggle.
They can't keep still
wiggle, wiggle,
wiggle 'til
the sermon's done,
and the choir sings us home . . .

. . . into a Cuba day
Cuba sun
Cuba nap
our work is done
Cuba dreams for everyone
siesta time
Havana town

This is the fellowship into which Paul was welcomed on the Damascus Road. Jesus turned Paul's world upside down and inside out in order to get his attention. Jesus re-oriented Paul's world by way of dis-orienting Saul. Jesus invited Paul to be a disciple. To serve instead of to be served. To build up instead of to tear down. Paul is invited to join folk like Ananias who are interested in doing the work of God in the world, sharing the love of Jesus with everybody, trusting God's Spirit to guide, enliven, and encourage.

For Paul and for us, the road always leads here to a communion table filled with God's bounty, which God freely and generously shares.

Bienvenidos.

AMEN.

Acts 9:1-20 ¹Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and 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. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul 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. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Acts 9:1-6 (7-20) 1Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2and 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.

**Saul held the costs of others as they stoned Stephen.
Why would Saul "arrest" Christians. The Way. (Jesus is the way.)
-- The Way is a threat? They need to be eliminated?**

3Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus,

It's hard to read this without thinking of the terrible civil war in Syria and all the death in Damascus.

suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

**Has God every used what you thought was a "bad" thing for a "good" purpose?
God literally knocks Saul down. That must hurt. That must embarrass. That must belittle.**

7The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.

When God is talking to us, often nobody else hears it.

Sometimes, we are the only one who doesn't hear it. Everybody else does!

8Saul 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. 9For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

**God can reveal God's will to us through our weakness.
You don't need to have good eyesight to see what God is doing.
You can be deaf and still hear God's call.
You don't have to be able to walk for God to send you all over the world.**

10Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias."

**Visions: Dreams: Poetry: A feeling in our gut: the nudge of our conscience.
God speaks to us in unusual ways. He gives us another way to hear, to see, to discern.**

He answered, "Here I am, Lord."

**Ananias is faithful. HERE I AM.
We often are faithful UNTIL we find out what God wants us to do.
Then, we aren't eager to be faithful. We change our minds. Our yes becomes a no.**

11The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, 12and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." 13But Ananias answered,

BUT: here it comes Ananias is trying to back out.
Just like Moses tried to back out.
Just like Jeremiah tried to back out.
Just like Jonah tried to back out.

Peter backed out. James. John. Andrew. All of them, all 12 disciples, backed out.

"Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; 14and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name."

Ananias is being honest.
Ananias is afraid.

15But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; 16I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 17So Ananias went and entered the house.

He did it! Ananias did it?
Where does this courage come from?
(I can do all things through him who strengthens me/ The Lord is my Shepherd/
Your right hand holds me fast.)

He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul,

Could it be that even our enemies are our brothers and sister?
This is a tender thought.

the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

God brings wholeness.
And God has a purpose for Saul. (and for you and me.)

18And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, 19and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, 20and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

We may not be knocked down on the road to Damascus, but God always calls us to serve and love.

Maybe we are like Saul before he meets Jesus: cocky, arrogant, self-centered, powerful.

Maybe we are like Saul after we meet Jesus: confused, blind, praying.

Maybe we are like Ananias: faithful, but worried.

God meets us where we are. If need be, God will make us blind in order to see.

And God will use to be disciples of Jesus.

Where ever else our journey of faith take us, we always end up at this table
--where we are nurtured, sustained, and encouraged.

AMEN.