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Acts 9: 1 – 6 (7 – 20) Psalm 30
 Revelation: 11 – 1 John 21: 1 – 19

“You have turned my wailing into dancing; you have put off my sack-cloth and clothed me with joy. Therefore, my heart sings to you without ceasing; O Lord my God, I will give you thanks for ever.”

I think I’ve shared this story with you before about Winchester Cathedral in England. Winchester is a very grand cathedral, built first in Norman and then in Gothic style, primarily between the 11th and 14th centuries. Typical of Gothic design, the walls are laced with beautiful stained glass windows that flood the sanctuary with light. The center aisle is longer than that of any other Gothic cathedral in Europe. And at the far end of that aisle, opposite the altar, is the great West Window. Our window is structured similarly to Winchester’s West Window, but it would take at least 6 or 7 of our windows to come close to the size of Winchester’s. The West Window is huge: nine panels of stained glass wide, by six panels high in the middle.

Stained glass windows were designed to tell Biblical stories to the mostly illiterate population. Windows might also feature favorite saints and local benefactors. And the great West Window at Winchester probably did all of that at one time. But in 1642, during the English Civil War, Oliver Cromwell’s troops deliberately broke the window into thousands of pieces of glass, as well as desecrated other parts of the cathedral. After Cromwell’s thugs left and it was safe to come out, the townspeople came back to the cathedral and gathered together every bit of broken glass they could find. Each of them hid the pieces in their homes, until Cromwell was defeated in 1660. Then, all of the people brought their shards out of hiding. They realized it was impossible to reassemble the windows as they had been. The West Window was irretrievably broken, and so they just put them back in a way to fit into all the panels.

In the 1980s or 90s, Sony took photographic images of each of the panels. Then, using a computer, they attempted to figure out what went where to recreate the original design. Although the computer managed to figure out a few small portions of the windows (which were then reassembled), it was too great of a puzzle for the computer to solve. Besides those few small areas that were matched up, all of the other bits and pieces are essentially still undisturbed. Coming out of all that brokenness is a wonderful, sort of fluid, mosaic with its own random beauty.

Novelist Michael Chabon writes that in childhood, we “experience the world as unbelievably big and beautiful, but also as irretrievably broken.” Sooner or later, whether we choose to or not, we encounter the hurtful parts of our broken world – heartbreak and failure, violence and cruelty, cowardice and duplicity, grief and sadness, to name just a few. Our innocence is lost in a world that is as fractured and as sharp as a pile of broken glass. In adolescence, Chabon writes, we keep trying to reconcile these two seeming opposites; we try to return into the misty memories of a world unbroken. But we come to realize that beauty and brokenness are almost always interwoven, locked in a dance. This second experience, according to Chabon, is as powerful as the first experience in childhood, and the desire, the yearning, for a glorious, un-fragmented world haunts us all our lives.

In adulthood, we respond to the shattered bits and pieces in different ways, Chabon notes. Some of us sit amongst the shards and just try to survive. Others of us break the broken pieces into ever smaller pieces. Still others of us, according to Chabon, “pass through the scattered pieces of that great jigsaw puzzle and start picking up a piece here and a piece there, with a vague, yet irresistible notion that perhaps something can be done about putting the thing back together again.” Rather like the people in Winchester after their cathedral had been ravaged.

Pulling the fractured pieces of our world back together again will always be an imperfect process. The Rev. Dan Clendinen, [*Journey with Jesus, April 14, 2013*] writing about this, says that (unlike the puzzles in our parish hall), we can't see the lid of the box and so we don't know what an unbroken world is supposed to look like when it is completed. And there will always be pieces that are missing. [Many of us marvel at the 18,000 pieces that Brenda and Gary Dartr assembled to create the huge puzzle that is framed in our Chapel. But even in that puzzle, there are at least 10 or 11 pieces missing.] Clendinen, quoting Chabon writes that “The most we can hope to accomplish with our handful of salvaged bits is to build a little world of our own.” And each of these little worlds, almost like doll houses or railroad layouts, are microcosms of the broken original world. They are partial approximations, imperfect replicas, mirroring what we each experience. But even in the midst of their imperfection, these little worlds can be “faithful maps” of our beautiful, yet broken, real world.

Picking up the pieces and reassembling them. That's what both Peter and Paul are invited to do in our lessons today. Peter has to pick up the pieces of his broken life – the loss of his friend and teacher, and his own betrayal and abandonment of that friend, and the larger picture of the now fragmented and scattered disciples. His denial of Jesus is something that has almost assuredly been gnawing at Peter since that time standing around the charcoal fire in the courtyard, hearing the rooster crow, and finding Jesus looking at him. And now, here he is, standing around another charcoal fire, this one provided by the risen Jesus. How sharp those fractured pieces of himself must feel on the inside of Peter right now. In an echo of his three denials, Peter responds to Jesus' seemingly repetitive question, “Peter, do you love me?” with “Yes, Lord, you know that I do.” Peter's consternation at being asked to repeat this so many times comes out in his third and last reply, “Lord, you know everything. You *know* that I love you.” Perhaps Jesus' repetition is like water washing over rocks in a streambed – it wears away and softens the sharp edges, the harsh memories of that other charcoal fire, but it does not happen without the pain of remembrance. Jesus redeems Peter's three denials with these three affirmations, like putting broken pieces of glass back into a mosaic. Peter will go on, strengthened by this moment, to pick up the bits and pieces and draw the disciples together into the stained glass mosaic that is the early church.

Paul, in his Damascus Road experience, faces a similar call – first to put back together the shards of his life by recognizing his brokenness, and then to assemble an ever wider expanse of equally imperfect converts into a similar mosaic. Before the risen yet unseen Jesus clobbered Paul with a cosmic 2 x 4, Paul, formerly Saul, was “breathing out murderous threats” and generally acting like a bounty hunter to persecute those whom he thought were defiling the Jewish faith. And though Paul goes from being one of the biggest persecutors of the early church to perhaps its greatest propagator, Paul's past will always cast a long, dark shadow on his life. He will recount it a number of times in his letters, and always honestly and openly. He doesn't claim to be anywhere near perfect. But just as

Peter's affirmations clear the way forward for him, Paul's conversion experience enables him to transcend his past and use the broken elements to create something new.

Notice, though, that there are cautionary words regarding both of them. Redemption or restoration, affirmation or conversion, are in themselves not perfect. They are signs which point to a more perfect future. They are the "yes, but not yet" feature of our continuing life and work in the world. To Peter, Jesus says, 'When you were younger, you could take care of yourself just fine and be independent. But when you are old, you will not be able to take care of yourself. You will be lead where you'd rather not go.' Henri Nouwen uses this to describe the mature Christian life in a nutshell: to go where we'd rather not go.

Regarding Paul, Jesus' cautionary words are to Ananias, the faithful disciple who *does* go where God leads him – to heal and to claim Saul/Paul as a member of the Way. Jesus tells Ananias that he has chosen Paul, a former enemy, to now be a chosen instrument for the proclamation of the Gospel to the Gentiles and their kings and yes, to all of Israel. Jesus, who knows just what suffering can mean, assures Ananias that Paul will suffer on behalf of Jesus and the Gospel. Not in revenge for his former life, but as an observation of the reality of the brokenness of the world. Paul will later note that it is only through 'trials and temptations' that we inherit the Kingdom of God. And, as if to confirm the brokenness of the world, we know that, according to tradition, both Peter and Paul are martyred for their faith.

I invite each of you this week to think about the broken shards of our lives and to imagine them reassembled into a new creation, a beautiful, random mosaic of stained glass that allows the light of Christ to shine through. Because, like the people of Winchester, and like Peter and Paul, we are called to pick up the broken shards of our own lives and of this world and, with the help of God, make a new creation out of them. We are to help turn people's wailing into dancing. To help people be clothed in joy rather than sack-cloth. To redeem the brokenness and make it whole. Or at least as whole as possible in this world. Our replicas of a beautiful world will never be perfect. Some pieces will always be missing. But we should never lose hope. We may fail. We may fall. And we may do it many times. But we rise again, always ready to make a new start. In the words of Frederick Buechner, we get up as many times as we fall. Why? Because, as Christians, we are "people who have been delivered just enough to know that there's more where that came from" and we are people "whose experience of that little deliverance that has already happened [in ourselves], and whose faith in the deliverance-still-to-happen, is what sees [us] through the night." It's why, even in the midst of our imperfect lives and world, our hearts sing to God without ceasing, and we give God thanks forever. +