**“Walking Boldly Into the Future…with Vision”**

**Acts 9: 1-19; Rev. G. Scott Turnbrook; Northwood United Church; Sept. 11, 2016**

The knock comes on the door … always at an inopportune moment. We have just sat down for dinner, or the kids and I are making a breakthrough on homework, or the Canucks are on TV (and they are actually winning). But you feel obliged to go and answer. As you open the door, you see them standing on your front porch: they are always well dressed; there are always two of them; they always are armed with colourful literature; and you may have guessed who I am referring to … it is a visit from your friendly neighbourhood Jehovah’s Witness representatives. Now you might say that I could just avoid answering the door; however, I always feel moved to support and encourage the work they are doing. As we start our fall sermon series “Walking Boldly into the Future” (today focusing on “with vision”), I can think of nothing more “bold” in this day and age than going door to door in a post-Christendom era and sharing the faith of one’s denomination. I think of all the doors that have been slammed in their faces, all the rejections they have received, I like to encourage them and appreciate the ministry they are offering. I certainly do not agree with much of what they say. I have had brief conversations with them and I have had lengthy ones with them inviting them in for tea and lengthy discussions. When I think of people of faith who walk “boldly”, I think of my friendly neigbourhood JW’s.

As we turn to the scripture selection this morning in Acts 9, I am aware that we are on very familiar ground. People often call this the story of Saul’s conversion to the Apostle Paul. Told here in Acts 9 and, of course later in Acts 22 and 26 ~ it is hard to miss it’s importance in the book of Acts. We meet Saul, a horrible persecutor of followers of the Way / of followers of Jesus. Earlier in Acts, we heard the story of how he watched over the garments of Stephen as he was stoned to death. In the text, a light from heaven comes over him ~ similar to the light coming over Moses at Mt. Sinai when he received the 10 commandments or the light coming over Ezekiel in his call to become a prophet. He is blinded and then Saul proceeds to fast for 3 days ~ the same number of days that Jesus stays in the tomb from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. And over time…Saul is transformed from persecutor to preacher, from murderer to missionary, from to slayer of Christians to saver of souls.

Dr. Will Willimon, professor of leadership at Duke University proposes a unique way to read the text, and that is in viewing Saul’s conversion within the larger narrative of ALL the conversions that occur in the book of Acts. Broadening our scope, we become aware that the three tellings of Saul’s conversion are just one incidence of a conversion. Luke, the writer of Luke-Acts, makes it clear that conversion is the very nature of the church that will soon catch on like wildfire. One chapter earlier, we would find the story of the conversion of the Samaritans. Following that, there is the conversion of an Ethiopian, then the conversion of Saul in Acts 9, and then the conversion of a Roman centurion. The work of the Holy Spirit in the early church was all about changing the hearts and minds of people. The work of the Holy Spirit was converting people; it was changing their lives; it was changing the world!

There is another conversion experience here that I would suggest we look at. It is often overlooked, but his story is so relevant to ours. And that story is the conversion of Ananias. Poor Ananias does not get as much press as Saul, but frankly I think he should! Ananias is a good Christian; he is a follower of the Way; and he is given an unthinkable task. God calls him; in a way ~ God converts him to understand the importance of going to Saul. When God first speaks to Ananias, there is no delay in his response ~ he responds “Here I am, Lord” / what do you want of me? / how shall I serve you? Ananias is shocked when God tells him that he is to go to Saul and lay hands on him in order that he might regain his sight. One writer said that this request is akin to asking a Jewish Rabbi pay a house call to Adolph Hitler in 1930’s Germany. This request from God seemed like a death sentence. Lay hands on Saul? You have to be kidding me God! Yet in the new Way God is ushering in, things will be different. Just like the scales will fall off the eyes of Saul allowing him to see in new ways, so too will Ananias see in a new way. He will be called to see the new Ways of following Jesus / the new ways of the church / the new ways of God!

Have you ever considered the new ways God is calling you to see? The things you are blind to? The pains of others that you have been glossing over? The pains in ourselves that we are too afraid to visit? I think this passage is a calling / or a commissioning for us to see with new eyes. As the scales have fallen off, we are renewed to see. It is a call to live out our faith boldly like Ananias did to Saul. It is a call for us to see in new ways. … with vision.

Apart from such considerations that are more individualized, I would suggest that as we are reassembling as a congregation following summer-time rest, it is always good to think about our future direction as a church. As I am suggesting from the sermon title, how will we: “walk boldly into the future” Considerations around a new ministry personnel team, thoughts about the building ~ it seems like the one constant for our future will be change! One body of research that I would like to introduce comes from Dr. Diana Butler-Bass, a leading voice in progressive Christianity. As we are focusing on recovering “vision” this morning I think Butler-Bass has much wisdom to offer. In her most recent book “*Grounded*”, she offers some interesting thoughts on a “vision” of the church’s direction for the future. Butler-Bass makes an interesting distinction between how people used to believe in God in the past and how spiritual people are increasingly connecting with the church today. She makes a distinction between two different understandings of God: a vertical God of the past and a horizontal God of the present. In the past, there was an understanding of a “vertical God”. In Biblical times, there was a belief in a three-tiered universe, and our faith stories were written from that perspective. In this conception of the universe, God was understood as distant and spatially located above in the heavens (the top tier). Hell and damnation was located at the bottom (the bottom tier). And in this model, we have problems and go to God to answer as we do our best to live in this (middle tier) with a God who is far away. With this understanding, the church functions almost like a ‘holy elevator’ by sending things down to help us live fuller and richer lives: the sacraments of communion and baptism, theological concepts such as forgiveness, grace, and peace; and instructional teaching for our living in the form of religious rules. The understanding is that if we do these things, then we eventually ride the elevator to the top when we die. The problem, Butler-Bass suggests is that with this vertical model, we become so focused on connecting with God ~ vertically that we forget our neighbours and become increasingly disconnected with one another. This ‘vertical God’ way of the church is increasingly dying, she suggests. While we were opening new churches each week during the post - WWII baby boom, we are now closing more and more in the new millennium. This connection with ‘vertical God’ at the peril of the ‘other’ (who are right beside us) is not speaking to people today and the church is increasingly dying.

Butler-Bass notes an interesting finding in a recent PEW study. 49% of Americans (and I think this would hold water for Canada too) feel a sense of “awe and wonder” in the world around them. What is even more exciting is that this number has increased by 10% in the past seven years! What Butler-Bass suggests is that we are needing to transition from being a church that used to live in a vertical God understanding to now being one that lives in a “horizontal God” understanding ~ to seeing God beside them / around them / and within them. People today are saying, it is not about the elevator. It is not about a distant God ‘up there’. People are relocating God to being close by and intimate. It is no longer, Butler-Bass suggests, about the church being the ‘mediator’ between God and humanity, it is now more about helping people find ways to connect more deeply with the world around them, with living and loving compassion. It is increasingly about finding a way of shifting to a more immediate God who is present here and now. And so, it becomes increasingly important for religion to be able to tell our ancient faith stories in new and modern contexts. It’s not just about telling our faith stories in church settings; we also need to be telling them at the lakeside, amidst a mountain hike, at a sunset, and around a campfire. How many of us have had profoundly meaningful experiences in nature, at home, at the hospital, in places other than the church? We all have! I’m not saying that the church is irrelevant, but I am saying that we need to expand our understanding of where God is located. Because the rest of the world is already doing it! I would suggest that we need to reclaim our theological imaginations and expand the contexts of where we see the domain of ‘the church’. The church of today needs to minister to an understanding of this ‘horizontal God’ who is immediately present around us, among us and inside us ~ not just above us!

How will this look in the church of the future? God around us and beside us? Well I think it will look differently in different contexts ~ and it will be based on the gifts of the congregation who see the vision of their ministry and live it out. Certainly, Sunday morning worship is not going away anytime soon. But changes will continue ~ as newer instruments are added ~ like we do here with drums and bass and guitars. And other genres like Jazz ~ as Northwood does so well. It will increasingly be about speaking the native musical language of those who gather ~ so in other settings: rock and even country. It is about connecting to the horizontal God. People are increasingly seeing new visions in the church as scales fall from their eyes. I attend a “theology on Tap” gathering at a Kitsilano church. Theological discussion at the local pub over craft brews ~ connecting with the horizontal God; “Reel Theology”~ discussions on contemporary movies are growing in popularity across North America; “Mindfulness Meditation” gatherings where people assemble to bathe themselves in silent meditation to practice an ever-increasing awareness of God’s presence in their lives~ connecting with the horizontal God. “Yoga Chapel” is a growing hybrid of yoga and biblical reflection where participants practice yoga and hear Biblical reflections at the same time. I’ve been at this church thing for over 20 years and I truly don’t think I recognize the church today from the church I began ministry in, or the church I grew up in.

As we draw to an end, I think the key for us is recognize the absolute surprise and the newness God brings to vision. For Ananias, his surprise was to be called to go and lay hands on Saul that his vision might be restored. For Saul, his surprise was that he was to become the greatest missionary God every called. And for you and I, the call is to be open to see what God is calling us to do and be as a church. These are days when we are called to walk boldly into the future, but we do it knowing that God will restore our vision and give us eyes to see.

Thanks be to God.

Amen