

Knocked Down By God

Acts 9:1-22

Tappahannock Presbyterian Church

January 26, 2014

Many of you know that I'm a big Three Stooges fan. I've been collecting their classic short films on video for some time now. In every single one of them, somebody's getting knocked down. Somebody always hits the deck – usually one of the Stooges. But it's all in good fun; you know no one's really gotten hurt, and at the end you just laugh about it all.

There are lots of times in your life and mine when we've gotten knocked down, and there wasn't any laughter. There wasn't anything funny about it, and it really did hurt. Oh, I'm not talking about physically falling; we all have done that, and we're probably not done doing that. I'm talking about those times when life hits you square between the eyes, and you're floored. Those times stick out. We remember when the bad times happened, what brought them on, who it was that gave us the bad news. It might even have been a *person* who "knocked us down" – like that boss who fired you unfairly, or the person you remember who picked a fight with you in school, then got you both in trouble. Those are bad times, for sure. There are worse times that don't have anything to do with being physically knocked down. When the very basis of your life, your beliefs about yourself, the very foundations of your view of the world, get changed dramatically, it's worse than being in a Three Stooges film. Divorce is one of those times. Losing someone to an accident is another example. Having the company you've spent the last 20 years working for, suddenly close its doors, with no warning – I think you're getting the picture. Step it up a notch. What if the thing that got destroyed was your entire belief

system? What if somebody came up with proof that everything you believed was wrong?

Consider the case of Saul of Tarsus, who we now know as Paul. We're looking at a guy who needed something *strong* to get him to do what God wanted him to do. He needed God to crack him 'upside his head because that was gonna be the only way God could get his attention. God was shattering everything he believed in, shattering his very existence. He'd heard the Good News many times, but he ignored it. He just didn't buy it. He wasn't open to even considering it. All this Jesus stuff! – too different, too radical, compared to what he'd always believed. It was this strong set of beliefs he had – his very foundation – that had Saul/Paul out here on the road, rooting out those awful Christians.

See, Paul wasn't a lot different than most of us. He'd grown up around the church all his life – church being synagogue and Temple for him. He knew the commandments; he knew the Law; he'd actually been quite good at keeping all of it. He was already studying to be a rabbi, that's how invested he was. Paul was zealous for the *pure* faith. When this new, radical sect of "Christians" came to the synagogue, he just *exploded!* How dare they go proclaiming this sad-sack character *Jesus* as the Messiah! Why, any good Jew would know that the Messiah was going to be a mighty one, was going to destroy Israel's enemies, was going to reestablish the throne of David. He'd come on the clouds in glory, to show the true power of God. *This guy Jesus* got nailed by the

Romans! Then his body got stolen. Resurrection shmesurrection – it was all a hoax.

And it was a disgrace to good Jews everywhere. Something had to be done.

So Paul went ahead and did it, with the blessings of those in power. With their permission and with *written* authority, Saul as he was known then was quite effective at hunting down *those people* and turning them over to the leaders of the Temple. Let me put it another way: *Saul was systematically wiping out the church of Jesus Christ*. By sending away all those believers, whether they were executed or not – and we know they probably were not – Saul was cutting off the nutrient that made the church grow: its fellowship and its worship. If he had succeeded in completely driving a small, weakened church underground, it couldn't have survived. By the time the Romans got around to making it unlawful to be a Christian in the late 90s of the first century, it was too late to stop the growth of the church. But Paul could have done it back there in the late thirties and early forties. He was sure giving it his best shot!

He knew who this “enemy” was, too. He'd heard all the drivel, about how this stupid carpenter from Galilee had gone around doing some *hokum* with healing, and making people think he'd chased out spirits – yeah, yeah, haven't we seen this all before? Worse, the guy really *did* know his scripture, and was fond of quoting it to make it sound like it was written about him. That just infuriated Paul. God's holy word is about *God*, not some Nazarean nincompoop with a big ego. Saul was the very epitome, the perfect role model, of the absolutely sure, arrogant, conservative religious

zealot that we still see today. Too bad they didn't have television back in his day – 'cause he'd have made *a pile of money* as a TV preacher!

You and I have to watch ourselves. For longer than any of us want to think about, we've been sure that our way is the only way. "How we've always done it" has to be right – doesn't it? And so we go on our merry way, turning a blind eye to the world, and also to what God might have in mind. Saul knew all the stuff the Christians were saying. He probably knew it better than they did. What's more, he understood the theological implications of it better than most any of them, because of his rabbinical training. But he was sure his way was right! So he gathered his posse, and he headed towards Damascus.

Now, we know God is a patient God, right? But there comes a time when God's had enough. God is not some cold, uncaring, machine-like figure up there in the heavens or in the universe somewhere, we just-don't-know-where. God is a God of love, but also of impatience, and even anger. God knows what he needs from us – and he knows how to get it. On this fateful day, on the road to Damascus, God made sure Saul signed up for *his* program.

The details are legend, they're ingrained in all of our minds by now. Saul saw a light beyond our imagination, that wasn't only in front of him, but *flashed AROUND him*. The word for that in the original is used in no other place in the whole Bible, it's so unusual. Saul was *surrounded* by this blinding, surreal, other-worldly light. It's almost like he was swimming in it! I guess it must have been painful – I mean, it put his eyes

out! He fell down off his horse – the words in the original language suggest a long fall, so he must have been *up* on his horse, and gotten knocked down off of it. And as if this wasn't spooky enough, he heard a voice. "Saul, Saul," it said, and you know when somebody says your name twice like that, it's not a good thing! Saul has enough left in him to call out, "Who are you, Lord?" The important part here is "Who are you?" Didn't Moses ask the same question of God, back there a few hundred years ago at the burning bush? Knocked down on his backside, faced with the reality of his Creator, he hardly knew what to say. Saul/Paul didn't know what to say, either. But Jesus filled him in: "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. And I got a job for you!. Go into the city, and await further instructions." The people with Saul might have thought he was hallucinating, except they themselves heard some sounds that were obviously from heaven – but they apparently didn't get to hear the words like Saul did. They didn't see the blinding light, either. But they knew something had happened to Saul, because they had to pick up this now-blind man and literally carry him into Damascus.

Sometimes, when *our* eyes get opened, it's painful for us. We want to shut our eyes! We want to avoid the light, we don't want to get blinded. That's just because we want to avoid pain, maybe the pain of change. If Saul had been willing to accept the truth about Jesus when he first heard it, he wouldn't have been knocked down. The same principle applies to us. As we look at ourselves, as we examine where we are and what we need to do, we can't turn our heads, we have to look with wide-open eyes for

the light that God can give. If we resist God, if we don't look and listen for what God has in mind, we might find ourselves, like Saul, knocked down for the count.

I know the history of this little church, and I know there have been times when you've been "knocked down." I know that you've picked yourself up over and over again, or else we wouldn't be here this morning. Did we learn anything from those experiences? Can you ever learn anything from those "knocked down" experiences? You can, if God has a purpose.

Saul/Paul was about to find out his purpose. He was carried on into Damascus, and he was one knocked down, knocked out guy. Our scripture tells us he didn't eat anything for THREE DAYS. Three days, huh? Is that just a coincidence? Saul was in his own personal tomb for three days.

But then something that had to be a God-thing happened. One of THOSE people, the ones he'd been persecuting, got a "knee-mail" from God. Ananias was his name. Against his better human judgment, he went where God sent him; he went to Saul. Now three days without water or food puts you pretty close to death, especially in a hot place like Palestine. But Saul wasn't going to die, because God had plans for him. Ananias laid his hands on him, almost like he was going to *ordain* him, and he prayed. Maybe he did ordain him! Because after the laying on of hands, just like that, Paul was able to see. He really did see, in every sense. The rest, as they say, is history. I extended today's passage a couple of verses past the lectionary so you could hear a little of that history.

What happened there in Damascus escapes us most of the time because we're not paying attention. But if we look with clear eyes, we see something that's bound to lift us up. Saul *knew* what the message was about Jesus; he didn't accept it, indeed he rejected it. It wasn't "how we've always done it." When our Lord appeared to him on the road in his full glory, then he knew: "My God, those Christians – they're right." The power of his own sin had blinded him, and without trying to psychologize things too much, he went blind with guilt and shame. He might have died. But when Ananias came along, and *demonstrated the love of Christ* by coming to heal this very one who would have sent him off in chains – well, that was the final golden straw. God was working through Ananias, and Saul finally believed. He who had once been knocked down to the depths had been raised up by God, and called to the work that has made all the difference in the world.

You know, that's how it is for us. Celebrate that! No matter how "knocked down" we feel, you and I will always have God sending us something or someone in the Spirit to lift us back up again, to point us in the direction we should go. God will always take into account our gifts and our situations, just as he did with Saul, and after he's lifted us up, he'll send us on to do the work of lifting up *other* knocked down souls. It's great work! It's world-changing work. It's the work of lifting people up who are knocked down, and turning them around for God. Thankfully, we have right much of that ahead. Ananias wasn't afraid, because his confidence was in the Lord. It'll be the same for us. Give thanks, that God has opened your eyes, and sent you to do his work.