

RISING STRONG: Rising from Hatred

Acts 9:1-22

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/rising-strong-rising-from-hatred/

I.

In 2014, the small German town of Wunsiedl (WOUND-ze-dull) had a problem. Because Adolf Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess, had once been buried there in the town cemetery, Wunsiedl had become a place of pilgrimage for neo-Nazis all over Europe. And for decades, far-right extremists with ideologies of hate marched through town in an annual neo-Nazi parade, much to the embarrassment of the townsfolk themselves.

They tried everything: blocking streets, closing shops. They even dug up Hess's remains from the cemetery in 2011 and sent them away, but the parade of hate continued. But in 2014, the townspeople decided to try something new. They welcomed the marchers.

They painted a starting line on the far side of the main street where the marchers typically came into town and a finish line on the other side where they usually left town. And they created and publicized what they called Germany's Most Involuntary Walkathon, a fundraiser for the organization *Exit Deutschland*, devoted to helping people escape extremist groups, including, of course, white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups. And so, with every step the extremist marchers took, the walkathon raised more and more money to help people escape extremism.

As they walked, the crowds cheered. Activists adorned the involuntary walkathon with all the trappings of a peppy fundraiser, adding colorful banners to encourage the neo-Nazis to keep moving forward, thus raising more money to support people escaping their cause. At the end of the walk, the neo-Nazis were showered with rainbow confetti and a sign thanking them for their unknown contribution to efforts against themselves. The news media took note, word spread, and over \$12,000 was raised that day by neo-Nazis to end neo-Nazis.

While this approach has not kept neo-Nazis out of towns like Wunsiedel entirely, it appears to have discouraged their presence, with the number of marchers in subsequent years cut by nearly half, even while hate crimes are on the rise around the world and in the U.S.

In a gentle rebellion with good humor, the citizens of Wundsiedel creatively stepped to one side, using the problem as part of the solution.ⁱ It was a story of a big, bold reversal of town rising strong from hatred.

II.

Easter is full of big, bold reversals. Crowds who praise and then condemn Jesus by week's end; close friends who promise to stand by Jesus at the Last Supper but betray him a few hours later. And the most famous reversal of all: death is undone into resurrection and new life; defeat is

transformed into victory.ⁱⁱ In all these reversals, God doesn't seek to destroy or conquer the enemies of Jesus. Hate is not a part of the kingdom Jesus was announcing. Instead, God sets out to reverse or transform them. Weapons like the cross are transformed into plowshares, tools that bring life rather than death.

The Eastertide season is also full of big, bold reversals through conversion stories. The Book of Acts tells us how the disciples quickly became a movement after Jesus's death and resurrection. Belief in Jesus as the Messiah spread rapidly in those early days, and these followers of the risen Jesus called themselves simply "the Way."

But something strange and confusing was going on. As the early disciples fled persecution, they continued to share about Jesus wherever they went. Once again, what the political and religious authorities intended to bury only caused it to rise strong. The disciples were taking the good news to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth as Jesus commanded them to do, and these new converts to the Way included some surprising characters.

They came from all kinds of racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds and every level of society: rich, poor, enslaved, free, well-educated, and illiterate. Not only that, but they included religiously unclean minorities, women, sexual outsiders, soldiers of the hated and feared Roman army, and people who were, according to Jewish law, barred from worshipping the God of Israel in the temple.

The family table was getting larger, messier, and far less controllable, making some people uncomfortable, even angry—like Saul.

III.

Saul (also known as Paul) was a notorious headhunter of early Christians. Saul was going from town to town, arresting his fellow Jews who believed Jesus was the son of God. He was so zealous about persecuting Jesus followers that our text says he was breathing threats and murder. He held the coats of those who killed followers of Jesus. Saul was so sure he had all the right answers. He was ready to impose his ideas on others using coercion, force, and the law. It takes a lot for an individual like this to see the error of his ways and allow his opinions and ideas to be changed. In Saul's case, it took a blinding encounter with the Risen Christ AND a community of Jesus followers open to being changed, too.

Blind Saul has been sitting in a house in Damascus for three days – not eating, not drinking, his eyes covered in scales so thick he could not look anywhere other than within at his sin and his single-minded, hate-filled persecution of those who claimed Jesus as Lord. Over those three days, God transforms Saul from a weapon to a plowshare. Saul rises strong from hatred, forever changed by his encounter with the living Christ and the community of Christ's followers. Saul would later write in his letter to the Galatians: "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) That is one of the most radical statements of inclusivity in the entire Bible, and

it was written by the same man whose life and heart were once full of hatred for Jesus and those who followed him.

IV.

It's tempting to think we're not as bad as Saul. Sometimes, I think the only time I've persecuted anyone was when I'd inch my finger across to my sister's side of the back seat on family road trips. But, if we are honest, sometimes we think we have all the right answers, just like Saul. Sometimes, we're afraid of different ideas or judgmental of people who believe or live differently than us. Sometimes, we're quick to post words of hate on social media or eager to impose our ideas and religion on others using coercion, force, and the law, feeling as if our devotion to God justifies us and our methods.

And sometimes, we're like Ananias, who was blind to the possibility of a man like Saul changing, blind to God's powerful, redeeming work in others. We've heard the stories and doubt they could ever change or be used by God.

The idea that God could choose Saul, the persecutor, blew Ananias's mind, but God's announcement that Saul was chosen to preach Jesus to the Gentiles, the non-Jews, may have been even more mind-blowing. Both are radical, new ways God expanded the table, and Ananias was invited to be a part of both. Ananias says yes to the invitation. But I doubt it was that easy for him or the other followers of Jesus.

V.

I have often wondered about that walk from Ananias's house to the house on Straight Street. Straight Street was one of the longest roads through the city of Damascus. It may have been a long walk for Ananias—literally and figuratively. I imagine Ananias was scared and questioning with every step if he heard correctly. Did he hesitate at all? Did he kill time at the corner convenience store? Did he tell anyone, and did they try to talk him out of going? Did he give his wife and kids an extra-long, extra-tight hug just in case he didn't return?

While we don't know, we know this: Ananias's conversion leads to Saul's conversion. Ananias laid hands on the man who had been breathing threats and murder against him and anyone who called Jesus the Son of God, and he called him brother. This was perhaps the perfect one-word sermon. This act of forgiveness and reconciliation was so powerful that the scales on Saul's eye could not help but fall.

This is rising strong from hatred for both men. Saul persecuted the faith of Christians because they didn't believe as he did. Ananias had preconceived ideas about Saul and wanted nothing to do with him at first. But God gets to decide who the instruments are and the part they'll play. In both cases, God seeks to overcome judgment and hatred with connection for the sake of the good news. And God is still seeking the same for us.

VI.

Saul stayed in Damascus, was baptized, and was discipled by the believers before he went out to preach and teach that Jesus was the Son of God. I imagine there were really hard things they had to work through together in those days. For Saul, shame, regret, and the challenging of beliefs and assumptions. For Ananias and the others, forgiveness, trauma, and the challenging of beliefs and assumptions. We know some never accepted Saul. Some tried to kill him as he left Damascus to share the good news, but his new brothers and sisters in faith helped him escape.

That is why this story is so much more than Saul's conversion. It is also about the conversion of the church. Yes, Jesus dramatically interrupted Saul's life on the road, but he expected the faith community in Damascus to do the rest: heal Saul's sight, feed and nourish him, teach him, and support the work God had planned for him to preach the Gospel to the nations. Saul continues to encounter Jesus in the love and forgiveness extended to him by the faith community as they dare to welcome and bless their former enemy.

Theologian Will Willimon says that this story of Saul and Ananias is "about how God chose to move toward the Gentiles through the one whom the church feared and hated." God used Saul's annoyingly certain personality, rhetorical brilliance, and passion ...in other words, all the things he used to persecute the early church, God used those same parts of Saul to lift the name of the Lord and grow the church. Like Ananias, we must be ready to be surprised by who God might use, who God might lead to our community, or who God might send us to so that the story of God's love can continue to spread.

Who are you so certain is beyond hope that you are blind to the work God is doing to restore them? Blind to God's invitation to be a part of their second chance. Blind to the invitation to be part of a new thing God is doing. Who needs to hear you call them in faith, "Brother or Sister," even if your heart is still catching up?

VII.

Most of us may not have had a blinding vision on a dusty road, but in other ways, we have all had encounters like Saul and Ananias. Like some of you, I have had scales fall from my eyes as I learned to see new truths made known to us through the work of the Spirit or have listened with curiosity rather than judgment to people's stories. I have had the experience of learning how radically inclusive the Way of the Messiah is and how wide open the welcoming arms of God are. And I have experienced Christ's love and forgiveness from you and have been profoundly transformed by God and the people of God.

The Risen Christ meets us on the road through Wunsiedl, Germany; Damascus, or wherever we travel. Christ shines brightly, calling us into light and love. In one of his most famous sermons, *Loving Your Enemies*, Rev. Dr. Martin L King, Jr. preached: "Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Friends, our world sometimes feels devoid of stars. Darkness in and around us seems to have the power some days, but Easter's big, bold reversal tells us darkness has been defeated forever. We are called to people of light and love in darkness. We are called to turn weapons into plowshares and walks of hate into walks for good. We are called to believe God can raise the dead, whether the dead is someone like Saul or you or me. Hate is not a part of the kingdom Jesus announced. Instead, God sets out to reverse or transform enemies into family. God is still doing big, bold reversals. God gets to decide who the instruments are and the part they'll play for the glory of God and the good of the world. Amen.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ <https://www.saltproject.org/podcast-strange-new-world/2024/3/5/understanding-easter-part-four-the-great-reversal>

ⁱⁱ ibid