

May 5, 2019

Acts 9: 1-20

Prayer: Dear Lord, Go with us into the study of your word as we see how Paul reacted to the Easter message. Teach us to live as Easter people. We pray in the name of the one who arose on Easter, Amen.

The Bubble Boy

I am sure you all think I was a *Seinfeld* fan because I mention the show so often. But I really wasn't.

It was just that Vince and Taylor had it on 24 hours a day, and I picked up a lot.

One of the shows that wormed its way into a family joke was the one about the Bubble Boy. Jerry was going to meet with a fan confined to a plastic bubble because of his autoimmune disease. But George and his fiancée Susan got there first.

George ended up playing Trivial Pursuit with Donald, who was actually no boy at all but a very abusive adult. George's Trivial Pursuit card posed the history question, "Who invaded Spain in the 8th century?" The Bubble Boy answered, correctly, *The Moors*.

But the Trivial Pursuit card had a misprint, and George answered, "Oh, no, I'm so sorry, it's the Moops."

Well, he and the Bubble Boy got into a heated argument until Donald reached out his suited, accordion-like arms and tried to strangle George. When Susan tried to release his grip, she punctured the protective suit, and the Bubble Boy had to be rushed to the hospital.

The Moore family remembers this episode because some friends with whom *we* play Trivial Pursuit started calling us the Moops. To this day, their adult children ask, *Are the Moops coming for Christmas dinner? Are we going to the beach with the Moops this year?*

No matter how many times we hear it, we find it hilarious.

Seinfeld was famous for taking uncomfortable topics and making us laugh. For, of course, the real instance of people having to live in a sterile environment behind a plastic shield is horrible.

Some babies, mostly males, are born with severe combined immunodeficiency syndrome. Their blood marrow does not make the necessary cells for their immune system to fight infection. Sometimes a blood marrow transplant can work. But often, there are no suitable donors, and the baby dies before he's two years old.

The nickname "bubble boy" came from a famous case in the 1970s – a Texas boy who lived for 12 years in a protective plastic bubble to isolate him from germs.

Which brings me to a story that ran last week in *The Greenville News*.

Doctors have pioneered a way to use gene therapy on these immune-compromised babies. So far, the therapy has succeeded in jumpstarting the immune systems of 10 babies, though researchers will need more time to see if the repairs are permanent.

But the real bombshell is the method of delivering the lacking gene. It's HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Somehow, scientists altered the HIV virus so it wouldn't cause AIDS but could deliver the gene the children lacked.

How remarkable! If you were alive during the 1980s, you remember what a terrifying thing HIV was. It was a death sentence for millions of people. Nearly 700,000 ultimately died in the United States, and worldwide the toll was 39 million.

There was no cure, and people were frightened.

Some doctors wouldn't treat AIDS patients. Those who did lost patients fearful of contracting the virus in their offices.

It was a scary time, and in scary times, people behave irrationally. Many HIV and AIDS sufferers underwent the double whammy of being cast out of their families, fired from their jobs, socially ostracized.

Eventually, doctors found not a cure but at least medications that turned AIDS into a chronic disease rather than a death sentence.

But still, to deliberately inject a baby with the HIV virus seems almost unbelievable.

Apparently, doctors first tried it 20 years ago and some patients developed the unintended consequence of leukemia. Researchers went back to the drawing board to lower those risks.

And now six months to two years after this experimental gene therapy treatment on 10 babies, all are making new cells to fight infections. So far with no side effects.

Doctors took one of the most horrific players in modern medicine and turned it into a lifesaver. Imagine that.

It puts me in mind of one of our Easter readings, which is the conversion or call of Saul on the road to Damascus. This passage comes from the book of Acts. As we talked about on Easter morning, Luke didn't start to explain the resurrection until Easter evening – when two men met the resurrected Jesus on the walk to Emmaus.

Luke then follows up with Part II of his gospel, which is the book of Acts. He writes about lives in which the resurrection is bursting out all over.

One of his main characters is Saul who became Paul. Saul was a Pharisee, a Jew, but not one who sat around quietly reflecting on the Torah. He was convinced that this new Christianity in the wind was a threat to Judaism.

He hadn't known Jesus personally, but he was hearing more than he wanted to from those dang disciples. And he wanted to put an end to their rabbleroising.

We first meet Saul in chapter 7 of Acts, at the stoning of Stephen.

Stephen was one of the seven men chosen to serve as day-to-day servant-ministers while the 12 disciples were busy with prayer and preaching.

Luke described Stephen as “**full of faith and the Holy Spirit,**” (Acts 6: 5) and “**full of grace and power.**” (Acts 6: 8) But Stephen was arrested and accused of undermining

Judaism. And the entire chapter 7 of Acts is his speech before the religious council, a speech that spelled out how people had always rejected the Holy Spirit and how they had continued to reject the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ.

The people became so enraged at Stephen's speech that they dragged him out of the city and stoned him. **“And the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.”** (Acts 7: 58)

They did that because Saul approved of the killing. They did that because Saul breathed **“threats and murder”** against the disciples.

He sought out believers in the synagogues so that he might bring them to trial just like Stephen. That's why he was going to Damascus, to arrest some more people.

And then, with absolutely no warning, he met the resurrected Christ. One of the most horrific players in the New Testament is about to become a lifesaver. Imagine that.

READ Acts 9: 1-20.

⁹Meanwhile 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.

¹⁰ Now 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.'

God took one of the most horrific players in ancient Palestine and turned him into a lifesaver. Imagine that.

This is the first time Luke tells this story. But he will eventually tell it three times in the book of Acts. And we know that when a writer repeats a story three times, something is up.

Hey! Pay attention to this! This is important!

The turning of Saul into the evangelist Paul is one of the great turnaround stories in all of literature. This is what God does.

There are Sauls in this congregation today, not necessarily persecuting Christians but living in dangerous and wrongheaded ways. Ways that are well off God's chosen path.

When Sauls become Pauls, it is dramatic. Sauls who become Pauls are not unlike the prodigal son of Luke's gospel. It is always wonderful to see a life turned around and refocused, a dramatic repentance on display.

But just like that story included the elder brother, this story includes ... Ananias.

Ananias was already a Christian disciple, and he'd heard about this lunatic Saul. He knew him to be a dangerous man.

And yet the Lord was telling Ananias to meet with him. Understandably, Ananias balked.

'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.'

Could such an evil man possibly be used for good? Ananias didn't see how.

And yet, isn't that the business God is in? To change us from the inside out, to allow us to repent and become new creatures?

There are Ananiases in this congregation today. Believers who are on the right path but perhaps fearful of what God asks of us. Perhaps preferring to keep our heads down so we don't see all the needs, all the hurts, all the potential to get involved.

But look what happened to Ananias. When God reiterated that Saul would be his instrument to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, he gulped and went to meet the man he feared. He addressed him as *Brother*, and laid healing hands on him.

And the man we now know as Paul **“immediately ... began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’ ”**

Like the fearsome HIV virus rushing gene reparation to mortally sick babies, the fearsome Saul rushed the gospel of Jesus Christ into the wide world of the Gentiles.

God is in the business of taking what is and making it what it could be.

Whether we are a Saul who needs a flashing light, a loud voice and a shot of blindness, or an Ananias who needs a quiet word, God can change our potential.

God can use us for holy work.

Amen.