

Psalm 30 ¹I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me. ²O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. ³O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit. ⁴Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. ⁵For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. ⁶As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved." ⁷By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; and I was dismayed. ⁸To you, O Lord, I cried, and made supplication: ⁹"What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? ¹⁰Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!" ¹¹You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, ¹²so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

Acts 9:1-20 ¹Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and 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. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul 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. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. ¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹The 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, ¹²and 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." ¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." ¹⁵But 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; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷So 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." ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Psalm 30 and Acts 9:1-20

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"The House of Judas"

Rev. Amy Terhune

Judas. For most of us, the very name conjures up an assortment negative thoughts. Traitor. Conspirator. Corrupt. Greedy. Unscrupulous. Despicable. Rotten. Evil. In reality, he was probably a zealot—a radical, uncompromising believer; one wholly dedicated to re-establishing not merely the autonomy of Israel, but it's authority as a powerhouse as well. Many scholars across the centuries have theorized that Judas may have led the soldiers to Jesus on the fateful last night of his life hoping to spur the Lord into action—to finally begin the glorious battle that would oust Roman occupiers and place the Son of David on the throne at last. You can take that theory or not—I won't hold it against you either

way—because Jesus wasn't having any of it. He never had any intention of heading up a military coup. Whether Judas was trying to force Jesus' hand or had truly turned against him is, in the end, inconsequential. Judas is forever marked by history as the worst kind of bad guy. I mean, how many people do you know today named Judas? Nobody names their kid Judas. As for his fate, well, scripture offers a variety of explanations. Some say he took his own life. Others say God took it from him. Who knows? But I will admit this much: I feel a certain degree of sympathy for him, and here's why.

It seems to me that all that disciples betrayed and denied Jesus when push came to shove. Peter denied knowing Jesus three times in the span of a few hours. Is that really so much worse than what Judas did? And the rest of the disciples, save for John, fled into the shadows. They didn't stand up for their Lord. They went into hiding. Betrayal is betrayal, isn't it? My point is simply that Judas doesn't seem to have done anything all that much worse than any of the others, so I'm inclined to think that Judas' real problem wasn't the betrayal, but rather, the fact that in spite of being in ministry with Jesus for three years, he never took any of it in. Think about it. He watched Jesus redeem countless persons—Zaccheaus, a Samaritan woman, a woman caught in the very act of adultery, ten lepers, not to mention countless prostitutes, sinners, tax collectors, and others marginalized persons. Jesus' deliverance and healing in these situations was right in line with the work of God throughout the centuries. Moses was a murderer. King David was arguably even worse. Surely Judas would have known those stories. Surely, he was not beyond redemption. What if Judas had come to the disciples and the Risen Christ with a repentant heart to match his beleaguered conscience? Might not Jesus have reached out to him, too? Spoken a word of peace, and breathed upon him the Spirit. Just as Peter was restored, Thomas revived and Mary rejuvenated, might not Judas had found life in Christ's name if he had simply asked for it? Scripture doesn't answer that question, but I remain convinced in my heart of hearts that God's ultimate goal with all of us is conversion, redemption, and renewal. I don't believe anyone to be beyond the scope of God's transformative power. But we are human beings with our own free will. Repentance, submission, obedience—these are choices we all must make. To my mind, Judas' greatest weakness was not the betrayal, but rather, the refusal to believe in the ongoing redemptive work of God in human hearts and lives. He was not redeemed because he did not believe it possible. That's what I think, anyhow.

Now, you may be wondering what any of this has to do with the text for today from the 9th chapter of Acts. Well, as redemptions stories go, this is probably one of the most famous ones out there. The lesson begins by telling us Saul was breathing threats and murder, which is a curious phrase, and which I take to mean that venomous hate had become his existence—it consumed him, probably from the inside out. And his hate is directed at this little band of folks who follow Jesus. For whatever reason, these upstarts infuriate him. But on the road to Damascus, Saul encounters Christ, and is ultimately recast as the greatest evangelist for Christ our world has ever known. But what strikes me as interesting—a detail I never noticed before—is that after Saul's encounter on the road, he's taken to the House of Judas, where he spends three days blind, neither eating nor drinking, waiting for some kind of guidance about what's next. Now obviously, this is not the same Judas that betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. In fact, the New Testament mentions at least four different Judases, and only one of them was a traitor. The others did great things for God. But still, I find it interesting. I wonder if it isn't symbolic somehow. I wonder if Saul spends three days cocooned in darkness, fervent in prayer, trying to decide whether to humble himself and accept Christ's call on his life or to deny it and follow Judas in the abyss. If it had been the latter, we wouldn't be reading this story now. But thankfully, it wasn't. Saul had all the stuffing knocked out of him, and most of the pomposity as well. And in its place, the insect persecuting the church emerged with wings to fly the word of God all across the known world. Three days. Darkness. And then, resurrection. This is God's story, and it's told over and over again.

But in those three days he spent at the house of Judas, Paul no doubt had to confront some difficult questions within himself, and this is where the text becomes relevant to you and I in 2019.

For one thing, he undoubtedly heard Jesus' question to him on the road over and over in the silence of his mind. Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? If you really stop to think about it, that's an intimidating question. "Jesus speaks: Why do you persecute ME? It brings with it the realization that when we commit violence or any act of hatred toward another, we are persecuting Christ. "When you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me," said Jesus in Matthew 25. He was not speaking simply of acts of kindness but evil acts as well. [from "A Real Solution For Real Problems" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Jesus makes it abundantly clear: persecuting others is persecuting him. I followed a car a few weeks back that had two bumper stickers on the rear fender. One said, "I support the separation of church and hate". The other said, "It is impossible to love your enemies and bomb them simultaneously." Which is true, even if isn't comfortable.

Saul was most certainly a hate-filled man. Not content to hunt down Christians in Jerusalem, he takes his hatred on the road. To me, that signifies something beyond ordinary hatred. It's a crusade for him—a kind of hatred that consumes him—until Jesus claims him, that is. As Paul collapses to his knees, he is called to account for the hatred that blinds him to God's vision for the world. Something like scales fell from his eyes and he is given new eyes, new perspective, an opportunity to rise above hatred. Who doesn't want that for this world?

And yet, in order for the world to rise above hatred, we must begin with ourselves. Most of us probably aren't consumed by hatred the way that Paul seemed to be, but this doesn't mean we're in the clear. What kind of scales must fall from our eyes? Who has pushed your buttons, irritated you, rubbed you the wrong way, mocked things you hold sacred, stabbed you in the back, harmed you or someone you love? Forgiveness is hard—it takes work. But hatred is destructive, not so much of them as of us. Hatred is an affront to Jesus. And Paul gets a rather pointed lesson: Jesus takes hatred personally. If Paul is going to find rebirth, he's going to have to let go of the hate that eating him alive, which means his entire way of thinking, his entire reason for existing, is going to lurch in a new direction. And that's honestly pretty terrifying.

Thus, Saul is not only confronting his culpability in the persecution of Christ, but he's facing the potential of what that could mean for his future.

I've think I've told you all before about my reaction to the cinematic production of *Les Misérables*—the one with Hugh Jackman and Anne Hathaway. In that same production, Russell Crowe plays Javert, the captain of the guard, who believes himself to be a religious man, a righteous man, a good man, a godly man. He's sees his work as God-ordained, and he chases Jean Valjean, who escaped parole, for decades. Javert isn't really evil—he is misguided. Like Judas, his problem is that for all his years in church, he never took in the resurrection. He doesn't understand that people really can change. He doesn't understand grace until he receives it from Jean Valjean himself, who could have killed him in cold blood and saved himself all the burden of running time after time. And how does Javert handle such a gift of grace? How does he cope when he realizes there is more to serving God than law? He doesn't. He can't take it. He throws himself off a balustrade. But if you want to know where Victor Hugo got his inspiration for Javert, you really don't have to look any further than Saul sitting in the House of Judas in Damascus lost in desperate prayer. Javert and Saul at that point thought very much alike, I suspect: rules, law, right, wrong, punishment, justice. What was it about Jean Valjean that confounded Javert? What was it about grace that ripped his mind apart? What was he afraid of? Calling his whole life and philosophy into question, I suppose. He's not alone. It is terrifying to question a foundational principle in one's life! That kind of shift is a fearsome thing.

To his credit, Saul is able to handle it better. Almost certainly, God calls him because he recognizes in this man a hunger to do something for God. To be sure, it's misguided when the passage opens, but it's the kind of thing God can use. And it's the kind of thing Saul may be able to cling to as his vision is restored and his identity undergoes resurrection.

Even his changed name marks the internal shift that God affected in him. “Saul, the Hebrew name, means “asked for” or “prayed for.” You’ll remember that the people of ancient Israel asked God for a king, so God finally gave them one, and his name was Saul. King Saul was “asked for,” “prayed for” by the people of Israel. Undoubtedly this New Testament Saul was named by his parents after this first king of Israel since they were both of the tribe of Benjamin.

“There was just one thing wrong with old King Saul: he was a big disappointment. He was utterly egocentric and became desperate to maintain his position, finally being driven mad in his determination to destroy young David who, you’ll remember, was far more popular than he was. Maybe Saul’s name was part of the problem—“asked for,” “prayed for.” Such a name has to make a person feel important.

“The New Testament Saul—like his namesake, the former king of Israel—was a man equally egocentric and power hungry. After he learned to see with new eyes, Saul took on a new name: Paul, a Latin name meaning “small,” as in tiny, little, insignificant. It is intriguing to me that the Apostle chosen by God would identify himself in this way. The once “big man,” identifies himself after his conversion, as “small.” [3 ¶s adapted from “A New Kind of Authority” by King Duncan on www.Sermons.com.] But then again, it was God that he wanted to magnify. The name is Paul’s acceptance of the metamorphosis God has worked in his life, and it fits the paradigm of the lesson. Everything about him is a 180-degree turnabout! He went from hate to love, from law to grace, from superior to servant, from big to small.

Once Paul confronts his hate and opens himself to a new way of interacting with the world, he accepts the new call that places on his life. He acts. As a human being, Paul was a man of moral and inward courage. That is why he is an example to us into today’s text. By the grace of God, Paul was able to challenge fundamental beliefs about who he was and what his place in the world might be. He weathered the doubt, suspicion, wariness and apprehension of the Christians he had hitherto been persecuting. Today, we marvel at this man—the radical change within, the work of God on his life, the tormentor turned disciple.

But we also learn from him. How many of us have spent time in the house of Judas? I won’t ask you to raise your hands, just think about it for yourself. How many of us have questioned whether people can change, whether God can really redeem one filled with hate and bile? Have you ever secretly lamented to yourself that God couldn’t do anything with the likes of little ol’ you? You’re not alone in that.

Several years back, a poet named Joseph Bayly published some poems in *Christian Century Magazine*, and entitled the collection “Psalms of my Life”. I used one of these at Taizé on Wednesday, and I want to read it for you this morning, as well:

Lord of the compost heap
You take garbage
And turn it into soil
Good soil
For seeds to root and grow
With wildest increase
Flowers to bloom
With brilliant beauty.

Take all the garbage of my life
Lord of the compost heap
And turn it into soil
Good soil
And then plant seeds
To bring forth fruit and beauty
In profusion.

[by Joseph Bayly, “Psalms of my Life,” *Christianity Today*, 1/15/1988, pg 35; in *Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, and Quotes* by Robert J. Morgan (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000) pg. 311.]

I wish Judas could have sung that psalm for his life. I wish Javert could have sung it. But even more, I would wish that each and every one of us could find a way to sing it, to believe it, and to act on it. May the Lord make it so. Amen.