

Scripture Reading: Acts 9:1-19 (from The Message Bible)

“All this time Saul was breathing down the necks of the Master’s disciples, out for the kill. He went to the Chief Priest and got arrest warrants to take to the meeting places in Damascus so that if he found anyone there belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he could arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem.

“He set off. When he got to the outskirts of Damascus, he was suddenly dazed by a blinding flash of light. As he fell to the ground, he heard a voice: ‘Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me?’

“He said, ‘Who are you, Master?’

“‘I am Jesus, the One you’re hunting down. I want you to get up and enter the city. In the city you’ll be told what to do next.’

“His companions stood there dumbstruck—they could hear the sound, but couldn’t see anyone—while Saul, picking himself up off the ground found himself stone-blind. They had to take him by the hand and lead him into Damascus. He continued blind for three days. He ate nothing, drank nothing.

“There was a disciple in Damascus by the name of Ananias. The Master spoke to him in a vision: ‘Ananias.’

“‘Yes, Master?’ he answered.

“‘Get up and go over to Straight Avenue. Ask at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus. His name is Saul. He’s there praying. He has just had a dream in which he saw a man named Ananias enter the house and lay hands on him so he could see again.’

“Ananias protested, ‘Master, you can’t be serious. Everybody’s talking about this man and the terrible things he’s been doing, his reign of terror against your people in Jerusalem! And now he’s shown up here with papers from the Chief Priest that give him license to do the same to us.’

“But the Master said, ‘Don’t argue. Go! I have picked him as my personal representative to non-Jews and kings and Jews. And now I’m about to show him what he’s in for—the hard suffering that goes with this job.’

“So Ananias went and found the house, placed his hands on blind Saul, and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Master sent me, the same Jesus you saw on your way here. He sent me so you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ No sooner were the words out of his mouth than something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes—he could see again! He got to his feet, was baptized, and sat down with them to a hearty meal.” (The Word of God for the people of God; Thanks be to God.)

There is Saul, breathing down the necks of good Christians in the Holy Land, followers of the Way. He wanted to put them in jail. However, God had other plans for Saul Paul, and we will get back to that in a few minutes. Right now, I want to talk to you about our wonderful mission statement. Do you know what it is? It’s right up there on the screen. Say it with me:

Invite all in need of God’s love,

Inspire them to become deeply committed Christians, and

Involve them in service to a world in need.

That is a fantastic mission statement. It is inclusive, purposeful, and action-oriented. It can also be reduced to three, alliterative words: Invite, Inspire, and Involve. Don’t hate me for asking, but please, say those three words with me: Invite, Inspire, and Involve. It breaks down neatly into a

three-step process. First, we invite our friends and neighbors to church, then we inspire them to accept Christ in their hearts, and finally we help them get involved in one of the thousand ways this church serves its community. Those three steps would be challenging enough, but I want to suggest that there are really six steps to our mission statement.

The last three steps are exactly what I just described, and they are all about our friends and neighbors. But people of God, we cannot invite our friends until we first answer the invitation. We cannot inspire them to become committed Christians until we ourselves are inspired, and we cannot involve them in the mission work of this church unless we ourselves are involved. The first three steps, my friends, are about us.

The good news is, we have already done the first step: we answered the invitation. We are here! The invitation may have been your parents dragging you, kicking and screaming when you were a child. Or it may have been the sign outside that made you think, "I'm going to stop in there one day and see what they're all about." The invitation may have come from one of your neighbors who asked, "Would you like to come with me to church today?" In any case, we all said yes, and here we are. Step one is complete.

The bad news is, step two is the hardest. We are responsible for inspiring ourselves to become deeply committed Christians. This is where I think so many Christians stumble. We don't want to inspire ourselves—we want others to inspire us. We come to church on Sunday and expect the pastor to bring a message that is going to rip us out of our seats and get us fired up for missions. We want the music to lift us and carry us out into the world, determined to make a difference. We look toward the heavens, waiting for that divine intervention. We want that lightning bolt from God to change our lives, just as Christ transformed Saul Paul on the road to Damascus.

For Paul, divine inspiration caused a complete conversion. He went from persecuting early Christians to eating with them. He went from taking their money to ministering to them. That moment on the Damascus road, that one encounter with Christ, changed Paul's life forever. But what about those of us who have not had a Damascus Road moment? We come to church faithfully and wait for that lightning bolt to hit. When we remain uninspired, we blame the pastor, or the music director, or the noisy children, or the couple in front of us who talked through the entire service.

I'll tell a little story on myself here. I used to sing in the choir at Good Shepherd United Methodist Church up in Thornton. Their choir closet is at the back of the sanctuary and the choir sits in the front of the sanctuary, facing the back. Every Sunday during the service, I would sit there and stare at the choir closet door, which was always left open, and the choir closet light, which was always left on. I would then stare at the choir director, who of course was responsible for this heinous transgression, and I would think to myself, "How hard is it for him to turn off the light and shut the door?" Some of you may already be thinking what took awhile to occur to me, which is, "Why don't I just remember to turn off the light and shut the door before the service starts every Sunday?" I did finally come to that realization, and take on that responsibility, but not with any good grace, because in my mind, it was the choir director's job.

God has a way of getting us back for our pettiness. In my case, He made me a choir director.

Now that I'm on my way to becoming a pastor, I can't help remembering all the things I've said about my past ministers. I am hoping that if I apologize enough, God won't use my future ministry as a payback opportunity. But the point is, I left church every Sunday uninspired, because I let that closet light, and that closet door, get in the way of the Word of God.

Unfortunately, I am not alone. I brought a list of things that have come between other people and God, things I've heard good Christians complain about—not at this church, of course—but during the last 30 or so years that I've been paying attention. In fact, instead of reading them off to you, let's borrow a page from *The Late Show with David Letterman*, and make this a list of:

The Top Ten Reasons I Was Not Able To Worship Last Sunday

10. The pastor sweats too much, and then wants to hug me. Yuk!
9. The pastor is too loud and it hurts my ears.
8. The pastor's shoelace keeps coming untied during the sermon and it is very distracting.
7. That rip in the carpet by the pulpit is still there and if it's not fixed soon, I'm leaving this church.
6. The pastor stands right on the squeaky spot in the floor during the sermon—it drives me crazy!
5. I could not pray because the music during the prayer time was distracting.
4. I could not pray because there was not any music during the prayer time.
3. We never sing any hymns that were written in this century!
2. We did not sing *Amazing Grace*.
1. Was there a worship service last Sunday?

I have heard worse complaints; threats to leave the church over use of audio/video equipment, over using foreign languages in the service and in music, over use of money, the parsonage, the kitchen. We can find the most trivial and painful things to argue about, things that are so important to us we would threaten to leave our church family over them. This is about as far from becoming inspired as you can get.

I want to mention again that I am not talking about Lakewood United Methodist Church. I am sure nothing like that ever happens here, but you have to know it does happen. As for me, I am a little better now than I was a year ago, and next year, God willing, I will be a little better than I was this year. I do not want to leave it to the pastor or the music director to inspire me. I do not want to be distracted by carpeting, shoelaces, or sweat. Or closet doors! I want to spend my days looking for God and finding God, in new and exciting places.

Perhaps you are among the happy ones who leave church every Sunday, totally inspired and ready to do God's work in the world. We are fortunate to have Rev. Rosa as a spiritual leader. She continuously brings us intelligent, thought-provoking—and inspirational—messages every Sunday. We are blessed with worshipful—and inspirational—music under the leadership of David Heck, and the many talented musicians who contribute to the fine music ministry here. We have three retired pastors at this church who are happy to help anyone find inspiration in the Word of God, anytime. We have a myriad of mission opportunities, where giving time and talents may lead to life-altering inspiration. But maybe, just maybe, even with all these blessings, inspiration is still elusive.

My husband Brian and I have a friend named Walt. He has been over in Romania, doing mission work for several years. Every year, he comes home for a month or so and we get to visit with him and catch up on his ministry. One Sunday when Walt was home, we got to talking about the differences between the church services here and the services in Romania. Brian has been to Romania with Walt and can testify that the services there are long, at least two hours long, and of course, they are not in English. I asked Walt how he could stand it, week after week, and if he ever found a place where he could truly worship.

Walt got the most peaceful look on his face as he explained that he had learned to worship anywhere. He finds God in the faces of the children praying, or the sound of the music, even though he cannot understand all the words. He worships in the fields when he plays soccer with the orphans, and on the dusty road when he rides his bike into town. He expects to see God and when God is not immediately visible, Walt goes looking for God. Imagine that, interactive worship.

In his book “A Testament of Devotion,” Thomas R. Kelly writes of passive and active routes to obedience. He explains “the amazing experiences of the mystics” who have a transcendent experience with the Holy Spirit. He calls this the passive route, where God does all the work and we are simply a seed waiting for God’s water and light to make us sprout. “The vision fades, but holy and listening and alert obedience remains, as the core and kernel of a God-intoxicated life.” A God-intoxicated life. Wow! Kelly could be describing the Saul Paul moment on the Damascus road. That passive, acted-upon conversion experience changed his life forever.

But Kelly goes on to explain, “most people must follow what Jean-Nicholas Grou calls the active way, wherein we must struggle and, like Jacob of old, wrestle with the angel until the morning dawns, the active way wherein the will must be subjected bit by bit, piecemeal and progressively, to the divine Will” of God. In other words, most of us have to work for it.

Now, Kelly writes about obedience and submission to God’s will, but I believe the same paths lead to inspiration. There is the passive path where we sit in the pew and wait for inspiration to come to us, and there is the active path, where we desire it, seek it, work for it—and find it.

Let’s get back to the six steps of our fabulous mission statement, where personal involvement follows personal inspiration. In fact, it almost happens automatically. Once we are inspired, we cannot help getting involved. And sometimes, it even works the other way around; first, we get involved, and then we get inspired. Our friend Walt found inspiration on a mission trip to Romania, and that inspiration changed his life. I find inspiration through prayer and study, Godly girlfriends, and a patient and supportive husband. My road to inspiration has been the active path. I have definitely had to work for it.

Invite, Inspire, Involve. You have already answered the invitation. I pray that you find inspiration to become a deeply committed Christian. If you are already a deeply committed Christian, then you can begin working on step three and get involved in service to a world in need. And if you are already present, committed and involved, you know what the next three steps are. Say them with me: Invite, Inspire, Involve. Amen!