

## The Personal Touch

Acts 9:1-9

The Third Sunday of Easter, April 18, 2010

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

Wouldn't a miracle be cool? Wouldn't it be great to see a miracle? We read all of these things that happened in the Bible and they seem so great. Wouldn't that be great? Wouldn't it be great to see the bang and the flash of the Almighty?

Think about Noah's flood. Think how awesome that must have been. Think what it must have been like to have seen those things.

Consider the miracles that Moses performed. Think of seeing the Nile change into blood. Oh wow to have seen that happen! Think of darkness coming over the land of Egypt for three days and then it is light again. Think of the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. What I wouldn't give to have seen those pillars. They travel around with the people. God is in them. Think of what the Mountain of Sinai must have been like! Fire is on the top of the mountain. The glory of the Lord has come down. There is smoke and a deep darkness and the sound of the trumpet.

Consider the miracles of the prophets. They did some pretty awesome things. Elijah calls down fire from heaven. That must have been tremendous. He calls down fire from heaven and proves to all of the false prophets that the Lord is God. Elisha calls down fire to burn up the soldiers who come to arrest him. What amazing power! What amazing feats! Would that we could have seen those miracles! Would that some of those miracles would happen today!

Think of the evangelism program of a congregation who has a member who can call down fire out of heaven! Just think about that for a second. What if one of you could call down fire out of heaven in the name of Jesus? Think of all of the people who would come and see this being done. Think of all of the attention that our congregation would receive. Think of all of the positive things that people would say about us. Think of all of the interviews this person would have on the major networks and the cable networks and the radio and the internet. Think of all of the Tweeting that would go on if one of our members could call down fire out of heaven. What a great miracle that would be!

If one of us could call down fire out of heaven we would have some respect! People would respect us. People would fear us. People would fear us the way that they feared Moses. They would fear us the way that they feared the prophets, Elijah and Elisha. If one of us could call down fire out of heaven we could tell the President what we thought of his policies. If one of us could call down fire out of heaven, we could tell our politicians to straighten up and they would have to listen to us. We could tell those sinners to repent and they would listen to us.

The pews would be full. We would have to build a bigger church. We would have to have multiple services. We would have to have fire calling down services every once in a while just to make sure that everyone stayed in line. But think of the crowds! Isn't that how Jesus attracted all of his crowds? He performed miracles and everyone followed Him around.

That's what we need around here. A couple of miracles and everything would be great. What we need around here is for Jesus to appear in all of His glory and tell people what is what. That is what we need around here.

After all we are smart enough to know that it is not a good thing for a member of the congregation to have the power to call down fire out of heaven. If you got cross with this person, he

might call down fire on your house. If he did not like you, he might call down fire on your property. That would not be good. But it would be ok if Jesus did it.

Wouldn't it be great if Jesus Himself stood in our pulpit and preached? Wouldn't that be great! We could simply sit at the feet of the Master Himself and hear the word of Jesus straight from Jesus. Wouldn't it be great if Jesus glowed somehow so that we knew that it was really Him. After all the Son of God would surely have an aura of some kind around Him to let people know who He is. Let's have Jesus come down here and perform miracles again so that the crowds will return and sing His praises. Think of how full our pews would be if Jesus were personally here to heal the sick, cast out demons, raise the dead. Think of how full the pews would be if Jesus appeared in a blaze of glory.

Folks, Jesus is going to appear in a blaze of glory. That is not some kind of dream or wishful thinking on my part. It is not a sermon illustration in order to make a point. He is going to appear in a blaze of glory and when He does it, it is for judgment.

The flood of Noah is a wonderful thing and shows clearly how awesome God is unless you are one of the wicked who drowned. The plagues on Egypt that Moses performed were wonderful signs of God's power and might. They were unmistakable in their power and might. They were wonderful, unless you were an Egyptian. It is an awesome miracle when Elijah calls down fire from heaven, unless you were a prophet of Baal. If you were, then you died that day. It is an awesome miracle that Elisha calls down fire from heaven, unless you were one of the soldiers who were burned to death. And even the children of Israel were smart enough to tremble when the glory of God appeared on the top of Mount Sinai. Saint Peter was smart enough even with a small miracle of Jesus that of the miraculous catch of fish to get down on his knees and proclaim to Jesus that he was a sinful man.

Maybe having fire come down out of heaven isn't such a wonderful thing.

I don't know about you, but I like the idea of fire coming down out of heaven because it produces certainty. When God does a miracle, I am certain that it is God because it is a miracle. When nature or science cannot explain a phenomenon that is majestic, then I take comfort in the fact that God did it. I want certainty. I want to be certain that God is doing the miracle. I want to be certain that I understand that it is God and what God is doing in order to know whether or not I am saved.

If God appears to me in a bang and a flash and tells me that I am forgiven, I am certain that I am forgiven. The problem is that when God appears in a bang and a flash it is to judge. The fire-breathing God is never a good God to encounter. When God appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus it was not good what He said, "Why are you persecuting Me?" "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

If Jesus appears to you in a flash of glory, my pastoral advice is, "Run!"

In order to have certainty regarding God and His attitudes toward us we are going to have to give up our need for some kind of miraculous sign. Our lust for glory will have to be laid aside if we are going to be able to hear God when He is saying something merciful and kind. After all only a foolish, sinful and adulterous generation asks for a sign and none will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. As Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights so the Son of Man was in the heart of the earth three days and three nights.

And so Jesus comes to the woman caught in adultery and asks her, "Woman, where are those who condemned you?" She answers, "Nowhere, Lord." Jesus tells her, "Then neither do I condemn you." No thunder rolled when He said it. No lightning flashed when the words came from His mouth. There was no fire from heaven and yet that woman's entire life changed. Her sins were forgiven.

And so Jesus tells the woman weeping over His feet, "Woman, your sins are forgiven. Go in peace and leave your life of sin." There was no earthquake. There was no sudden rush of rain. Jesus didn't even raise His voice. He just told her that her sins were forgiven and they were. That is all.

Jesus looks at the paralyzed man and forgives him and then performs the miracle later. The man would have been forgiven even if Jesus had not healed him. Jesus only healed the paralyzed man to prove that He could do all kinds of things like forgive sins. What if Jesus had forgiven the man and then never gotten around to the miraculous healing? The man would still be paralyzed until death, but his sins would have been forgiven. There is no great shaking of the earth when it happens, but His sins are forgiven. And even with some of Jesus' healings they were not miraculous enough for some folks who claimed that the people Jesus healed were only pretending to be sick and so according to them Jesus didn't heal anyone at all.

When forgiveness of sins comes between friends and family members, there is a rush of power unlike any other, but there is no great miraculous sign. I have seen fathers and sons forgive each other of their abusive remarks to each other. They weep and embrace and then in some manly kind of fashion explain to the woman of the house how they handled it like men! I have seen husbands and wives forgive each other of adultery and abuse and it is like heaven opening up, but you cannot see it. You can only feel it.

When someone forgives you, there is no bang and no flash. There is no booming voice from the sky. There is no sudden gust of wind that takes place. But when someone forgives you it is as good as Jesus forgiving you. After all when Jesus forgives you, nowadays at least He usually sends some one to do it for Him. Occasionally you will hear of stories where people saw Jesus, but I don't know whether or not to believe them. When Jesus forgives usually someone else is doing the forgiving.

Jesus had plenty of time to tell Paul he was forgiven. Jesus had plenty of time on the road to Damascus. No one would have stopped him. Paul's companions are speechless. Paul is on his face, on the ground. Jesus has just shoved his sin in his face. It wasn't just Christians that Paul was persecuting it was Jesus Himself. But Jesus does not tell Paul his sins are forgiven in the blaze of glory. He does not tell Paul His sins are forgiven with the booming voice from heaven, the same voice that He used to give the Israelites the Ten Commandments. Instead Jesus sends Ananias to Paul and Ananias was none too eager to go. Ananias probably figured that Paul deserved Jesus' judgment and not Baptism. And so Paul did, but Jesus gave Paul Baptism and not judgment. And He sent Ananias to do it. Ananias lays his hands on Paul and Paul can see again. Paul gets up and is baptized. That is all. He is saved. He immediately begins to bear witness to Jesus. Paul believes that Jesus is the Son of God and that Jesus is the Christ. All this happened because Ananias came.

I may question the will of God. I may prefer that the certainty of my salvation may come in a bang and a flash, but Jesus is wiser. He knows that forgiveness is not about bangs and flashes. If it were He would not have had to have been crucified. If forgiveness were about the power and strength of God, His Son would not have had to have died.

So Jesus gives His forgiveness to you in His own way. It is not flashy. It is rather simple. He baptizes you. When Jesus baptizes you the water does not glow. There is no aura about the water. The Ghost Hunters would not detect anything unusual about the ceremony of baptism. In fact the flashy parts, the robes the candles, all that stuff is not commanded. What is commanded is water and the Name. That is all. It is simple. It is tender. It is so tender and kind that even an infant can receive it.

Jesus may not come personally to tell you that you are forgiven and that is ok. He is content to send someone else. And someone else will come. It will typically be one of His disciples. This person will not have a given education. He will have no given moral authority. This person that Jesus sends to you

will not always have some kind of impressive spirituality. This person will simply say what Jesus has given Him to say. He will tell you that your sins are forgiven. In that moment Jesus will know that someone has told you that your sins are forgiven. He will know the people that He has sent to you. Look for them. Listen for them. They will come or they already have come. They will tell you that your sins are forgiven. The bold ones will tell you that they forgive you all of your sins in the Name of Jesus Christ. The Name makes all the difference.

When it is done, no miracles have taken place. There will have been no bangs and no flashes. There will have been no miracles that day, at least none that you could see. And your life is changed because your sins are forgiven and God has a new attitude toward you.

In that moment you may thank God that no bang and no flash occurred. You may thank God that your sins were forgiven in a simple straightforward way with someone telling you that your sins are forgiven. As long as there was no flash and no bang and no miracle, then there was no judgment. And isn't that what forgiveness is all about? No judgment. No judgment and no damnation for you.

It is Jesus' way. It is personal. And it is the best way.

In His Name. Amen.