

Encounter at the Crossroads

Acts 9:1-9, 26-31; Ephesians 2:14-16; 4:11-16

Introduction

Have you met the Master recently? Have you looked around and seen God in action lately? Has he smiled upon you, blessed you, challenged you, carried you on? Have you met the Christ along the way? Have you encountered God at the crossroads?

Our Faith in Action Focus this morning is *Intersection*. In this hour we are looking to that intersection where God's desires for us meet the gifts we have to offer Him. In this segment of our overall preparations for Faith in Action Sunday, we are considering the profound implications of encountering God at the crossroads of God's activity and our human experience, at the intersection of God's divine initiative and our human response.

Purves and Partee of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, in their recent book titled *Encountering God: Christian Faith in Turbulent Times*, contend that undoubtedly most people have experienced a precipitating event in their lives as a result of God's coming to them in a personal encounter. From that supposition based on their own experiences, they assert that:

God is . . . personal In fact, God is the one who encounters us and makes us believers. As believers we speak of the One whom we have met, whom we know, and whom we love, worship and serve. Encounter with God leads to adoration of God, which in turn leads to reflection on faith in God,ⁱ which in turn, we should add, leads to our reaction. Divine action inevitably requires human response.

The Pathway from Encounter to Response

As we travel the road from Encounter to Response, I seriously contend that there are three dynamics along that pathway. The first is the encounter itself, or what I would call *paripeteia*, which is known as a sudden change, a reverse of fortune, or a change that is irreversible. The second dynamic I would identify as *anagnoresis*, which is the moment of recognition. The third dynamic I have labeled as *Die Antwort*, or the answer, the response.

Two vignettes will serve to illustrate this progression from Encounter to Recognition to Response: one is historical, the other biblical.

The historical vignette is drawn from the early twentieth century tragedy of the sinking of the Titanic on April 14, 1912. That was the fateful night that the White Star liner—traveling near its full speed on its maiden voyage in North Atlantic waters—ignored warnings of ice sightings and struck an iceberg. Within two hours the unsinkable vessel sank with 2207 people on board, 1500 of whom perished in the 31 degree waters. Many

of us here will recall reading a minute-by-minute account of the disaster in Walter Lord's book *A Night to Remember*; most of us, however, will The *peripeteia*—the irreversible change in fortune—occurred with possess vivid images of the tragedy from James Cameron's 1997 film version starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet. There is a riveting scene in the conference room when the ship's Irish designer informs the captain that the ship could not stay afloat with five of the fourteen compartments' being damaged, taking on water. "How long do we have?" asks the captain somberly. "An hour, perhaps two," rejoins the ship's architect.

In this sequence of happenings, the *peripeteia*—the irreversible change of fortune—occurred with the Titanic's encounter with the iceberg; but the *anagnorsis*—the moments of recognition—occurred sequentially and gradually: first the ship's Irish designer and then the captain of the ship and his crew in the conference room; and then the moments of recognition spread throughout the passengers. The responses (*Die Antworten*): load the lifeboats and maintain as much order as possible before the onset of despair and panic.

Our second vignette is biblical, portrayed in I Samuel 3. When the great prophet Samuel was a small boy, he served the Lord under the teaching of Eli, priest of the Temple in Shiloh. One night, while sleeping in he temple, Samuel heard a voice calling to him: "Samuel! Samuel!" He arose and ran to Eli, saying "Here I am, for you called me." Eli insisted that he did not call Samuel and told him to go back to bed. After this had happened three times, Eli told him to lie down again, and if he were to hear the voice calling him, then he must respond by saying, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Samuel lay down, heard the voice, indicated that the Lord's servant was listening, and God delivered his message. The *peripeteia*—the irreversible change in fortune here—occurred in God's encountering Samuel. It is an indelible experience, a precipitating event in Samuel life, which he can neither ignore nor treat lightly. The *anagnorsis*—the moment of recognition—came after Samuel mistakenly identified the voice as Eli's; but once he came to the moment of profound recognition that it was God who was calling him, that the voice was more than the rustling of the wind or the murmuring of a dying temple priest, Samuel had to respond. His answer, *die Antwort*, must be: "Here am I, speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

It is a common progression: a change of fortune, the moment of recognition, and the imperative of response.

Paul's Encounter, Paul's Response

This brings us to our text for the day: Paul's conversion experience on the Road to Damascus. After Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified, raised from the dead, and carried into heaven, the church was born at Pentecost. No sooner had the fledgling church taken on a palpable form than it became the target of the Roman emperor, marked for perfidious persecution and immediate extermination. Who better to accomplish this edict than the passionate Saul of Tarsus, a righteous man, whose anger seethed as a relentless righteous indignation? As both a Roman citizen and an upright Jewish Pharisee, Saul

was a law-abiding and obedient member of the Jewish culture of his day. On the other hand, it was the growing body of Christians that was suspect. They were the ones who were upsetting the religious values and eroding the moral foundations of sacred tradition by advocating the worship of a new God, Jesus of Nazareth, who—they claimed—rose from the dead and now ruled the world. Saul exercised his privilege simply to thwart these iconoclastic “atheists” who were knocking down the Roman gods and threatening Jewish precepts with a new deity and a radically new code of morality: grace over law.

The brutal severity of Saul’s vindictiveness against the Christians cannot be overstated; neither should it be romanticized. He brilliantly engineered the systematic capture, subsequent torture, and mass execution of men, women, and children, spreading a cloak of misery over the new community of Christ’s followers. For Christians, it had been the best of times as they adored their Risen Savior; now it became the worst of times as they were dragged in chains to dungeons in Jerusalem.

Saul was the wolf let loose in the sheepfold, the jackal in the house, the leopard in the park, the jaguar in the street, hurrying enraged with imprisoning passions . . . propelled by a short, fierce fuse.ⁱⁱ

*He was the tiger that came at night
With a voice as soft as thunder
As he tore their hopes apart,
As he turned their dreams to shame...ⁱⁱⁱ*

But his cocky program of persecution all change dramatically on the road to Damascus: thrown to the ground, blinded by a Light, confronted by a voice from the Light, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Here is Saul’s *peripeteia*, his irreversible change of fortune, God’s encounter with Saul at the crossroads. Here Saul’s passion and God’s desire intersect. It will never be the same again for Saul of Tarsus. “Who are you, Lord?” issues Saul verbally into the Light. “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.” Here is the *anagnoresis*—Saul’s moment of recognition: it is Jesus the Christ who has called him. It is the God of the Christians who has met him on the road and transformed his passionate belief system and vituperative vindication against the followers of the Nazarene. It is the God of the people whom he has been persecuting that has brought him low, has made him vulnerable and weak, and called him into a new mission with an equal passion. And *die Antwort* for Saul? His answer, his response? At the crossroads he chooses a different road, a new direction. His sight restored by Ananias, his name changed from Saul to Paul, Paul channels his perfidious passion to persecute and prosecute into a persistent passion to preach and proselytize. Evidently God’s desire was for Christ’s church to grow among the gentiles in Macedonia and Asia Minor. Paul’s gifts to preach and teach with passion intersected precisely where God’s desires were made known to Saul at the crossroads on the way to Damascus.

Our Encounter, Our Response

If Purves and Partee are correct, then each of us has had some precipitating event in our lives that constituted an encounter with God. Undoubtedly each of us is here this morning because God has met us along the road in one way or another. It is possible that that encounter was a change of fortune for you. Once God has encountered us and called us to him, then there is no turning back. It is essentially an irreversible change, and as soon as we recognize that God has called us, the only option is a response. “Here am I, Lord, your servant is listening.” Your servant is waiting. Your servant is ready to use the gifts you have given to us to meet your desires.

The Imperative of Response

Paul’s voice comes to us from antiquity, addressed to us as fully as much as to the Ephesians: *the gifts Christ gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry* (with any gifts that Christ has given to us), *for building up the body of Christ*^{iv} . . .

Paul mentions only a few. Beyond the gifts employed by apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, there are innumerable gifts we can use for building up the body of Christ. There are countless ways for us to respond with our individual gifts: the gift of compassionate caring, organizational design, administrative oversight, theological discernment, biblical exploration, program development, mission outreach, standing with the poor, feeding the homeless, digging wells in Africa, healing patients in hospitals, showing hospitality in our homes, championing the legal cause of the poor, planting flowers at hospice, walking for hospice, caring for cancer patients, entering the cancer relay, attending to the homeless through Light of Life Mission, assembling kitchen kits for homeless women, seeking to share peace through spiritual yoga.

Whatever our gifts, when God encounters us at the crossroads of our journey, nothing is ever again the same: inevitably there is a change of fortune that is irreversible; and in that moment of recognition, the only suitable response is to use our gifts to aspire to what God desires for us.

*Where cross the crowded ways of life,
Where sounds the cries of race and clan,
Above the noise of human strife,
We hear Thy voice, O Son of Man.*^v

Will you respond? Someone keeps calling our name! Will you respond? Will you say,
Hear I am! Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening!

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ⁱ Andrew Purves and Charles Partee, *Encountering God: Christian Faith in Turbulent Times*, p. 5

ⁱⁱ Adapted from Ted Hughes, *The Jaguar*, stanza 3, line 4; stanza 4, line 1

ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted from *I Dreamed a Dream*, Fantine's Song in *Les Misérables*, a musical by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg; lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer; based on the novel by Victor Hugo

^{iv} Ephesians 4:11-12

^v First stanza of hymn titled *Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life*, words by Frank Mason North (1905) and tune arranged by Ludwig van Beethoven (1170-1827)