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### Week 3: Kintsugi/Cup of our Lives

#### Acts 9: 1-20

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'

## John 21: 15-19

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

## Sermon:

I've been thinking about stories a lot lately.

Stories typically have a beginning, a whole lot of middle, and an end.

We like tidy stories, ones where we know what happens, even if it's not what we wanted. Knowing helps us get a hold on it, begin to make some sense of it.

But when we're in the middle of a story, we don't know when, or how, it will end, do we?

We're living in several really big stories in our country right now - from Supreme Court decisions to mind boggling amounts of money being spent on yet another war...

We're living in some stories in our own faith community - how do we faithfully live into decisions surrounding COVID and caring for everyone? What does it mean to be stewards of our building?

Each of us have complicated, ongoing stories in our own lives - ones that often have a whole lot of messy middle to wade through.

We like stories with endings. Last week Ben told a story about Rick Ankiel, the major league baseball player who took the broken shards of a promising career and turned it into something similar, but different. It was a kintsugi story - beauty born out of brokenness. It's a great story - one to give us hope when we find ourselves wondering what to do with the chips and cracks and pieces of our own lives.

But that wasn't the end of Ankiel's story. I want it to be so - I want the period at the end of the sentence to tell me he lived happily ever after. And maybe he has. I don't know. Most of the stories we live with are picked up and put down, with twists and turns and sometimes no clear endings.

In a podcast I listened to recently, in reflecting on how we live into the stories of our lives, pastor and writer Nadia Bolz-Weber said: We assume there is a period where really, quite often, there is actually a comma.<sup>1</sup>

We assume there's a period when really, there's actually a comma.

Our scripture stories today - they are the middle of stories - the messy parts that end with commas, not periods.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://nadiabolzweber.com/102-lenny-duncan/>

Simon Peter standing before the risen Christ, still damp from his early morning plunge into the sea. Being asked to take his broken life and do the work of the kingdom.

And, by the way, Christ tells him, you're going to be broken again and again. And - and Peter? The story isn't over. Follow me. Follow me. With all your cracks and flaws, come, follow me.

Saul - when we meet him he is successful, powerful, on a mission for God. This story has him being knocked to the ground - in an instant his world is changed, broken apart. In hindsight, when we put a period at the end of the story, we might say his life was broken open on the road to Damascus that day - that in his being laid low and broken that he found wholeness and the Truth with a capital T. But I'm guessing it didn't feel that way for Saul.

Or for his traveling companions, or for Ananias, who was called to approach this powerful, violent man, as a brother in need of healing. No, in the middle of that story, with a comma instead of a period.

Saul didn't make that journey out of brokenness alone. He made it into Damascus with the help of his companions, finding refuge in the house of Judas, met 3 days later by a stranger who came and laid hands on him. Saul was chipped, scarred, no longer powerful and self-sufficient. God continued to show up- through others, in unexpected ways.

I want to tell you another story of a chipped vessel - starting in the middle of his story, and not knowing the ending. Denny's, like all of ours, is a story that is still being written.

Denny was on the top bunk of his Montgomery County jail cell when, at 3 AM, a letter slid under the door. All these months in jail, and he'd never received a single piece of mail. Now, in the middle of the night, he crawls off his bunk and picks it up.<sup>2</sup>

Immediately he recognizes his mom's perfect cursive handwriting, and in the low light of the prison cell, opens it, seeing sparkles and stars, drawn in bright pink. Half the page is taken up by the statement - "It's a girl!, and her name is Jenna"

Age 19 and Denny was a dad. Stuck in a prison cell, not there with his girlfriend and new born baby. Not even able to help name his child.

As he sat on the floor of the prison cell, he realized he'd become everything he promised he wouldn't be when he left home.

That leaving home at age 13 - he believes that was a God given notion. It was God speaking to him. Even though the next 18 years were filled with all sorts of misery, Like Saul on the road to Damascus, Denny heard God's call to step into his life in new ways.

In that jail cell that night, he realized that all the things that he ran away from, the patterns he was trying to break, he had become those—in a very real way. It didn't matter that he wasn't physically or emotionally abusive, he still wasn't showing up; still hurting people he loved.

He felt like a complete failure, and when released a few months later, set to work to get his life together.

Life held together for a brief time, but then again, he was knocked to the ground. Fell hard, he says.

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<sup>2</sup> IBID.

Didn't see his daughter for 13 years after that.

In that time, Denny experienced 11 years of descent into some of the darkest and ugliest places of alcoholism, addiction and the prison industrial complex.

One day, in the midst of that darkness, a voice, a voice deep down inside of him - this experience of God, tells him he's getting sober that day.

And he did. With lots of help.

Over time, through AA, faith and the support of others, he began to repair his relationship with Jenna, his daughter, and eventually her mom.

Restoration didn't mean undoing the harm, no there were scars that are carried for life, but restoration for Denny and those he loved meant creating something new from the pieces.

There was a moment in time, Denny says - a year and a half into living as a family, and he called Jenna out for something she wasn't supposed to be doing. Well she let him have it - screamed and yelled, her face inches from his, telling him how he stole her life, broke her self worth.

When she was done naming all the hardship and ugliness, he walked outside and wept. Wept. Wept tears of joy, because he knew, then, that she trusted him enough to show him all of her brokenness. That trust confirmed for Denny that she wasn't going anywhere - they were re-building their messy, broken life, together.

I don't know the rest of their story. I'm guessing the cracks and chips and scars still run deep. No, I know they do. That's the way of broken things, isn't it?

The scars on the hands of the risen Christ were still there.

Simon Peter had to find new ways of being a leader, accepting the suffering that lay ahead.

Saul, we learn in other biblical accounts of his life, spent years in solitude learning how to make sense of his brokenness and what it meant to be a follower of Christ.

These vessels of ours, this country and world of ours - these parts that are chipped and cracked - seemingly beyond repair, can we trust the movement of the Spirit, and “Never put a period where God has placed a comma”?

Our scriptures are full of flawed, chipped, scarred individuals. Each one with a story that continued beyond the pages of our text.

Simon Peter is called to tend, feed, care for the flock.

Saul who stumbled, unseeing, into the life of those he intended to kill, and was met with healing touch.

Last week, Ben reminded us that the movement of the Spirit is unexpected. Our lives, our stories, cracked and chipped, are in process.

Never place a period where God has put a comma.

Like Peter, like Saul and Ananias, like Denny - may we be surprised by the unfolding way that God moves in our midst, making beauty out of brokenness.

Our stories, the big ones, and the small ones, they aren't over. Just as Saul was led by his companions, called brother by Ananias, one that he sought to punish... just as Denny found new life in the messiness of restoration...

May we be vessels, stories, open to transformation and change, trusting that God is still at work in and through us.