

**Close Encounters****Easter 3C, May 5, 2019**

Laura Smith Conrad

Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

**Scripture: Acts 9:1-20**

9:1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest

9:2 and 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.

9:3 Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

9:4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

9:5 He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

9:6 But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

9:7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.

9:8 Saul 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.

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

9:10 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord."

9:11 The 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,

9:12 and 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."

9:13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem;

9:14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name."

9:15 But 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;

9:16 I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

9:17 So 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."

9:18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,

9:19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus,

9:20 and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

## Meditation

2017 was the 30th anniversary edition of the Steven Spielberg blockbuster movie, "Close Encounters; of the Third Kind." In truth I was too young to view it when it came out, but I knew the music. I knew it had something to do with aliens coming to earth. In the 1970s we seem to be obsessed with aliens. Those who watch culture tell us one way we deal with our fear of strangers or impending catastrophe is by working out our fears in pop culture. In the 1930s folks who were afraid of having enough to eat, were obsessed with vampires. That cycles around. After the 2008 financial crisis, once again on TV, in books, and in movies, we were obsessed with Vampires and then zombies with shows like *The Walking Dead* and now with *Game of Thrones* those horrid ice zombies, the White Walkers.

So what are we afraid of now?

The next recession? Aliens and strangers from other countries or other faiths? our kids' cell phone usage making them into zombies that hurt social skills?

Whatever fears plague us, it seems that Spielberg and company may have had something right. Close encounters of the third kind make the difference.

What is that? CONTACT. The first two kinds of close encounter are sightings and evidence, but the third kind- contact.

Today's scripture of Paul, Jesus, and Ananias is about close encounters and contact. Saul is on the road to Damascus . He is on his way to arrest some people who follow Jesus.

They are the ones that are upsetting the purity of his faith, threatening the treasured institution of Temple religion, and causing disruption.

So what do they do with those kind of people- lock them up and put them on trial.

This is the same Saul who stood by and watched the stoning of the Apostle Stephen with self-righteous satisfaction. They were taking care of the problem.

Throughout history when we make a group of people "the problem" there is usually violence.

Think about how things have been labeled in the past as "the Jewish problem" the "The Negro Problem" a book by William Bruce in 1891, or the "Immigrant Problem" today.

Back to Saul. You know the story.

Breathing fire and threats, this Saul was knocked off his feet by the risen Jesus himself, probably dazed and confused, as well as blinded- talk about a close encounter.

I have rarely met a person who had such a dramatic encounter with Christ. Have you?

There was the Reformer Martin Luther's dramatic experience when he "felt I was altogether born again." Then there was John Wesley's warmed heart. F.F. Bruce points to India's great missionary

Sundar Singh's conversion<sup>i</sup>. After years of hostility to the Gospel, he saw a great light one night (in 1904):

"I saw the form of the Lord Jesus Christ, an appearance of glory and love. If it had been a Hindu incarnation, I would have prostrated myself. But it was the Lord Jesus Christ I'd been insulting the day before. A voice asked, 'How long will you persecute me? I have come to save you.' I realized Jesus is not dead but living. So I fell at his feet and received this wonderful peace, and the joy I was wishing for."

But the truth of the matter, if you know Singh's life, was that he was Hindu, but went to a Christian school taught by Christian priests, primarily so he could learn English. He was of two worlds, sort of like Paul, living in a multi-cultural, multi-faith world. In fact, Sundar Singh was so angry about his mother's death at age 14 that he tore out pages of the Bible and burned them in front of his friends.

It was those Christian priests and students who showed him a different way.

It was not just that moment that made the difference, it was all those moments leading to it. He had been on a journey of faith. And a one-time enemy of Christ became one the most profound missionaries of the Punjab in India and Muslim Pakistan.

He is the most revered Missionary of the Christian Church in India- a twentieth century modern day Apostle Paul.

But what if he had not been in a Christian community like his school? And what if he had no priests, no youth advisors, no teachers to guide him? And once he had that dramatic experience, what if he had no Christian friends to help him interpret what God was doing in his life?

Only they could help him through that encounter with Jesus to understand.

Being a Christian or a person of the Way is never a solo act. While I love the call of Paul, I am most thankful for Ananias.

Ananias, seems to be a supporting actor here; but if he had never taken the risk to do what God called him to do, I wonder if Saul would have really become the man Paul. Ananias, we are told in Acts 22:12, was a devout man according to the Law and well-spoken by all the Jews living there.

Ananias, even in his fear is willing to risk his own safety to serve God's purposes.

This is fire-breathing, Saul, who watched Stephen get stoned.

He was the leader of the persecution of people of the Way.

Ananias could be walking into his own arrest.

Ananias's response: Here I am, Lord. He trusted God. He was vulnerable and available.

He took the risk of love. Have you had an Ananias in your own life?

Who in your life has been most vulnerable and available to share the faith with you?

While in Atlanta, we were active at the Open Door Community which provided hospitality to our homeless neighbors. Formerly homeless men and women lived in Christian community with people PhDs. Their covenant of faith kept them in mission to serve their neighbors on the street.

One 6:00 am morning we loaded up the vans with grits, vitamins, boiled eggs and headed to Butler street to a church across from Grady Hospital which serves the poor. As we drove together, I looked at the people in the van and thought, "This is what the Kingdom of God looks like."

Here I was a educated, Seminary student, a young woman, in a van load of men, some had been homeless or convicted of crimes. We were different races and backgrounds, and everything in my upbringing taught me to be afraid of them. Truth be told if my father had been living, he would have had another heart attack.

Then I thought, they have been taught to be just as afraid of me.

So what made the difference? We were a Christian community centered on Jesus.

The community practiced what happened in Acts 2. Once baptized into Christ, they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread, to singing, the prayers, and sharing all they had in common. And people of all sorts who had been taught to be afraid of one another, took the risk of sharing in mission.

It was through them that I learned the saying, "Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread." (D.T. Niles)

It was through those close encounters that I grew as a Christian to understand the beauty of the Kingdom of God.

We were all bound for the Promised Land, and it looked a lot like sharing a meal in the Church basement on Butler Street.

We took communion together on Sunday nights at the Open Door- homeless and housed people, just as we ate together daily reading Scripture and praying. The Lord's Supper fueled our mission. The scales fell from my eyes, and I saw the face of Christ in my brothers and sisters, even those I was taught to fear.

In the Hebrew Scripture God speaks so many times about welcoming the stranger, for we once were aliens and strangers in a strange land. And it began with them welcoming me...a Seminary student from the suburbs. The gospel is always first and foremost about contact and close encounters.

Jesus came to earth to make contact. He came to show us the way. And for us he was crucified and raised. He took the risk of love. The same professor that walked with me on that journey, Chuck Campbell, wrote about Acts 9:

"The living Christ is 'loose' in the world, encountering people and shaping the community of faith, often in surprising ways, for our mission in the world. In the presence of the living Christ persecutors become allies who share the suffering of the persecuted. 'Ordinary' believers provide the gift of discernment. Enemies become brothers and sisters. Violence is replaced by witness. Ordination, baptism, and Eucharist become vehicles for the transforming and empowering work of the Spirit. And the Word is lived and proclaimed 'in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'"<sup>ii</sup>

Even to Clemson.

If we are people called to share the love of God here, to encounter and make contact with others, to whom are you being called to know and love? To whom are you called to share the love of Christ, even if it is risky?

Does it look like inviting a co-worker, a student, another Fort Hill disciple, to coffee or lunch and getting to know him/her with no agenda except to listen to his/her story?

Does it look like doing a Habitat workday or serving at our Daily Bread or mentoring through Ripple of One to encounter folks that may be different than you while sharing your time and talents?

Does it look like befriending the school bully, the weirdo, the geek, the popular kid?

We all need an Ananias to walk alongside us, to help us see with the vision of Jesus.

Ananias took the risk of love in faith.

Where would any of us be without him?

---

<sup>i</sup> as quoted by James Howell, "James Howell's Weekly Preaching Notions" at <http://jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com/>

<sup>ii</sup> Campbell, Charles L., in Van Harn, Roger (ed.), *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Text. The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001)