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## Daily Meditations

### August 23 - 28, 2021

*The Biblical readings are taken from the Daily Office in the Book of Common Prayer for Year 2 and written by the St. Stephen's Meditation Writing Team: Dave Boyd, Jon Campbell, Becky Denton, Pat Gillory, Jay Nickel, Bob Reed, and Carroll Wilson.*

*Click on the scripture reading for each day to go directly to link. Current and past copies of the "Daily Meditations" may be found at: [ststeve.org/daily-meditations](http://ststeve.org/daily-meditations)*

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## PROPER 16:

*Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all people, to the glory of your name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.***

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## On the Road

*Monday, August 23, 2021*

### **Acts 26:1-23**

*"I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord answered, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you.'" - Acts 26:15-16*

This is one of three accounts of Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus included in Acts. Luke, the writer, quotes Paul in describing his miraculous encounter with the risen Jesus after the crucifixion. This experience completely reversed Paul's life. He had been a Pharisee who admitted he had hated the followers of Jesus and actually persecuted them. After his conversion, he became an evangelist who preached that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah of the Jews and spent the rest of his life converting people and helping establish what became the early Christian Church.

Paul's mystical experience was no airy-fairy esoteric story that appeared to him in a dream; it happened as he was traveling to Damascus actually intending to persecute the followers of Jesus. However, this mystical experience was so earth-shaking that he was inspired into action of an opposite nature. He dedicated his life to spreading the word about Jesus that resulted in the tangible results of conversions. Action inspired by Spirit is

always powerful.

Many people became believers, but of course there were others who couldn't accept something so startlingly different. The same is true today when we find the thought of miracles too illogical and tend to automatically reject anything that can't be explained by the scientific method.

Some people take a tongue-in-cheek attitude about such things as stories of swine that run off cliffs committing suicide. Thus they bow to the god of logic and reason and miss the metaphorical meaning of driving the unclean or destructive thoughts and beliefs from one's mind.

The whole of life is God's creation, and we need to refuse to let the ego claim credit. This would open the door to Spirit and allow us to receive the accompanying gifts of peace, love, and a meaningful life with compassion for those less fortunate.

I am thankful that through reading Luke's words I can feel at least a small portion of Paul's awe at encountering the risen Jesus. Help me also accept the charge of spreading the Truth that Paul died proclaiming.

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## You Must be Crazy!

*Tuesday, August 24, 2021*

### **Acts 26:24-27:8**

*"Indeed the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely; for I am certain that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner." - Acts 26:26*

Festus, the governor, had asked Paul if he had been "driven insane by too much learning." To me this sounded like a present-day politician discounting an opponent, but Festus actually could not understand Paul's presentation because it was about intra-Jewish religious matters unfamiliar to Festus. And maybe it was because Festus just wasn't as intelligent as Paul.

Paul decided it would be wise to avoid the local court and use his rights as a Roman citizen to request that the supreme court of the Empire hear his case where he thought he would be more likely to receive an impartial hearing. Festus called upon Agrippa, the king of a small province, who happened to be nearby, available, and was an expert on Jewish affairs, to help him frame the charges to be included in Paul's request.

Paul explained his case as having been a Pharisee who, as a result of a miraculous experience, had come to believe that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah of the Jews rather than being someone radically different and a troublemaker. Agrippa, his Jewish sister Bernice, and Festus heard Paul and decided that he had not done anything deserving the death penalty, which he would receive if found guilty. He had already spent two years in prison and could have been released at this point if he had not appealed to Caesar; therefore, he was sent to Rome, which required sailing across the Mediterranean Sea.

So Paul certainly had proven he wasn't insane and also that he had a good sense of humor when he implied Festus' lack of understanding was because he had been standing in a corner, and that Agrippa was better informed. Paul also was brave enough to proclaim his miraculous experience. This pleases me since I, too, believe in miracles, and I don't want my sanity questioned. I invite you to join me in appreciation of the wonders of this life seen as God's gifts rather than just accidental and haphazard coincidences.

# No Bon Voyage

Wednesday, August 25, 2021

## Acts 27:9-26

*"For last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.'" - Acts 27:22-23*

Paul's voyage to Rome was treacherous. The description is so explicit that one can almost smell the salt water and feel the pitching of the ship as the angry sea constantly battered it. He was an experienced traveler who knew what likely lay in store because of threatening weather and had advised them not to sail, but they had not listened to him. The storm ultimately engulfed them and was so severe that they had to dump anything they could find to lighten the ship and undergirded it for reinforcement. However, the storm kept worsening, and they did not expect to survive.

Even the Roman centurion in charge recognized Paul's superior knowledge and judgment when they were in the midst of the crisis. Paul became a source of strength for everyone. Among all of this desperate action trying to save the ship, Paul stayed calm and resolute like the quiet eye in the center of a hurricane. His presence conveyed the power and certainty of the God he worshipped. The motley crew aboard that ship would probably not have had any concept of a monotheistic creator or of salvation offered by a benevolent god, but Paul's actions and words and especially the angel's message must have had much meaning for them and certainly gave them hope.

Our faith in God offers that same surety to each of us even in times when we struggle to stay afloat amidst a pounding storm. That's when we learn to dump the costly cargo that we treasured so unwisely and hold on to the God we worship who offers us salvation. That's when we learn what truly matters in life.

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# A Successful Shipwreck

Thursday, August 26, 2021

## Acts 27:27-44

*"After he had said this he took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat." - Acts 27:36*

When Paul told the men about the angel's message that they would survive, he added that they would probably have to run aground on some island, and this is what happened. During that night the sailors thought they might be nearing land, and this was confirmed by soundings so they dropped anchors. In the morning they could see the shoreline that lay ahead and tried to avoid the rocks as they went ashore. Paul knew they had not eaten in many days so he advised them to eat something to sustain and strengthen them through the risky adventure that lay ahead, and this time they listened to him.

Paul gave thanks to God for his bread before eating it—a gesture that calls to mind the last supper and the later rite of communion. He did this in the presence of all the men, and they remembered the angelic message, ate, and felt encouraged.

The events of that perilous journey must have been etched in the memories on those survivors. Paul's actions and demeanor would have also left a lasting

impression on them. His strength, bravery, and practical advice made him a natural leader, and his presence provided evidence of the omnipotence of his god. Later, when his fellow voyagers each went their way, they must have related their experience to other people, and this may well have contributed to the spread of the early church in the Greco-Roman world.

The purpose of the trip was not one of evangelizing, but by living his faith Paul showed those fellow voyagers what it was to be a righteous man and to have faith in his powerful god. No matter where Paul was – in prison, in a synagogue, or even at sea – he served as an evangelist. He had given his life to Jesus, and he lived his beliefs. Each one of us could do the same.

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## Snake Language

*Friday, August 27, 2021*

### **Acts 28:1-16**

*"Paul gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it on the fire, when a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand." - Acts 28:3*

Many people will miss the significance of the story of the snake. It did not hurt Paul, and he shook it off. However, the natives on the island of Malta, where they had landed after the shipwreck, were very alarmed. They waited for him to "swell up and drop dead." They actually thought Paul might be a murderer who had escaped death at sea, and the snakebite and impending death would be retribution for his murderous deed.

The symbolism of a snake has different connotations. For instance, it can be associated with transformation since it sheds its skin; it is sometimes associated with wisdom but can be seen negatively as the "snake in the grass" – some hidden danger. It will always be remembered for the role it played in Eve's downfall.

Scholars have suggested that the story "demonstrates divine protection and power working through Paul,"<sup>1</sup> and that certainly rings true for me when I check it out with my intuition. I also become aware that God speaks to different people in different ways according to their ability to understand. Paul is an intellectual who, as a Pharisee, was well versed in knowledge of Jewish beliefs, but intellectual presentations would have been lost on these people who were uneducated. He spoke to them in words they understood and, more importantly with acts of kindness such as healing the ill. Paul had that indefinable aura of holiness that gained him respect and gratitude from these natives.

In America even to this day there are people who handle snakes as part of their worship of God. We may be tempted to judge this harshly, but to them it has deep religious meaning. It is our preference to follow rituals in a prayer book. Someone else might think this is an ineffective way to worship. God speaks to humans in many ways, but the very best way is to listen through the ear of the heart.

<sup>1</sup> *The New Interpreter's Study Bible, Abingdon Press, Ashville, Tennessee, pg. 2004.*

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## Turning a Deaf Ear

*Saturday, August 28, 2021*

### **Acts 28:17-31**

*"Go to the people and say, you will never understand and you will indeed look, but never perceive." - Acts 28:26*

These are the words of the prophet Isaiah quoted by Paul as he preached continually with little success while in Rome. He tried to convince the Romans that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scripture and the words of Isaiah, but they could not understand or would not believe him. He also concluded his efforts by saying, "the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles [because] they will listen."

Imagine the comparison he must have made in his own mind between the natives of Malta who were so eager to hear the word and believed his message opposed to the sophisticated but unreceptive Romans. The footnotes of *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* mention that some other ancient authorities add a 29th verse to Acts that describes the Jews departing, arguing vigorously among themselves. That amused me because it sounds so familiar—like some of the political discussions we hear frequently on TV.

How much good we probably shut out of our lives because we don't listen to what God says to us. This is the reason meditation is so valuable. It requires more time than prayer does, which is often too brief and too like a Christmas gift list and ignores the need for listening. God has more valuable gifts in store for us than our egos can imagine but requires that we stay quiet and tap into that priceless wellspring of wisdom that exists within our own consciousness.

Just as communication with our Lord helps us create a righteous life, listening carefully to one another helps create meaningful relationships because it communicates caring and fosters love.

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