OUT OF NOWHERE

Acts 9:1-22

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Guilford Park Presbyterian Church

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One of my favorite jazz standard songs is “Out of Nowhere,” especially as sung by the great Ella Fitzgerald. I used to sing it myself back in my night club playing days. Perhaps you know it: “You came to me from out of nowhere; You took by heart and found it free; Wonderful dreams, wonderful schemes from nowhere; Made every hour sweet as a flower for me. If you should go back to your nowhere; Leaving me with a memory; I’ll always wait for your return out of nowhere; Hoping you’ll bring your love to me.”

When I read our NT text for today, which is from the lectionary, I think of that song and the words to that song; and I imagine Paul “singing” words like those after his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. In my imagination, Paul is not singing, of course, to another human being, but to a real presence that is the risen Christ, who seemingly appears to Paul “out of nowhere.” And that dramatic, mystical appearance of the risen Christ changes his life. Paul awakens to the real presence of God as the risen Christ – such awakening initiated and powered by the Spirit of God – the Holy Spirit – that lives in him.

Such awakening in Paul – and such awakening in you and in me – is the subject of this sermon. Sometimes our awakening occurs in the most unlikely of places, in the most unlikely of situations. But any such awakening can change our life.

Paul’s situation is this: Saul, his Jewish name – and whose name later in Acts (Acts 13:9) is Paul – is certainly not looking for Jesus – quite the opposite. He is in the process of hunting down Christians in order to persecute them. Saul is an orthodox Jew, a Pharisee with status in the Judean governmental board called the Sanhedrin, which sends Saul out to put down a new sect of Judaism called “The Way” – not yet named Christianity. Saul, according to our text, is “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” And, as he says in his letter to the Galatians: “I tried to destroy it. And I advanced beyond my contemporaries in my own nation. I was exceedingly more zealous for the traditions of my fathers than anybody else.”

But…”out of nowhere” God turns Saul/Paul’s situation upside down. Paul describes his experience himself in his letter to the Galatians: “For I want you to know,” writes Paul, “that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

This revelation of Jesus Christ is what Luke, the author of the book of Acts, describes in detail in our text for today from Acts. This so-called “Damascus-Road experience” occurs as Paul is going about his normal business of the day. This is a highly personal experience, involving a “light from heaven,” a “voice from heaven,” as it were, blindness, and recovery of sight, as well as an infusion of the Holy Spirit – such that Paul is a new man, a new creation – and from this time on he becomes the chief apologist for Christianity, proclaiming in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah.

Paul once was blind – but now he sees – because God awakens him to see. And it’s the same for you and for me – whenever and wherever we awaken to the real presence of the risen Christ that lives with and within each one of us.

Christianity, you see, is a revealed religion. It’s a religion brought about by the decision of God to reveal God to us in the person of Jesus the Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit living in us. We do not find Jesus. Jesus finds us. “You did not choose me, but I chose you,” says Jesus in the gospel of John. Any sense that we might have of the real presence of the risen Christ is because the risen Christ, as the Holy Spirit, has enlivened that sense within our hearts and souls and minds. If you have faith, it’s because God has given you the gift of having faith – just as God did for Paul. It’s a fundamental tenet of our Presbyterian theology – known as Reformed theology – that God chooses us before we can choose God. God loves us before we love God. There is nothing we do or say to earn this love.

Our belief system is founded upon the truth that God is absolutely sovereign. In the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we affirm “the majesty, holiness, and providence of God, who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love.” And God has chosen to reveal God to us in the person of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ to whom we awaken and do our best to follow in our daily lives. Of course, how God deals with other people – other religions – in the world is not up to us to determine, or to judge.

So, Christianity is a revealed religion. Jesus is on the loose! He’s looking for you and for me. And he may just appear to you or to me – when we least expect it – “out of nowhere.” That appearance may occur mystically – during a spiritual retreat, perhaps – or alone on a mountaintop – or in the midst of prayer or meditation – or in the context of some particularly difficult time in life. It also may occur smack in the middle of everyday, ordinary life – such as what happens with the disciples of Jesus in that post-resurrection story at the end of the gospel of John – which is in the lectionary for today – as Jesus appears to the disciples in the middle of their fishing. David preached on that passage several weeks ago.

The idea of Jesus appearing “out of nowhere” in the middle of everyday life events, like fishing, reminds me of a particular experience I had several years ago during one of my visits to Vermont – Newport, Vermont, my hometown. It involved fishing.

One of my closest friends is a fisherman. We went to school together, played sports together – and we did a lot of other things together, some of which I won’t mention. He was the best man when Sally and I got married back in 1966. But then I never heard from him again until that visit to Vermont several years ago.

I hardly recognized him. You see, my friend is what I consider to be a casualty of the Vietnam War. His wounds included alcoholism, drug use, broken relationships, post traumatic stress disorder, and even some time in prison. When I saw him that day he was on probation – and he spent his time fishing. That was how he coped. And he had been sober for one year and eight months.

He was on the mend, but, as his counselor had been telling him for months, one thing had still been missing in his recovery – a spiritual dimension to his life. In fact, the first night we sat down to talk, as he was fishing, and after finding out what I did for a living, he said he expected me to tell him the same thing.

But I didn’t have to tell him. I believe God did. I don’t remember seeing any great light, or hearing any voices, but I believe he did in a way I couldn’t explain. I believe God awakened him to the Spirit living in him. Our encounter stirred deep emotions and re-ignited our long and strong friendship.

My wounded friend wasn’t looking for Jesus that night we got together on the banks of the Clyde River in Newport, Vermont. But Jesus sure found him – at least, that’s how I would interpret it, as the Spirit of God living in him woke him up and he seemed to change. And he seemed to at least entertain the idea that there was, indeed, a spiritual dimension to his life. My friend is still recovering. I think he is more and more aware of the real presence of God with him and within him. And I am pretty sure that Jesus still appears to him while he is fishing – “out of nowhere.”

So, I pray this day that you might awaken – or re-awaken – to the real presence of the risen Christ, living in you. The Spirit may bring it about in the most unlikely of places, the most unlikely of situations – out of nowhere. But such awakening, to be sure, will change your life.

Let us pray: Risen Christ: Appear to us today as the power and presence of the Spirit of God. Then send us into the world to be your light for all people. In the sovereignty and strength of your unconditional love, we pray. AMEN.