

**Sermon: 2019/05/05 - (3rd Sunday of Easter Day) - Acts 9:1-20;
Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14; & John 21:1-19_BTR**

[Invite children to the front.]

I told you last week that there were forty days between Jesus' resurrection (from His death on the cross), and when He finally returned to Heaven: [Acts 1:3].

Forty days of appearing to the Apostles to *prove* He had conquered the devil; to *prove* He was God Himself (in human form) as He had claimed all along.

But after each (*miraculous*) appearance, Jesus would vanish again!

To where, no one knows.

So, every time He did that the Apostles - that's Peter, Thomas, Nathanael and the others - would worry if that had been the last time.

"Oh no!" They would think to themselves, "Was that it?"

Will we see Him again?

Has He gone altogether now?"

But an angel told them to "Stop worrying!" and return to their homes in Galilee:

[e.g. Mt. 28:10].

Which they did.

Well, they got a little impatient.

And so some of the Apostles decided to do some fishing - they had to pay the bills somehow!

And they spent all night in a boat trying to catch something, but without any success.

Now, fishing in ancient Israel was a very different business to how we do it now.

[Grady/Campbell], how does one fish around here?

[Wait for response.]

Right!

And it is quite a relaxing pastime.

Peaceful.

Not too strenuous.

But for the Apostles, fishing was very hard:

You had a very large net made of natural rope - a sort of oval shape, with large, round stones tied around its circumference.

Here's one I made using string and 'Lifesaver' candies.

The real one was *very* heavy!

And you would twist your body around, and throw it as far as you could into the water so that the net would expand and unfold outwards as it soared.

Because of those stones I mentioned, the net would then sink down very fast, trapping fish beneath it against the lake-bottom. Then, you would wait a moment, before drawing it back in; and as the net rose to the surface - which was like a difficult "tug-of-war(!)" - the stones at its edge would draw together (thanks to gravity), so that the whole thing became like a tear-drop, keeping some of the fish enclosed inside.

And this process had to be repeated again and again and again.
And we hear that the Apostles did it all night: their muscles must have been very sore!

Then, in the morning, Jesus came and stood on the shore and shouted to them, saying:

"Cast the net [again]!" Which they did.

And this time it filled up with hundreds *and hundreds* of squirming, wriggling, *slimy* fish!

(It was a miracle.)

And Peter, despite how tired he was from throwing that heavy net out all night, jumped straight into the water to swim to Jesus and greet Him.

And this is how we should be: we should be willing to do tiring, difficult, heavy work for Jesus, *and excited* - like Peter - to do it too. Because it is *the Lord* who asks us.

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

In the Bible - as today from (the Book of) Acts with Saint Paul, we are presented with true-story after true-story after true-story about exceptional men and women "of Faith" who have these powerful, public, unmistakably *super-natural* "God-moments."

The proper term, in theology textbooks, is, "*Theophany*."

Which is one (English) noun consisting of two *Greek* words *smooshed* together meaning "a-glimpse-of-God."

And these clear, "concrete," plain-as-day appearances of the Divine; of the Diety, (or of one of His angels) to those lucky mortals happened, usually, to bring about conversion; *conviction*.

In other words, the rationale for these "theophanies" is to say: "*Look*, here I am. Now, stop doubting; stop "mucking around," and get on with whatever it is that

you're supposed to be doing."

Other examples include Jacob's wrestling match, [Gen. 32:24f.] the three strange visitors to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre [Gen. 18:1ff.]; the list goes on and on. And because there are so many of these episodes, they skew our attitude about such things - about the role that such instant, dramatic revelations - *theophanies* - should play in my life.

We hope and long for the same,
and if we haven't experienced something like that - the blinding light on the road-to-Damascus - we (might) feel... bereft;
hard-done-by;
impoverished.

And that feeling of having missed out (on something) can effect our discipleship: the disappointment of not having had an experience like Paul's might make us "lose heart;" lose focus, be less motivated to evangelize and witness and advocate and agitate for the Kingdom.

But, and hear me now, most men and women both in Scripture *and in the world* do not encounter God in this way.

He chooses *another* method:

Consider Ananias - the man God used to restore Paul's sight and convert him from a persecutor of the (Christian) Church to one of its greatest "pillars."

Ananias has, yes, a vision too, in which he heard the Lord speaking audibly and giving him easily comprehensible directions as to what to do.

But what about the person who converted him?

What about the unnamed person - not mentioned in the New Testament - who must have had a conversation at some point with Ananias and told him about Jesus - about that young rabbi from Galilee who proved to be God incarnate by a series of astonishing miracles culminating in the resurrection.

And consider how far from Jerusalem - where our episode from *Acts* began - is Damascus (about 230 miles), and the likelihood, therefore, that there might have been *multiple* anonymous somebodies who, between them, "*transmitted*" the "Good News" (from the one city to the other).

None of them had experiences like Paul or Ananias.

None of them saw flashes of unexplainable phenomena, or were struck dumb, or had the voice of God in their ear.

They didn't see a fiery-cloudy column stretching to the sky as the Hebrews in the wilderness,

or the walls of Jericho collapsing as Joshua.

They had no noteworthy visions - and we know this because they literally weren't noted, right?

(They're not in the Scriptures.)

God, then, does not usually operate by pyrotechnics and Hollywood special effects.

He relies instead on a still, small voice of reasoned conviction uttered by people who already believe:

take, for example, Elijah.

Elijah was one of those lucky few who did have a powerful, scary, impactful "God-moment;" a "theophany."

However, he found himself in a spiritual rut anyway; a "funk."

A low place of uncertainty.

And that's been me!

And probably many of you at some point.

And maybe somebody here today.

Do I *really* believe in all this?

Am I *really* in a saving relationship with the Easter-Savior?

Elijah was having these thoughts.

Am I on the right path?

Where is my life going?

He was sitting in a cave, and, we're told, there was 'a sound of sheer silence.'

It followed a hurricane and an earthquake.

And '[w]hen he heard it' - the 'silence', that is - '[Elijah] wrapped his face in his mantle, [stood up and] went out', and got back to work with a renewed sense of purpose; with a new *zeal*.

Specifically, *coincidentally*, this all took place in the area south of Damascus where Paul had his (own) encounter: [1 Ki. 19:12-15].

What had happened?

Nothing very much.

And that's the point: Elijah had had some quiet time to himself to reflect; to... philosophise; to "weigh" up what he had already experienced and seen.

And, apparently, it was this well-deserved quiet time that led him to decide that a life of serving God - though it might be dangerous and inconvenient, which it very much was so for Elijah who had criticised the royal family - was far better than a life without God.

Similarly, whoever the insignificant person - or persons - was who converted Ananias - and it wasn't an Apostle: they were still in Jerusalem being questioned and harassed by the Sadducees - that person hadn't needed a (big) "theophany" either.

What was sufficient for them - and what should be sufficient for us - are the simple *facts* of the matter,

which can be discovered in Sunday School, or in a scholarly book from an armchair; in Cambridge University library (as in my case), *or* in conversation with

others that we trust who *are* convinced.

Thoughtful, open-minded people, then, are the “instruments” [Acts 9:15] by which God-in-Heaven likes to do most of His heavy-lifting.

So, if you are struggling with questions, don’t do it alone *and don’t do nothing*.

Rather, take active steps to talk, to read, to listen and meditate.

Trust Christ to show Himself to you in this(, more mundane) way.

It isn’t spectacular, but it will change your life nonetheless!