

Easter 3

Acts 9:1-20

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church May 4, 2025

Every year, about this time, when the blossoms and leaves are bursting forth in Downeast Maine, it seems we have a reading appointed for a Sunday morning that allows me to use one of my favorite little verses about peepers – those tiny amphibians that even now are changing from tadpoles to frogs and singing from low-lying areas, sounding a bit like this... *eeeh... eeeh...*

The verse about them, which I wrote during the Easter season some years ago, goes like this...

Unless a tadpole stills its gills and dies to underwater ways,

It remains a silent voice in the choir of "Peeper Praise."

But if it lets go of gills, takes a chance and takes a breath,

It will find a song inside where it feared was only death.

And then, oh then, what once was still will lift its voice to heav'n above,

Filling falling dark'ning dusk with God's Easter song of love.

So it's this morning's text from Acts 9 that inspired me to use this little verse about peepers, because I truly believe that if Paul had known it, he would have recited these exact lines anytime anyone asked him

about the radical transformation begun in him as he traveled the road to Damascus that day... (Paul comparing his experience to the tadpole who has to “let go of gills” and **die** to “underwater ways” before becoming the peeper he’s intended to be...)

The thing is, we don’t usually think of the story about Saul’s transformation into Paul as being first and foremost about **life that comes by way of death**, choosing instead to see it simply as a highly successful conversion story whereby the “bad and murderous Jewish Pharisee Saul” was, through an experience with the risen Jesus, changed in just three days’ time into the “loving, top-notch, Christian missionary Paul,” on fire to tell anyone who would listen the story about he had finally fallen off his “Pharisaical high horse,” and come over to the “Christian side,” and from then on would be using all of his gifts and talents to work for Jesus instead of for the Synagogue.

It’s a story we Christians love to use as an example of a “quick and glorious conversion to Jesus,” when it’s really a story about the end of one kind of life and the beginning of another... an initiation of sorts into a transformation that begins with dying... “dying to underwater ways,” to use the language of peepers... letting go of gills... and taking a chance on breath where we fear is only death...

Luke tells us that Saul traveled the road to Damascus that day with all the power and confidence of his station... Paul himself, looking back on his life after his transformation, describing his former self this way...

Circumcised on the eighth day,

A member of the people of Israel,

*Of the tribe of Benjamin,
A Hebrew born of Hebrews,
As to the law, a Pharisee,
As to zeal, a persecutor of the church,
As to righteousness under the law, blameless...*

In other words, he couldn't have been better situated in terms of "Temple hierarchy" or the framework of Judaism that had been built so carefully over so many centuries upon keeping the "letter of the Law" while forgetting completely about the wild, windy, beautiful, expansive, fiery, endlessly gracious "spirit of the law," which lived at the heart of the covenant between God and God's people.

Saul began his trip to Damascus that day "on his high horse" we might say (even though there isn't a horse in the story at all), confident of his place in the religious framework that understood one's relationship with God to be dependent upon identity markers such as ethnicity, tribal affiliation, adherence to endless laws, and the number of gold good conduct stars on one's "religious" report card...

Saul began his trip to Damascus not only sure of himself and of his standing in the religious pecking order of the day, but also sure of his "sacred call" to stop in their tracks those folks in the Jewish community and beyond who had begun, after experiencing or hearing about the teaching, preaching, and healing acts of Jesus, to live in a different "way"...

- a way more in tune with the “spirit of the law” than with the strict adherence to the “letter of the law”...
- a way of relating to God and to the world around them that didn’t adhere to the rigid religious and cultural framework upon which Saul and the religious elite had built their lives, but lived from the knowledge of a love and grace that were theirs unconditionally, freeing them from fear to extend that same love and grace to others...
- A “way” that was in the process of “letting go” of some of the identity markers the Temple leaders had deemed non-negotiable, and in that letting go, threatened to undermine the entire system...

I remind us of all the identity markers upon which Saul had built his life until his experience with the risen Jesus that day, because it helps us to recognize just how much he had to lose, and what a profound rupture that encounter with Jesus made in Saul’s life... What an immersion into a devastating and dark time of unknowing... of not knowing... of dying to the life he had known and depended upon... three days of blindness and fasting during which there was nothing familiar to hold onto, and (as we read further on in the book of Acts) a life to follow in which the things we human beings normally depend upon for security, support, and meaning were minimal to non-existent...

But offering something else... something else to hold onto... Something other than self-protection and self-righteousness and... to return to the language of peepers... gills...

And I remind us of all of this because at its heart this story is not only about Saul's transformation from tadpole to peeper in the presence of the risen Jesus... but about our transformation as well... The story inviting us to ponder the meaning of the invitation that lives at the heart of the Christian faith... the invitation to "come and die"... (Which I've always thought would be an interesting message to put on one side of our sign our front... One side displaying my favorite church sign of all times... The one that says, "You don't have to be a sinner to come here, but it helps"... and the other side saying, "Worship, 10:00... All are welcome to come and die"... That would bring folks in by the droves I'm sure...)

But Paul would most certainly understand this strange invitation to the Christian life... And were he here with us this morning to try to help us explore its meaning, I do think, in keeping with the wonder of Spring in Downeast Maine, he'd begin by reciting the verse about tadpoles dying to their underwater ways and joining choirs of peeper praise...

Then I think he'd stammer around a bit looking for the best way to speak about the transformation begun in him that day on the road to Damascus... Because, as anyone knows who's come to die in the way Jesus invites us to come and die, it's almost impossible to find words adequate for the telling... (Which is why, perhaps, Paul's letters to fledgling Christian communities which we have to read on so many Sundays have so many impossible-to-read run-on sentences)...

But in an effort to speak to us of his transformation anyway (because he's always been on fire to do so), I think Paul would quote a

word of wisdom from the Gospel of Philip, a third century document that didn't make it into the Biblical canon... The word of wisdom that says, *"If there is such a thing as transformational knowing, its first stage is the inner act of not knowing."*

And then I think he'd say to us, "Well, I can't **explain** it... But... Consider this...

- Consider the political prisoners once held captive by an oppressive regime, who in total uncertainty about their fate, decided one morning to share the eucharist... But having no bread or wine, instituted what they later called "the communion of the empty hand"... each man communing the person next to him by putting into his open hand nothing except the "absent" presence of the risen Jesus along with the words, "The body of Christ, broken for you"... A number of those prisoners saying later that they had never experienced the presence of Jesus so powerfully before that moment, or since...
- Consider the 26-year old woman who had had a bone marrow transplant, sequestered in a hospital room for over a month and allowed very few visitors, and then only those who donned sterile gowns, face masks and gloves... Imagine her speaking to the pastor who visited her about losing her hair, her breast, her ability to bear children, as well as losing the past year and a half of her life, devoted as it had been to a thousand different procedures... And then imagine her speaking to this pastor about how during that time she had come to know the most important things of life; those things being the relationships of

love that surrounded and held her... Imagine her saying, "I'm not the center of my life anymore, and it's so freeing."

- Consider the old Lutheran pastor who for almost her entire life formed her identity around her beautiful singing voice... Always playing the lead roles in musicals... always getting the soprano solos in choral groups... Always knowing she could "wow" any audience with her gorgeous voice... Consider her losing her ability to sing... completely really... The identity marker upon which she had built her meaning and purpose in life, gone... Imagine her sorrow at this loss... and sometimes her anger... and then imagine a day when her seven-year-old grandson says, "Mormor, can I play you my favorite song?" Imagine her stopping all her incessant busyness in the kitchen and sitting down with him... This seven-year-old, who with a technological expertise she can hardly comprehend takes out his I-pad and plays a song called "Kiss the Sky" from his favorite movie "Wild Robot"... Imagine the old Lutheran pastor, former soprano soloist sitting next to her seven-year-old grandson and listening to his favorite song in all the world, and realizing that maybe in that moment there's a music more beautiful than any music she ever made... a music for which there is no musical score... a music she can't learn and perfect and "wow" everyone in the audience with... But a music that is simply, perfectly, beautifully there because a mormor and her grandson are sharing the moment together... a music she hadn't heard before because she was so intent on making the music she knew would bring her accolades...

“In all of these instances,” Paul would say to us, “you may have noticed that there was something in the not-knowing... something in the not-having... something in the giving up of the “sure thing,” the “known thing,” the “underwater tadpole gill thing” that allowed for something else to be sensed, and seen and heard...

“This is what happened to me during my three days of blindness, when all of my supports and identity markers, my accomplishments and my gold good conduct stars were taken away, and I was left naked and alone and without a sense of who in the world I was...

“It was in that time of utter unknowing that I sensed the sound, the movement, the presence of something that lifted my head, and wrenched open my heart... something for which I have no name except love... or music... or the risen Jesus... or mercy... or compassion... or, did I say love?

“Something I realized had been with me and around me and in me all along, but which I hadn’t seen or known, so full was I of what I knew... Something that gave me the courage to let go of gills and to take a chance on breath where I’d feared was only death...”

This is what Paul would say to us, I think, if he was here with us today... To all of us who tend to find our security, our support and meaning in our accomplishments, our expertise, our religious or political affiliations... Paul would remind us that Jesus calls us to “come and die” to those things, because they tend to keep us from sensing or

hearing or knowing God's presence and God's love moving and rising around and inside us...

And then, just before leaving, I think Paul, knowing how hard it is to do this letting go... knowing too, that some of us may feel like we are already in state of deep darkness and utter unknowing would say, *"Consider this little story by Martin Buber: After the death of their leader, a group of rabbis formerly under his leadership gathered to talk about the things he had done. When it was Rabbi Zalman's turn, he asked them, 'Do you know why our master went to the pond every day and stayed there a while before coming home again?' They did not know why. Rabbi Zalman continued... 'He was learning the song with which the frogs praise God. It takes a very long time to learn that song.'*

"So take heart," Paul would say to all of us, whether we are caught up in all our expert knowing or in a place of total un-knowing... "Take heart," he would say... "And just keep coming to the pond... Keep coming to listen to the song with which the frogs praise God... keep coming with hands and heart open... And you will see that Jesus meets you there in whatever state of empty or full you may be... Jesus meets you there, in the darkness, and with a love that passes all understanding, says,

"Oh my child, let go of gills... take a chance and take a breath,

And you will find a song inside where you fear is only death.

And then, oh then, what once was still will lift its voice to heav'n above,

Filling falling dark'ning dusk with God's Easter song of love.