

“A New Age”
First Presbyterian Church, Marshfield, WI
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I want you to take a walk with me this morning. We are going to start from the temple in Jerusalem. We will accompany a group of deeply committed Jews who are immensely concerned about the rise of a new sect among them. There have been many fringe groups among the Jewish people over the ages, groups like the Essenes, for example, out of whom the Dead Sea Community arose. There had been the followers of John the Baptist. There were the revolutionaries, who placed the entire Jewish nation at risk. But all these other groups had never challenged the basic tenants of the Jewish faith. They never questioned the authority of the Jewish law with all its necessary minutiae and fences around behavior, which were there to be certain that no Jew broke the Law of God as given at Sinai.

No, this new group was different. Even the one they followed was different. All through his ministry he had challenged the validity of the Jewish traditions. He had challenged the Rabbis and even told the Pharisees, who sought to keep every element of the law, that they were like “whitewashed tombs,” appearing clean on the outside but filled with rot and decay on the inside. He finally became such a threat to the Sadducees’ and the Pharisees’ ways of life that he had to be eliminated. The Romans did the job by crucifying him, but the pressure came from the Jewish leaders out of their fear of him. Now his followers had the audacity to claim that he wasn’t dead anymore—that he had been raised to life, and everyone knew that was a crass lie. Clearly, his disciples had stolen the body to hoodwink the gullible masses. Even so, the movement was growing, and had to be stopped whatever the cost. So, a group was commissioned to find these so called “Christians” wherever they were and drag them to Jerusalem for trial and possible execution. So today, we tag along with one group headed for Damascus.

It is led by a Rabbi and Pharisee named Saul. He had been trained at the feet of one of the greatest Rabbis of the time—Gamaliel. And now, in all his zeal, he has committed himself to eradicate this new sect, because it is absolutely clear that this Jesus of Nazareth, whom many are starting to claim as the Messiah, cannot be that at all. When the Messiah comes, an age of peace will arrive with him, and it is utterly clear that no such age has appeared. He is a fraud. He is a threat to the entire Jewish people, and his deluded followers must be obliterated. And so, we begin our journey.

We leave the temple area, drop down into the Kidron Valley on the east of the city, and begin the climb up the Mount of Olives. We then begin to descend to the Jordan River, passing through Bethany, where this Jesus supposedly raised a man from the dead. We continue a very steep drop to Jericho, a distance of about eighteen miles from Jerusalem. Then, we follow the Jordan River to the Lake of Galilee, and from the northeastern corner of the lake we begin to climb to the top of the Golan Heights. We then descend into Syria, and now Damascus is not very far. Suddenly, there is a flash of light. It is almost blinding to everyone, and it is followed by what seems to be thunder. Everybody is unhurt, but Saul has been knocked from his horse. When we help him to his feet, we discover that he cannot see, and he has been badly shaken. We continue

on to Damascus where we stay for three days not knowing what to do. Suddenly, a man by the name of Ananias appears, lays his hands on Saul's head and says, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:17). It is astonishing! Even more startling, Saul immediately submits to baptism and begins preaching the very message we had come to destroy. What has happened?

The answer lies in the Romans text for today. Saul, who now becomes Paul as a mark of his new life, had discovered that the new age for which the Jews were waiting, had indeed come with the resurrection of Jesus. He himself now lived in that New Age. He was experiencing a personal newness that came with the reception of the Holy Spirit and that was dramatized in the act of baptismal immersion. He had died with Christ to his old life, but now lived anew in the resurrected life of Jesus. He had left the old age, which was marked by sin and death, and had moved into the new age marked by new life, new hope, and new possibilities. As C. K. Barrett, an English New Testament scholar, noted, the move from one age to another is something that takes place as one is united to Christ through faith. That is what happened to Saul, and it can and should have happened to all of us. The mark of that newness, according to Barrett, is the ethical values we carry on our shoulders as inhabitants of the new age. The way we as Christians live and act is the only visible evidence that something new is present in this world.

Today, as in Paul's day, faithful Jewish people still do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah. The reason is the same as it has always been. It is clear from observation that no new age has arrived. There is no peace in the world, and that was supposed to come with the Messiah. But those of us who have the Spirit in our lives know that isn't fully true. The new age is here, but the old age hasn't yet vanished. Just as we know, due to our faith in Jesus, that we have been made new in him, so we also recognize that in ourselves, we are still sinners. That tension will not be resolved until he comes again, to bring in that era of peace that both we and the Jewish people await. In the meantime, we cannot permit sin to flourish in our lives or in the society in which we live. The way we face evil in ourselves and the world, defines the kind of Christian we are.

An encounter with Jesus always changes a person. It certainly changed Thomas a Beckett. If you happen to remember your English history, Beckett was the friend and companion of King Henry the Second of England. Their behavior was anything but Christian, be it in the realm of personal morals or in the ethics of government. Everything they did was for pleasure or gain. Everything was self-serving, and Henry knew he could count on Beckett always to support him. Thus, as the Barons put pressure on him, he made Beckett the Chancellor of England, with all the attendant powers that went with that office. As Henry's designs were further thwarted, particularly by the Roman Church, he finally appointed Beckett as Archbishop of Canterbury. With this appointment, which Beckett pled with Henry not to make, Beckett was brought face to face with the risen Lord, and it changed him dramatically.

His first act was to divest himself of all his wealth. He gave everything he had to the poor. He then separated himself from the office of Chancellor of England, and gave his life to Christ and the Church. When a priest committed a crime that would normally have been tried in a civil court, had he not been a priest, Beckett refused to turn the priest over to state authorities, and said he would be tried before a church court. This put him at odds with Henry, and Beckett had

to flee England, and finally found refuge in France. Ultimately, he returned to England, where he continued to oppose Henry, and he was finally assassinated by some of the Barons loyal to the King. This act led to such an uproar that Henry finally had to do penance before the tomb of Beckett, and later Beckett was canonized as a Saint. An encounter with Christ is a dangerous thing. It may make a person new, and he or she may show that newness by wanting to change the world.

Another person radically changed by his encounter with the new age found in Jesus, was Peter. I like Peter, because he bumbles and stumbles along during Jesus' ministry, just as I surely would have. He, along with the rest of the disciples, just didn't get what Jesus was trying to say. He had flashes of insight at times. He even had mountain top experiences when he accompanied Jesus up Mt. Hermon where the Transfiguration took place. The things that Jesus was saying were so far beyond anything the disciples had ever experienced, that they just couldn't get their heads around it. But then Jesus was crucified, buried, and then on the third day there was a report from women, no less, who claimed they had met the resurrected Jesus. Peter still didn't get it, until Jesus appeared to him also. And then this very human person became a giant of faith, letting nothing stand in his way. He opened the mission to the Gentiles by preaching to Cornelius and his family and baptizing them into the church. He finally carried the gospel to Rome where he was ultimately crucified up-side-down, because he did not feel worthy to die in the same way that his Lord did. He knew what the new age looked like, even in the midst of the brutal old age.

And then there was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was like most of us. He grew up in a Christian home. There was no startling Damascus road experience for him that I am aware of. His trip was much like mine, and I suspect like yours. I can't remember a time when I didn't know Jesus was my Lord, but that conviction has grown over time as I have tried to live more and more closely to him. Jesus was always Bonhoeffer's companion. He led him to seminary, into the pastorate, and finally into opposition to the Nazi regime. That opposition was such that Bonhoeffer, along with other members of his family, were implicated in the plot to kill Hitler. On April 9, 1945, he was hanged by the Nazis, but eye-witness reports say that he went to his death in utter calmness and in the assurance that he walked with Jesus. He too brought the ethics of the new age into the midst of the sinful old age.

Do we live in the new age? If our claims to be Christians are real, then we should be living there. That is what it means to have been baptized into Christ, both into his death which cancels the old age, and into his resurrection which shows us the coming of the new age, albeit only in part. Somewhere along the line there is or has been for all Christians a Damascus road experience. It is the point where we have finally given our lives consciously to the Master of the living and of the dead. It is the point where death no longer holds any fear for us, because it will lead us fully into the new age, which we now experience only in part through the Spirit and our communion with Jesus. If we live in the new age, we can no longer tolerate the sin and evil of the old age and will do what we can to change this world into something alive and wholesome. I know that the Spirit of Jesus can bring us into this new age and make us more vibrant and more whole than we have ever been.

Amen.