

**WESTMINSTER CHURCH
THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA
Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario P6A 3B5**

**“Trusting God, nurturing disciples for Christ,
being empowered by the Holy Spirit”**

May 1st, 2022

Third Sunday of Easter

...We Gather to Worship God...

Prelude

Call to Worship

Brothers and sisters.

If you lift your net and it is empty,

Come here!

We'll cast it out again into Christ's abundance.

If you open your eyes but do not recognize the Holy One,

Come here!

We'll find the Risen Christ here among us.

If your life is filled with mourning,

Come here!

Christ is leading a dance of joy.

Come here, sisters and brothers!

To give blessing and honor and glory to God!

Opening Hymn: Alleluia, alleluia - 260

Announcements: Birthday Train Notice: We have one birthday this week. Elizabeth Nyamuch on May 4th. We wish her a lovely day with her children and the Lord's Peace over her.

Opening Prayer for Worship

You break in, O God, on the road

you break in, O God, exactly the way we don't believe

you break in, O God, and change everything

You break in, O God with a call

you break in, O God with an invitation

you break in, O God with the truth

You break in, O God with a new realm
 You break in, O God with a new world
 You break in, O God with your intent for the future

God, break in again and call us to be your workers
 God, break in again and use the gifts we are to build your realm
 God, break in again and change our world once more.

We pray this in the name of Jesus, our Lord, who taught us when we pray to say....Our Father, who art in heaven....Amen.

-written by Roddy Hamilton, and posted on the New Kilpatrick Parish Church website.
<https://www.nkchurch.org.uk/original-liturgy>

Music by Peter Scoffield

Word of God:

Old Testament: Psalm 30

New Testament: John 21: 15-17; Acts 9: 1-18

Hymn: Jesus calls us o'er the tumult - 672

Sermon: Who did you say became a follower of Jesus?

This is a story about my life that I don't think I have told you before. As some of you know, I have a few degrees after my name. I spent a few years in University and Bible College. While I was at the University of Waterloo finishing off my B.A in history and English, after I had graduated with a B. Th from Ontario Bible College, I applied to teacher's college. The time had come to put all of this education to work and I was not sure what I wanted to do thought I did love learning and I did enjoy teaching. My mom was a teacher. I had decent marks so I was fairly sure I would be accepted. So I was quite disappointed when I received the rejection letters. It was February, I believe and I did not know what I was going to do next. I remember calling my mom and telling her that the teachers' colleges had not accepted my application. I told her I did not know what I was going to do. She responded by saying "Well, why don't you apply to Knox College?" - this being the only words that she had for saying 'have you thought about being a minister?' As she said that, I knew that God was putting those words in her mouth. I do not know how to explain it, this 'hearing God's voice' does not happen all the time. However, it did happen this time. I knew I was being called to ministry. I also remember saying to my mom that Knox College would mean another three years of schooling and I had no money for that. She was so kind. She said that she and Dad had supported me this far, they could get me through another three years. You have to realize that I was not the only child they were supporting in post-secondary studies by this time. My younger brother was also in university.

I am telling you this story because I think our story this morning is better understood if it is entitled a call story rather than a conversion story. Now, don't get me wrong, Saul changes and it is dramatic but it is only part of this story which involves several people and each person has been called to play a role in the bigger story which is the good news about Jesus' death and resurrection reaching out beyond Jerusalem. We must not forget that is key to the book of Acts.

The story of Saul's conversion from terrorizing Christians to following Jesus is part of a series of call stories. Philip, one of the Greek disciples, is called to Gaza where he meets a steward of the Ethiopian government. Then there is the story of Saul and the call to Ananias to help which we will look at in a minute. Finally there is the call story of Cornelius, the centurion. He has been called by God to send for Peter. Each story becomes a little larger and each one carries its own significance in this account of the acts of the apostles.

So our story is right in the middle of these three stories. The first thing to note is this is a surprising story. We have already been told a little bit about Saul and it is not pleasant. Saul was the young man who held the cloaks while the disciple, Stephen, was being stoned to death for speaking about Jesus being rejected and killed but also being resurrected and alive. Saul approved of this. He also began to destroy the Christian fellowships by doing a door to door search and terror campaign dragging many people to prisons. At the beginning of our story this morning, Saul has decided to take his campaign to Damascus. He went to the High Priest in Jerusalem with his plan and received agreement for this terror in the form of a letter to the synagogues to explain what was happening. Saul is being described as focused and ruthless. He is a frightening person as the text says 'breathing out murderous threats'.

This is not the person that we expect to be called by Christ to follow him. I mean we know that there were all sorts of women, tax collectors, Roman soldiers and religious leaders. Luke makes that clear in the gospels but Saul seems to be in a whole different category. He is trying to spread chaos and fear within the Christian communities forcing them to disappear. If you were to put together what we know about Saul at this point you would be thinking that this was a person that you would like to keep at a distance. I think Luke has set the story up this way that you are to be completely surprised at what happened on the road to Damascus. Jesus calls Saul to be a follower in a spectacular manner.

The second person to be called in this story is Ananias. He is called by God to go and heal Saul of his blindness. Saul's interaction with God is somewhat straight forward and very short. Ananias has a conversation with God. Ananias hears his name and he answers appropriately with "yes, Lord" Then the Lord, probably Jesus because he spoke to Saul, tells Ananias to go to the house of Judas where Saul is praying and Saul will be expecting him because he has had a vision. Now, Ananias does not immediately say yes. He actually checks out which Saul this is that he is to go and visit. He tells God or Jesus that he is well aware of this man and what he has done in God's name just incase God was unaware of these facts. Basically, Ananias is saying that God must have the wrong person because this Saul is bad news.

Interestingly, Jesus describes Saul completely differently from Ananias. He says “This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the non-Jewish people and their kings and the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” I see this as God saying, ‘leave the justice to me’.

It is worth reading the rest of the story in this chapter. Saul is suddenly a focused teacher about Jesus being the Messiah. The people in Damascus are now confused. He was coming to put Christians in prison and now he was one of them. The Jews start to conspire to kill him. With help he was released over the wall in a basket. Then he goes to Jerusalem and the disciples are not very keen on accepting him into their group. They were very aware of what he had organized and done. He was taken in by the apostles until he annoyed the Greek Jews with his talking and debating. They sent him off to his hometown of Tarsus to be safe.

I like the next sentence in the text. Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. It sounds like Saul came in like a whirlwind, causing all sorts of reactions to his news and then left.

So I see three things we can learn from this call passage other than simply be amazed at Saul’s call and conversion - which is spectacular! The first thing is God calls people who we would see as strange and possibly unfit for His purposes. The Ethiopian government servant definitely grasped this wonderful news that was given to him but he was not a likely recipient. Cornelius, the centurion, is also an unexpected person to comprehend this news that Jesus is the messiah. Saul the focused, hostile Pharisee is definitely an unlikely candidate and he embraces this wonderful news. Luke presents these candidates as people that are not the first people on the new Christian community’s radar to tell about Jesus being the messiah.

I remember a wonderful Christian person from our first presbytery. Rev. Hugh Neugent. He was a very spiritual man. A person who had integrity. If he said he would pray for you, you would trust him to do that. He was earnest. He was also a person with a very unique way of talking. He had his own pace and rhythm. I learned after I left that presbytery that Hugh was bilingual. This amused me because he has such an interesting way of speaking English that I wondered if that carried over into his French. All of this is to say - he was not charismatic. He was not a dynamic speaker. Yet, he and his wife were very faithful Christians in their calling to ministry. Of that there was no doubt. I think we did not always appreciate the gifts that he did have, sadly. God calls interesting people.

Secondly, there were many people who played a role in Saul’s calling. They played these roles out of humility and care. They had no idea who Saul would become. God had called Judas to house Saul for a few days. The risen Christ called Ananias to go, heal Saul, and confirm that the Spirit of God was on Saul.

We might be prompted by God to help with an audible voice and conversation but we might be prompted with just a sense that we need to help this person. Both are important in this story. Even

the men who were traveling with Saul with the intention of helping imprison people played a role in this story. They were the ones who took the time to guide the blinded Saul into Damascus. Saul is described as powerful and threatening. I do not think that the men who went with him did so because they liked him. They were probably drawn to his power and leadership. They could have left him on the road in his blindness. What good was a blind leader going to be? However, they take the time - to lead him by hand. There is nothing fast about this journey. They take the time to lead him by hand to the house where Saul has been told to go. They must have thought it strange that they were leading him to a Christian house but there was a gracious host so all went well. I am sure these men were in for many surprises as they went with Saul to Damascus. I am sure many were surprised within the Christian community of Damascus that they were interacting and helping this person named Saul.

Thirdly, Saul was a bit much to handle as a newly converted Christian or note that not all of the Christian community trusted this new convert even in his zeal and passion. The Christian community was still getting used to the idea that Saul had changed. When he started to attract attention that wanted to see him killed, the community of Damascus did what they thought was best for him, and possibly for themselves, and devised a way to get him out of the city. The Christian community in Jerusalem had the same issue. Some were not willing to trust this newly converted to the Risen Christ Saul. God does not seem bothered by this. Saul preaches and gets himself in the same situation as in Damascus. The community works a plan to get Saul, with Barnabas, out of the city and safely on to Tarsus, his home town. I am amused at the final comment on this story. 'Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Saul caused a kerfuffle even as a person being clearly called by God to minister to people. He was not immediately seen as this great missionary teacher among the Christian community.

The Christian communities in these cities, however, seem to be gracious and kind even if they did not trust Saul. They offered what they could and did what they could to keep him safe and God works with in this to create a very important missionary teacher.

The writer of the Acts of the Apostles is still pointing out that God works in mysterious ways and using very interesting people into these Kingdom communities. We need to remember there is room for everyone. We may not understand how that is going to be - and that is often not our task. Our task to live out of the characteristics that are the gifts of the Spirit of God to the best our ability. We are live into the death and resurrection of Christ and see where God leads us.

...We Respond in Service...

Offering: Session would like to thank the congregation for its faithful support of Westminster over these past two years and to encourage your continued support of our witness here at Westminster. Contributions can be given in person, or online through e-transfers to office@westminsterchurch.ca. We thank you for your continued support.

Pastoral Prayer:

Call our names, Lord.

Call us as you called Saul, when we are traveling in the wrong direction, when we are breathing threats, when our hearts are full of evil intent.

Speak to us in unexpected voices and set us on a new path.

Call our names, Lord.

Call our names, Lord.

Call us as you called Ananias to be an instrument of healing, to be agents of change, to speak truth to power.

Even when we are fearful of the cost, give us trust in your sending.

Call our names, Lord.

Call our names, Lord.

Call us as you called the disciples and invited them for breakfast, even though they did not recognize you.

Help us to see that there will be enough food for everyone if we persist through the long night of waiting, if we take the risks of faith and sharing to reach the abundance of daybreak.

Call our names, Lord.

Call our names, Lord.

Call us as you called Simon Peter and asked for his love, then told him to feed and tend your people.

May we see the connection between love of you and love of your people; that we too may feed and be fed, and follow you.

Call our names, Lord.

~ originally posted on the Monthly Prayers page (now Weekly Worship) of the Christian Aid website.

<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/churches/weekly-worship>

Hymn: Eternal Father Strong to Save- 325**Benediction:**

May God, who comes to us in the things of this world, bless your eyes and be in your seeing.

May Christ, who looks upon you with deepest love, bless your eyes and widen your gaze.

May the Spirit, who perceives what is and what may yet be, bless your eyes and sharpen your vision.

May the Sacred Three bless your eyes and cause you to see.

~ from In the Sanctuary of Women, copyright © Jan L. Richardson. Posted on the painted prayerbook.

<http://paintedprayerbook.com/>

Wednesday Evening - April 27th Our Two Year Anniversary

Psalm 100 - 'Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness, come before Him with joyful songs.'

Lord be with us as we celebrate this special anniversary. It has been two years now that we have come together to centre ourselves in this day and pray. Lord, we had no idea when we started how long we would continue. Lord, I had no idea when I started if anyone would want to gather for pray like this. Yet, you gave me three or four who said 'yes' and we started. This has been a journey of following so many friends and friends of friends through their great joys, their celebrations and their sadness and sorrows. We thank you for the openness of all who have participated so that prayers were shared and many knew Your care. Lord, we thank you for this time together and we pray that it will continue so many more come to know of Your care and concern for them.

We pray for those whom we know are having birthdays this week. We pray for Iain Smith and Sam Serre in particular. Surprise and delight them Lord as only you can do and thank you for their presence in the Westminster church family.

We continue to pray for the Ukranian people as they continue to live in a place of chaos and war. We see the horror and find it hard to live in hope. Still, Lord, we know that you are the light in darkness. Please be the light for these people. May they know that they are not forgotten but that we pray for them and pray that this war will end.

We pray for all COVID related issues. There are still so many who are sick with this virus. Lord, we pray that they will recover quickly and have no lasting effects. We pray for Ariaahna, the Easter Seals ambassador from our area who has Covid. She is a precious child whom you have blessed with a joyful spirit. Lord, she is so vulnerable and we pray for Your hand of healing to be on her and may she know your presence with her. Please take her cough away so that she does not have to choke so often. We also pray for Ariaahna's mom who now has Covid. May she heal quickly so that she can get back to caring for her daughter.

We pray for Susan and are glad that she seems to be over the worst days of Covid. Be with her, Lord, as she recuperates.

We pray for Donna Crossen as she prepares for her mother's, Sylvia Ross, funeral on May 7th and is still feeling the tiredness that comes with Covid. May she also recuperate quickly so that she is able to feel well next Saturday.

We pray for Bonnie that her sciatica would resolve so that she can keep her physio going at a successful pace and get around without pain. She is pain free from the surgery but now has this. Lord, we pray that she gets relief.

We continue to pray for Emily Michaud as she recovers from her surgery for her broken ankle. Give her patience for her recovery.

Susan has asked us to pray for a friend who is facing a serious health challenge. Lord, we pray for wisdom and direction to the attending doctors and Lord please give an encouraging and manageable outcome. Go before all involved and bring this person and their family your comfort and peace.

We also pray for Susan's brother, John, that he will hear Your voice and guide him. May he see your love and care for him. May Susan's nephews and wives come to know Your love for them as well.

We pray for Les Dool as he continues to suffering from shingles around his neck. Lord we pray for healing and encouragement through this stage of debilitating, extreme nerve pain. Lord please touch Les's body and heal him.

We pray for Jackie and his ongoing health issues. May he know your presence and feel your loving hand upon him. Thank you Lord for the support he is receiving from friends who are caring for him in friendship.

We pray for those who are living with cancer.

We continue to pray for Charlotte, we ask Lord for positive steps for her and that you might delight this brave young girl in some special way. We remember Peter's sister-in-law and pray she knows you are standing with her in her journey. And we pray for Grayson. Lord we lift up each of these brave folks who are facing a real battle for better health. Please be with each of them and their families. We ask for your encouragement as they live with cancer and all it entails. We pray for wisdom for all Doctors overseeing their care.

We pray for Carol and Adam Lord, please give Carol wisdom and perseverance in this relationship with her son. Help Adam to receive insight from You Lord.

We pray for Melinda's goddaughter who is facing some fairly serious health challenges. Lord, we pray for answers to her issues and we pray for restored health.

We pray for Nora from Tasty Treats who fell down some stairs and busted up her knee and leg a couple of weeks ago. She is now home, though not with a new knee. That surgery is going to have to wait. Lord, we pray that her recovery will continue and progress quickly so that decisions can be made about her knee replacement.

We pray for Shelby as she has had a biopsy and is concerned as to what this might mean. Lord, calm her fears and give her peace. Praise report - We are so pleased that Nancy is back in Pathways and out of the hospital. Lord, we pray for a good adjustment as she returns to living independently and that she stays well.

Praise report - Paula's in-laws. Both Richard and Josie are recovered from Covid. Richard is able to visit Josie in the hospital again and Josie is progressing much better than she was last week.

Praise report - Peggy Christie is going home this week after breaking her ankle two months ago. We pray that her return to her own place goes well.