

**“Darkness Gives Way to Light”**  
**Sermon by Rev. Brian Foreman, Guest Speaker**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
**November 22, 2015**

It is my pleasure to be here, and allow me to begin by thanking you all for the invitation and to your pastor and the Dawnings team for their invitation and allowing me to be a part of this process with them. I will share a little bit more about what Dawnings is as we move on, but for now let me bring greetings to you from the Center of Congregational Health, where I do some consulting and coaching, also from Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, where the Dawnings Initiative originally began. I am grateful for your invitation to be here today.

I want to share a little bit about the passage that was read earlier and continue reading with Verse 10-19, mostly because that passage in Acts, Chapter 9, is a foundational piece for us as we think about what it means to see a new dawn. I hope you will join me in picking up the reading.

If you will recall, at the end of Verse 9, Saul was still blind, and he wasn't eating or drinking while he was with the disciples in Damascus. In Verse 10 it says there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision: "Ananias", who answered "Here I am, Lord". The Lord said to Ananias "Get up and go to a street called Straight, and at the house of Judas, look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying." 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, but Ananias answered "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem and here he has authority from the chief priest to bind all who invoke Your name", but the Lord said "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles, kings and the people of Israel. I, myself, will show him how much he might suffer for the sake of my name", so 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". Immediately, something like scales fell from his eyes and his sight was restored. He got up and got baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus and immediately began to proclaim Jesus, saying "He is the Son of God".

For a few moments after the collision, he was left sightless. It seemed like hours passed before he regained his vision but it was, in reality, just a few minutes. It was long enough for his teammates, trainers and coaches to arrive at his side, and in those brief moments he thought about all of the things he would never see again—his room, his mom's face, movies, pretty girls, the fall leaf colors, the ocean. Just as quickly as the hit that jarred his sight away, his sight was returned to him. As he walked off of the football field with his helmet in his hand, knowing that this is the place where the helmet would never return to his head again, he paid particular attention to the color of the grass at his feet. He made sure to find his parents in the stands, and he looked at his teammates around him. In that moment, he knew his sight was something he had taken for granted and vowed to never do so again. Our sight, our vision! It is something that we may take for granted. I do.

A few years ago I went to see the optometrist. I was having regular headaches. My wife convinced me that I needed to go have my eyes checked. Now, let me be clear. I can read signs from a great distance. There was nothing wrong with my eyesight, but because she told me to go, I was smart enough to listen. They did the exam. They sprayed the air in my eyes. They made me see the dots and everything else. I sat down in the doctor's chair. He was going over the results. He projected some other symbols up on a screen and said "Read these for me" which I beautifully did and did really well, I might add. Then he handed me a card and asked me to read it. After a few minutes I got it where I needed it to be, where I could see it, and I started reading. A small set of lenses went in front of my eyes that the doctor placed before me. That card was so much clearer. Huh! How about that! Maybe

I can't see as well as I think I can. I had no idea how blurry my vision had become, and because I refused to even pay attention to that, it was something that was causing me to hurt.

Saul ran into a moment when he lost his vision. Listen to the description of Saul before he left for Damascus. Saul was still breathing threats of murder against the disciples. This wasn't a happy guy just strolling along the way. He was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples. He had petitioned the high priest to let him find the very people who claimed to be followers of Jesus and to bring them back to Jerusalem but not just to bring them back, but to imprison them. They said yes, so off he went, on his way, in his holy, indignant rage against this new group of believers. As he goes, a flash of light and a voice from the heavens said "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" If you remember, in the scripture everyone else heard it too, but it was Saul who was lying on the ground struck blind. The voice continued "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting". I think the scripture leaves a part out here. I think the next thing Jesus said was "and now that I have your attention". I dare say that Jesus had everyone in the group's attention at that moment. They gathered this powerful, charismatic and angry man up from the ground and led him by the hand to Damascus. Jesus not only got Saul's attention. He humbled Saul.

We lead the injured, we lead the weak, we lead the frail, we lead the sick by the hand. Suddenly Saul was all of those things—physically and spiritually. How are we like Saul? I guess we say we are not like Saul in the whole persecuting Jesus thing although in our world there are plenty of Christians who may be guilty of the sin of omission to protect the injured, the weak, the frail and the sick. We might say we are like Saul in that Jesus has to go to pretty significant extremes to get our attention. I wonder if God ever wants to respond to our infrequent prayer requests with "Oh, I see you think you need Me now"?

Of the more and more studies about the religious and spiritual ideas of American Christians, a high number of Christians who view God and prayer as something to be done in times of trial is staggering. I wonder in those moments if the prayers, while they may be heartfelt or heart wrenching, are like a kid sitting on Santa's lap? We tell Santa what we want in a very one-sided conversation. Have you ever noticed at the mall when Santa appears and the children go sit on his lap, after they have listed everything that want, they don't stop, get quiet and listen to see what Santa has to say in response.

We even ask God for stuff sometimes like rubbing a genie in a lamp. We don't stop and listen for God to respond.

Even Aladdin in the Disney movie realized that the Disney genie had something of value to say in response.

Maybe we are like Saul in that we are spiritually sick, as the big sea church. I wonder if it is because American Christians have lost the ability to be still and know that God is God.

The story doesn't end with Saul sitting blind, does it? The Lord headed off to have another conversation—this time with a disciple named Ananias, who clearly was listening. Just hearing the Lord call his name "Ananias", he knew who it was. He simply said "Here I am, Lord".

Put yourself in Ananias' shoes. You probably know Saul is coming to Damascus, and you know the bad intentions he has before he ever arrives, and Jesus is now telling you to go to this person. Not only does He want Ananias to go to Saul, but He has already shown Saul that Ananias is coming. I can only think that if I am Ananias I am probably sitting there thinking "Hey, thanks Jesus. You know what Saul was coming to do, right? It's bad enough that he knows my name, but You went and showed him what I look like. I mean...come on Jesus". He went. He went because Jesus told him to go. He tells Ananias that He intends for Saul to see how much he has to suffer in order to serve.

So, Ananias goes to this one who has the power to imprison him. He goes with the promise that Jesus has said “I intend to make Saul my instrument”. Can you imagine what he’s thinking? You’ve struck him blind, Lord. You’ve shown him I am coming to heal him. You are planning to make him an instrument to share with the world, and You plan on doing this while showing him how much he has to suffer? Ananias has every reason in the world to make excuses not to do what Jesus was instructing him to do--It sounds dangerous, Lord. Jesus, this sounds a little bit crazy. There is no way this is going to work, Lord. In the face of all those excuses, it says in Verse 17 that Ananias went and entered the house, and he laid his hands on Saul, and he healed him.

We think of courage all too often as making the tough call or solving the problems by sheer will. The real courage, the real leadership began with following the will of the Lord, no excuses, no running away, just faithfulness, listening and following. Saul, then had a new vision—one that came not from the scales that fell from his eyes, not from the food and drink that restored his sight and strength, but for several days he stayed with the disciples in Damascus, where he learned, where he was with other believers, where he prayed, where he worshipped, and that new vision wasn’t to start a new church, although Saul proved to be very effective at the whole church growth strategy, but he wasn’t there to start a new program. His vision was simply to proclaim Jesus as Lord, to be the presence of Christ in the world, and to still struggle, even as he did then. We read in his letters where he talked about having a thorn that remained in his flesh. We know that he had to write to churches over the conflicts they were having over what to eat, how to worship, whom to serve, but in the midst of that, Saul as Paul kept proclaiming Jesus as Lord.

Do we have the sickness of an angry Saul on the road to Damascus? Does Jesus have to do drastic things to get our attention? When He does, are we listening? Do we respond like Ananias, knowing that the voice speaking to us is the Lord? Do we say yes even though this vision is crazy, unachievable and absurd, but we say yes simply because God asked us to do it? Do we even give God space to tell us the things, or are we too busy displaying our own intelligence and solutions? Do we respond like Saul and spend time in fellowship with disciples with the community of faith? Do we make space to communicate with God? Do we remember how important it is simply to proclaim Jesus?

Scott Boulevard Baptist Church is in Decatur, Georgia. Thirty or forty years ago everything was going great for Scott Boulevard, in a growing part of town with new homes, young families, in a beautiful location with a healthy budget, people coming in and out of the doors every time the church was open. They rested on those nostalgic memories of the good years until they looked around one day and said “Where are the young people. Our building has fallen in disrepair, and our budget is in bad shape”. Scott Boulevard looked around and realized they had enough money to hold on for a few years, but the handwriting was on the walls.

As a last gas, they began a spiritual listening process of just praying and listening. They had one simple prayer: “God, what would you have us to be and to do?” The more they stopped trying to answer that prayer with church growth strategies and church reinvention models, they made more space to listen in prayer. As they stopped wringing their hands and blaming the culture, they made space to listen in their prayers. It turns out that their vision had gotten pretty blurry over the years, even to the point that it was hurting them. After several weeks of praying this prayer and seeking God’s vision for their church, they realized God was leading them through some pretty dramatic changes. They sold their building. They decided to care for the elderly in their community. Today they worship in the chapel in a much larger church where they converted a couple of Sunday School rooms into their church office, but they aren’t just caring for the aging from their congregation. They are doing it for the community. They are doing it wherever they are needed, and they are not worried about church growth, as a result. They are simply proclaiming Jesus.

A few weeks ago I sat with the members of a new listening team that had formed. They are embarking on a new dawnings cycle for their church. They are adding church members. They are saying goodbye to a lot of saints as well. It’s a remarkable ministry that they exist to do. It is what God called

them to do. Now they sense that God is ready for them to begin the next chapter of what their ministry indicator will be, and they are excited about doing it. They aren't expected a long-term vision from God. They just want to know what God's vision is for right now. That is what they are going to live into.

So, I ask, are we listening or are we hoping? Are we trusting that God has a vision, not just for Peace Church but for each of us in this building? The world is changing fast and has been for some time, frankly. For many of us, we are waking up now, and it scares us. Now that Jesus has your attention, what shall we do?

Let us pray:

God for the gift of who we are, what You would have us to be, the blessings all around us, we give You thanks. God, we ask for a new vision which comes from You where we listen and where we hear what You have for us to be and to do. Despite all of the things that may cause us to be timid or to be fearful in the world around us, help us to hang on to Your words when You say "I am here". Help us to remember to be still and know that You are God and that, because You are God, You are still in control. God, open our hearts and our eyes to where we can be Your presence in this community and in the lives of each person we touch day and night. We ask these things in Your Son's most precious name. Amen.