

Hand in Hand
Saul's conversion
Acts 9: 1-20*
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So, they led him by the hand to Damascus...

Saul breathing fire and persecuting the Christians, has a letter from the high priests giving him authority to arrest anyone who claims to be following the Way of Jesus. He is traveling to Damascus when a light flashes all around and throws him to the ground. While he is on the ground a voice from Heaven asks him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Saul says, "Who are you?"

The voice replies, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city and there you will be told what to do."

The men with him are astonished, speechless, confused. As they help him up, they realize that though his eyes are open he cannot see.

So, taking his hand, they lead him into the city, to his destiny.

A day or so later, in the city, a follower of Jesus', Ananias, has a vision. In the vision Ananias goes and lays hands on Saul, curing him of his blindness. Ananias, is greatly shaken by this vision and responds to the Lord—

"But I have heard of this man Saul of Tarsus—and I know that he has done horrible things to your holy people in Jerusalem and even now he has the authority of the chief priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name. Why do you want me to go and be with this man?"

But the Lord, deflects his fears and tells Ananias, "You must go, for I will use this man, to spread my word before gentiles, Kings and Israelites."

So, Ananias, goes to Saul, lays his hands upon him, the scales fall from Saul's eyes. Immediately Saul asks to be baptized and he begins to preach about Jesus. Saul becomes Paul, the most prolific of all the apostles, incarnating God's word.

I am struck by the power of people who do indeed, remain close enough to be hand in hand with one another.

Several years ago, my spouse Susan went back East to visit her pop for what would be her last time with him on this earth. Susan grew up in by Lake Anna in Louisa County, Mineral VA, living in her family's rambling farmhouse dating from the 1800s.

Her pop, lived to be 100 and half years old. Her mom died this past year also at the age of 100. (Susan has some good genes!) Her father, James Carroll Harlow, was a wiry, farmer, who also worked as a mechanic for the state of Virginia. Carroll, as he was known, was a WWII vet; A kind, quiet, resilient man who when he was 86 years old was plowed over by a run-away tractor. As a result of his close encounter with that John Deere, he broke his pelvis, several vertebrae, and a few ribs. And he recovered. Carroll Harlow was tough.

In the last two years of her pop's life, it became too much to care for him at the family farmhouse. So, he moved into an assisted living facility, The Gordon House, where much to everyone's surprise, he thrived. It was only in his last few months that he began to have a difficult time.

On that last visit with him, her father was particularly removed from the world. He told Susan he'd been on this journey, and he'd found himself at this new place where the owner gave him three meals a day at considerable expense, (Carroll Harlow did not like to spend money.) but he didn't like it there and very much wanted to get back the Gordon house. So, he'd started walking back—he'd found a horse along the way—followed the horse for a while but still he hadn't found his way back.

And as much as Susan tried to tell him that he was at the Gordon house she could not convince him. His reality was not hers. She desperately wanted to visit with her lucid pop and not have him dwell in this dream world. She wanted him to be the pop she enjoyed visiting and talking to; He was still regularly beating her at checkers just a few months before he died.

But try as she might, Susan's logical explanations weren't working. Now he said he was on a metal contraption that was sliding rapidly down a hill, and he couldn't stop it or even slow it down it was out of control. He was scared.

Susan was really a bit beside herself at this point so she went to find one of his nursing aids, (they just loved him) to see if she could help. Elinore came in and listened to Susan's pop intently. While he was talking with her, he suddenly paused and asked her, "Hey, how did you get on this metal contraption with me?"

Without missing a beat, she said, "Well, Mr. Harlow—I just jumped."

Well then Susan convinced him that she too had jumped on the metal contraption.

But Mr. Harlow continued to get more and more agitated. At one point convinced that it was out of control moving so fast—he yelled out, "Somebody help me—How can we get this thing to stop."

Then the nurses aid, said, "It's a beautiful day Susan—why don't you take your dad on outside."

So, she wheeled her pop outside
 He seemed to be able to take in his surroundings a bit more.
 He remarked to Susan that neither the building across the street nor the big tree in the front yard was moving very much.
 To which she said, “well you know pop---maybe if they aren’t moving too much, maybe this metal contraption is slowing down enough for us to jump off.

He thought about that for a minute and then he said, “Ok—will you jump with me?”
 He reached out his hand for Susan to take.
 She took his hand and at the count of three they each jumped.
 Susan in the air, her pop in his wheelchair. And together holding one another’s hands they got off that out-of-control-metal-contraption.

And then He knew where he was—safe and sound at the Gordon House and he asked Susan to wheel him back to his room. “Room number 1 please.”

Hand in hand...

More than metaphor, symbol or sign, incarnational, physical presence matters. Hand in hand, throughout scripture the power of physical presence matters.

Jesus touched the man’s ear (Luke 22)

Jesus touched the man’s eyes (Mark 8)

The woman touched Jesus’ cloak (Matthew 9)

Ours is an incarnational faith, Jesus came into this world and lived and breathed, ate, and drank, suffered, and died, and rose again, physically. Ours is a religion rooted in our bodies. Saul’s conversion is physically traumatic. His subsequent healing is mystical and physical. He was led by hand to the city. Ananias physically comes and lays his hands on Saul. Physicality is essential.

Now more than ever having lived in this time of pandemic and isolation we know the pain of physical absence; we know the grace of physical presence.

As it becomes safer for us to be with one another, my prayer is that we make the time to be with each other, physically, to connect, to care, one with another, moving together, hand in hand, drawing each other to our destinies, healing our battered souls, and when it is appropriate helping each other to slow down and jump off this seemingly sometimes out of control contraption. Hand in hand friends, in faith let us move on together.

Amen.