

Six Words: Revelation (Acts 9:1-20)

Sermon Series: Six Faith Words That Aren't So Bad

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For Lenten sermons series, “Six Faith Words That Aren’t So Bad,” Todd and I focused religious concepts that we thought may need a little extra rehabilitation or unpacking. We chose words that have some theological and cultural baggage attached to them.

The term “revelation” is automatically loaded because we hear it and think of the Book of Revelation, that strange, highly symbolic text at the end of our Bible, the one with horned dragons and harlots and seven seals and the Anti-Christ. That book is “Revelation” with a capital “R,” and it has shaped how Western culture pictures the apocalypse, the end of the world.

But revelations—little “r” revelations—take place all throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The biblical meaning of revelation is very similar to the secular one: it means a revealing; an unveiling or uncovering of a truth that was previously hidden. And in the biblical context, that hidden truth is *God*.

And so to experience a revelation (in the biblical sense) is to experience God in some new and vivid way.

So what's the baggage here? What's the problem? Isn't that the idea behind this whole church thing—to encounter God? To commune with God? To be changed by God?

I think the challenge is not so much that we think of revelation as a bad thing. I think the challenge is that we often talk about revelation only in terms of life-changing, divine thunderclaps like the one experienced by Paul on the road to Damascus. High-octane revelation.

I mean, you really can't get more dramatic than the story of the apostle formerly known as Saul. There he is, on his way to Damascus to persecute men and women who belong to "The Way"—that is, followers in the Way of Jesus.

Here's what we know about Paul: he's an educated Jew, he's a Roman citizen, and he helped stone the disciple Stephen to death. And then, the *revelation*: Paul is encountered by the resurrected Christ. And everything changes. He no longer fights the Way of Jesus. He joins the Way of Jesus, or really, he *becomes* the Way of Jesus, wandering from city to city planting little bodies of Christ—otherwise known as churches—everywhere he goes.

It's a powerful story, one that has influenced how the church imagines God's presence. Here, God is a flash of light from heaven. God is the disembodied voice of Jesus. God is a force of nature that changes your

eyesight and speaks in your ear and gives incredibly precise directions about what is going to happen next.

Personally, I have yet to experience that level of revelation. I suspect I'm not alone. I think that postmodern culture is, generally, pretty skeptical of the God described here, the God whose voice is as real and audible as that of the person sitting next to you. To many of us, that kind of God does not feel grounded in reality, does not feel truthful to the experience of modern life, and so we look for other explanations for biblical stories like this one.

For example, I came across this headline last year:

*Saint Paul's famous revelation may have been caused by epilepsy, say scientists.*

I'll read you an excerpt from this [article](#):

*Saint Paul, a key figure in the history of the Western world, is well-known for his dramatic religious conversion on the road to Damascus.*

*Exactly what occurred as Saint Paul made his revelation, turning from persecuting Jesus to preaching Jesus, has been difficult to determine as the accounts in Acts and the letters vary in detail. However, a team of scientists have developed a theory as to how St Paul's U-turn may have come about.*

*Rather than hearing God talking to him, scientists in Israel have suggested Saint Paul's revelation could have been brought about by an epileptic seizure. Researchers at Hadassah Medical Centre, linked to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, have scanned the brain of a man during a seizure while he also had visions of God and noticed a surge of activity in the organ's frontal lobe, which is linked to a belief people are interacting with a deity.*

The article describes how doctors also noticed increased activity in the patient's left prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain thought to be responsible for social behavior. So they wonder if perhaps that's why the patient interrupted his own scan and began wandering around the department trying to convince people to follow him, telling them "God has sent me to you."

The article continues, *Scientists have suggested that a belief in God is deeply embedded in the human brain, which is programmed for religious experiences. [Researchers](#) at the US National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke searching for the neural 'God spot' said their findings support the idea that the brain has evolved to be sensitive to any form of belief that improves the chances of survival, which could explain why a belief in God and the supernatural became so widespread in human evolutionary history.*

So, there you have it. According to science, Paul's revelation wasn't a revelation at all, but rather his brain firing and misfiring and doing its thing to keep him alive.

But is that really what the science is saying? If we believe the myth that science and religion are incompatible, then, sure, it would seem that science is saying faith is all in our heads.

But what if science isn't about dispelling the mysteries of God, but deepening them? What if divine revelation and scientific revelation aren't really so different?

Let's remember what the word revelation really means. Revelation isn't the appearance of something new. It's the uncovering of something that's already there.

In other words, revelation is not about a change in reality; it's about a change in perspective. It's about what we can't see, and what we can see, and what helps us shift from one state of perception to another.

Take Paul on the Road to Damascus. When we hear this story, we tend to focus on the intensity of his transformation. We focus on what's different about him, the before and after. But maybe we should also pay attention to what's the same. Before Damascus, Paul was, as we mentioned, an

educated Jew and a Roman citizen. After Damascus, he was still both these things.

What had changed was how he saw things. He had, literally, a new vision. Once the scales are dropped from Paul's eyes, he views the world through Christ-tinted glasses. He sees Christ's image in everything. And according to the story, he owes this epiphany not just to what he saw but to what he heard, specifically, Jesus saying these words: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

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Think about that. Jesus is not just saying, "I am God," or "I am all-powerful," or "You should worship me." Jesus is saying, "Those people you hurt? The ones you stoned, the ones you hope to arrest and make suffer? Those people *are* me. *I am those people*. That is my body. That is my blood."

Jesus is harkening back to his famous teaching that however we treat the least of these, we treat Jesus.

In other words, God's image is *in everyone*. Even the stranger. Even our enemy. Especially our enemy. And when we fail to treat fellow human beings with respect and dignity, we aren't just hurting people; we are denigrating *God*.

That's an insight that changed Paul's life.

What insights have changed your life? What moments have revealed something to you that you didn't understand before? What encounters have alerted you to the divine spark that exists in another person? When has your compassion been activated, or your biases challenged, or your mind simply changed?

Here's an example from my own story.

Some of you know that I took a few years away from ministry to earn a Master of Social work degree, which turned out to be an immersion-learning experience in revelations like these. One of the most powerful experiences I had was not in the classroom, or even in my field practicum, but working as a research assistant for a professor studying the disproportionate suspension of students of color in Twin Cities high schools. As part of my work for her, I interviewed black students who had been suspended and the white teachers who had suspended them, hearing the same story of the same incident from two different points of view.

And not surprisingly, they would tell the story of the events leading to the suspension quite differently. And intellectually, I was prepared for that discrepancy. But I was not prepared, emotionally, for the pain in the hearts of the black students, mostly young men, students who had been described by their teachers as loud, as threatening, as disruptive, as disrespectful

looked at me and said, “My teacher never listens to me. She always assumes the worst about me. My mom tells me to keep my voice low because teachers are scared of me, but I had to speak louder and louder because she wasn’t hearing me.”

And through those conversations, I suddenly saw things a bit more clearly. I didn’t see everything; I didn’t have a “God’s-eye-view” of these incidents that I had not witnessed with my own eyes. But did have a pretty good view of myself, and I realized that I, like those teachers, had grown accustomed to seeing young black men as potentially dangerous, as potentially out-of-control. It took a calm conversation, removed from the power dynamics of teacher and student, for me to get it. To get why these situations escalate.

My compassion was awakened, my perspective was broadened, and it changed how I looked at everything, including the Black Lives Matter movement that was soon to rise up in our city.

*That’s* revelation. And yes, maybe my brain was playing out the biological imperative to survive through social connection and cooperation. Or, maybe the the mystery of God, and the presence of God in everything and everyone, was unexpectedly revealed to me on the road. Maybe those are the exact same thing, two sides of the same coin, two languages describing the same experience. Because in the end, I think the results of scientific and religious revelation are the same:

We are awakened to new possibilities.

We are sensing that we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

We are transformed, so that we can be transformers of the world.

May new visions be revealed in all of us. Amen.