

**GOD HAD OTHER PLANS; ACTS 9:1-20; EASTER III/APRIL 10, 2016;
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I recently heard one of my colleagues on the Board of Auburn Theological Seminary, Kurt Roeloff, share his 'Road to Damascus' story at a dinner he was hosting in his home for board members. Kurt is a fifty something retired senior executive from Deutschbank who moved back to New York a few years ago to start a new chapter.

At that time, he and his family were living on the Upper East Side and he was in the habit of driving home each day right past Brick Presbyterian Church at Park Avenue and 90th Street.

Kurt says that he often noticed the handsome Greek Revival redbrick building but didn't think much about it. You see, Kurt was not a "religious" person, hadn't been raised in the church, and wasn't, he says, looking for a church.

Then one day, as was his habit, he turned the corner at Park and 90 and was passing by the familiar landmark when he 'heard a voice.' By the way, Kurt was of sound body and mind and not in the habit of hearing voices. In fact, had never before 'heard a voice' – at least, not like he did on this day. When he tells the story, still surprised by it, he makes clear the voice he heard was not his own, as if he was 'thinking-to-himself,' but a voice from outside his thoughts or consciousness or memory.

The voice said, "Kurt, you can go in there (meaning Brick Presbyterian) they are friendly people." He was startled and curious, he says, and the message was so clear – a kind of summons – that he had and his wife had no choice but to attend worship at Brick Presbyterian the following Sunday.

Long story short, Kurt is today an elder at Brick, a board member at Auburn, and the chairperson of Auburn's Profits for Peace. Kurt's role with the bank was head of global real estate acquisition and investment; his role with Profits for Peace is to assemble teams of Christian, Jewish and Muslim venture capitalists to find opportunities for multi-faith investment in regions troubled by religious tension and violence, like the Palestinian territories.

It didn't take long for Kurt's pastor at Brick, serving as a kind of Ananias, as we heard in the story from Acts today, to open Kurt's eyes to his new life in the Christian community.

Michael Lindvahl, Sr. Pastor at Brick, not only oriented Kurt and his wife to a Christian congregation and Christian life and values, he steered Kurt to Auburn where the banker with no religion, today leads one of the most effective non-state sponsored efforts for peace in troubled parts of the world.

When Kurt led devotions at one of his first board meetings I could tell that his faith was fresh and passionate; he spoke with discernable gratitude, vigor and awareness of God's presence in his life and humility. His prayer was rare for most of the board or committee meetings I attend in that it was unscripted, from the heart, and clearly acknowledged that what we were about to do was God's work.

I'll bet if we polled the room today we'd find more than a few 'Road to Damascus' stories; and though we tend to think of Paul's trip on the road to Damascus as rare and remarkable, I'm not so sure that it was. We don't get around in chariots any more and maybe it isn't always blinding light but I have talked with some of you and others over the years who have told me about some event, some circumstance that turned them in new and unexpected directions.

Kurt Roeloff and the Apostle Paul belong to different centuries and cultures; Paul was a rigid, judgmental believer who lived to persecute rivals; Kurt was an agnostic at best; but they both have this in common: they were re-directed by some presence independent and outside of themselves to use their passion and gifts for the church. Put simply – God gave them work to do.

This story is not as much about conversion – you see Paul was already a faithful, practicing Jew – as it is about vocation – finding what it is we are supposed to do, need to do; discovering the place where our deep joy meets the world's deep need, as Fred Buechner says.

But the problem is we do have scales on our eyes and cotton balls in our ears. We live in a society that tells us that everything we want to become or aspire to do derives from our own decision-making and discernment: that it's all up to us.

But the Bible and the experience of God's people is that the other player, the other factor in our life stories, is God.

And that's why Paul's story and Kurt's story are Easter stories – they are examples of God's presence in our lives as a power greater than we, transcending the allurements of the world, greater than life's dead ends and defeats; a power that directs us to vocation – not necessarily what we do for a living – but the calling and work to which we devote our passion and gifts to serve a higher purpose.

To say that Paul was intense is an understatement. Think Ted Cruz; think Henry VIII's henchman Thomas Cromwell; or Darwin's bulldog Thomas Huxley. Paul was a Pharisee, a purist, someone we'd consider a fundamentalist, for whom life was either black or white; ideological, dogmatic. Paul's business was to persecute Jews who were following the teachings of an uncertified rabbi.

Paul thought what he was doing was protecting the faith of Israel from the heretical ideas of outsiders – and yet, he was working against the purposes of God and the universe, not to mention his own best self. At some level perhaps he knew he was misguided; reconciling violent acts against innocent people under any circumstances or ideology requires self-deception.

But Paul wasn't going to be stopped with a stern lecture to dial it back. God comes to Paul in a form and language with which he was familiar; God gets Paul's attention with blinding light that knocks Paul off his horse and says: "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?" / "Who are you Lord?" / "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Get up, enter the city and you will be told what you are to do." You see, nuanced language rarely works with dictators and terrorists. God simply out-Paul's Paul. He blinds him, then orders him exactly what to do.

The rest is a fascinating and compelling history: after his rehabilitation Paul preaches Good News to religious communities in Damascus; he confounds followers of Jesus who knew and feared him as their persecutor.

Paul's passion for purity and practice of faith is redirected; he hangs out at places where he debates followers of other philosophies and faiths. The religious community does not take kindly to what they perceive as his undermining proselytizing; a dead or alive bounty is put on Paul's head – but with the help of his new Christian friends, Paul escapes to Tarsus until things cool down – after which he travels the far reaches of the known world to start churches. Were it not for Paul we would not be here today.

Two points can be made from Kurt's and Paul's experiences of being called: first, the voice that speaks is the risen Christ confronting, challenging a person who is headed purely in their own direction which is to say not the right or best direction; and second, the message is they both ultimately get is: "I have work for you to do."

I've told some of you my own story; it began as a teenager thinking my faith was more about me and evolved into an awareness that following Jesus is really about others. By the time I got to Divinity School I was trying to figure out whether to pursue a career in legal aid, teaching kids who dropped out, or in a distant third place and more out of obligation, parish ministry.

It was a big relief when I realized the law and teaching were not where I was being called; those were my own ideas; back then legal aid attorneys were knights in shining armor, and teaching tough kids was a very noble thing to do (still is!); so my path to the ministry involved overcoming my resistance to the church; and while there was no blinding light, there were three voices.

The first voice was a leader in the church I grew up in in Pittsburgh; he said to me out of the blue one day, when I was eight years old, that he had a vision the night before and that I was going to be a minister—when I shared the comment with my mother she said, "Oh yes, that nice Mr. Stradley he's very committed to his faith, you can be whatever you want to be"; the second voice was my high school pastor who said, almost in a whisper, that he strongly urged me to go to one year of seminary after college. Both of these voices were completely unexpected and out of context. Nothing I said or did merited their advice; I was a rowdy kid who played hooky from Sunday School and a pretentious jock in high school.

I purposely went to Yale Divinity School because very few of its graduates went into parish ministry; I wanted an open atmosphere to explore my options, to study theology and history; to get hands on experience in fields outside of the church.

My first field work assignment was in a legal aid office in New Haven; then in year two I was a teacher's aid in a school for emotionally troubled children.

Finally, when I decided to take an intern year in the church, since I had not yet fully explored that possibility, the director of field education assigned me to a pastor he considered the best in the business.

That pastor, Trevor Hauskee, was my Ananias. He helped me see pastoral ministry as a vocation filled with opportunities to do what I wanted to do but couldn't in most other professions – get behind the front door of people's homes where people were living. That's where the problems, people who I saw in the legal aid office, originated – they were coming to get a legal bandaid, but no real remedies; and home is where kids who didn't fit into traditional classrooms were struggling with parents, siblings and neighbors.

The ministry gives you access to people behind the front door of their homes Trevor said, as well as credibility in the community – so we started an outreach program to the dozens of people living in half way houses in that small town who'd just been released from a large state psychiatric institution when the first psychotropic drugs made residential programs for many people unnecessary, yet did not equip them to live independently either.

Trevor grew up with missionary parents in China, he marched and was arrested with Dr. King, he and his wife Dorothy were the first feminists I met in any church. Not long into that intern year I was hooked, I knew what I was called to do.

A former chaplain of Duke University tells about counseling students consumed with the question, "What should I do with my life?" He tells them to be open to voices other than their own, to sense some claim upon their life other than the claim they personally devise. You could say the same thing to people at any stage of life – because we search throughout our lives for a way to use our passions and gifts – sometimes it's 9 to 5 work we do; sometimes it's a new career, sometimes it's our volunteer service – the key is that it's where God needs us, where we belong.

Martin Luther King told the Black church in America it existed not for itself but to save the nation from racism. The church's role is not to save itself but to serve the mission and purposes of God.

The constitution of the Presbyterian Church says something quite similar – we are called not to preserve the institution but even to risk losing the institution, to serve God and others; if we live by that principle it frees us up to do daring things, to make a difference.

Here's the good news today: Paul's story is not just Kurt Roeloff's story or Tom Yorty's story, it is your story too.

When we open ourselves to embracing God's purpose for our lives we open ourselves to being stopped in our tracks by a voice or a blinding light or a mentor who helps us see needs more vast, possibilities more grand, work more satisfying than we ever imagined in our little scripted plans for ourselves.

Easter is a time to listen and be open to people with unexpected words. They come to remove the scales from our eyes. Resurrection, this year, may be discovering that God has other plans your life. Amen.