

Are You Dead Yet?

Acts 9:1-20

April 10, 2016

I went skiing one Colorado day with my senior pastor and our intern pastor. I was a beginner. The senior pastor was cautious and calm. The intern pastor loved to fly down the hill. He shot off the ski lift and rocketed toward the bottom.

We watched the intern take a daring jump. Then there was a silent explosion of snow, punctuated by flying poles, gloves and cap. We saw our poor intern half-buried and half-dazed. My senior pastor raised his eyebrows and called out, “Are you dead yet?”

That’s what I want to ask poor Saul of Tarsus—lying flat on his assumptions, knocked off the saddle of his absolute certainty. The Renaissance artist, Caravaggio, captures the moment better than anyone else. Poor Saul—are you dead yet?

Then I imagine Saul’s answer. “Of course I am! How else could I live?”

He was formerly known as Saul of Tarsus. He’s not exactly Christian recruiting poster material.

In Acts seven, he helps to kill the first Christian martyrs. In chapter eight we read that “*Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.*”

By the time we get to Acts nine, Paul is expanding to the city of Antioch. He is going after a nest of Jesus followers to drag them in chains to their deaths in Jerusalem.

If you think the writer of Acts is exaggerating, we have Paul’s own testimony. In Galatians three, verse thirteen he reports, “*I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it.*” He was an efficient and enthusiastic enemy of Jesus and his church. That’s who Jesus picks to be his greatest apostle, prophet and teacher. But first, Jesus has to knock him flat on his assumptions and give him a new life.

Poor Saul—are you dead yet? Of course he is! How else could he live?

Paul’s story is about death and resurrection. Nothing ends at Easter. It is the beginning of God’s mission for life. Christ is risen!

Saul of Tarsus meets the risen Jesus. The one who had been dead was now alive. Everything Paul thought he knew was turned upside down and inside out. He had been dead wrong and Jesus was about to put him right.

Paul describes it like this in Galatians 2: “*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.*”

Poor Saul—are you dead yet? Of course he is! How else could he live?

When Jesus raises someone, it’s for a reason. Resurrection leads to vocation.

Paul didn't sacrifice his smarts. He didn't forget his biblical knowledge. He didn't abandon his theological training. He didn't lose his zeal for God and God's truth. He didn't soften his abrasiveness or abandon his aggressiveness.

What changed was Paul's purpose, his focus his *mission*. The gifts he had used to persecute and destroy the church Jesus now claimed for the gospel of life and hope.

Poor Saul—are you dead yet? Of course he is! How else could he live?

What about us? Poor Emanuel, are you dead yet? Of course we are! How else could we live? Paul writes in Romans six, verse four: "*we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.*" Saul has died, and Paul is raised to be new.

What makes a church new? It's not a new building or program or liturgy or music. It's not even a new pastor. What makes a church new is a new purpose, focus, *mission*! That's what the Holy Spirit doing here at Emanuel. We are looking beyond ourselves, our needs and our preferences. We are seeking the good of our neighborhood and community because that's where Jesus is.

Paul didn't get new on his own. There's a second call story in Acts nine. Ananias is less than overjoyed about his assignment. "Lord, I know about this guy," Ananias says. "He's a bad man. He's been arresting and executing believers in Jerusalem. He's here in Antioch to do the same to us. Could you send someone else?"

Jesus is gently insistent. "Buck up, Ananias! I have called him to witness to the nations. I need you to help him understand what he is to do and what that will cost him. So, go!" And Ananias went.

Some people are called like Paul—with a flash and a bang. Some are called like Ananias—with a whisper and a nudge. We need both kinds of call stories in the church.

What's your call story? Have you ever shared that with anyone? It's one thing to have a faith story. But a faith story without a call story is incomplete. Jesus claims us as his own and then aims us into mission and service.

Are you dead yet? Of course you are! How else could you live?

Ananias is the church. If we are faithful, Jesus will send us new people. We will surprise one another. We won't all be the same. Sometimes we'll rub one another raw. But we are here to support one another in our various callings to loving service and faithful witness.

And we are people who know that the dead are raised to new life. That's why, for example, we have the Emanuel Fresh Start Team that works with ex-offenders. We know the Holy Spirit will change a person if the person will allow it. We are living proof that Jesus gives new life. Jesus changes people, and we're privileged to be part of the process.

So pray this week to see how Jesus is calling you to something new. Then pray for the willingness to respond.

Are you dead yet? Of course you are! How else could you live? Let's pray...

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