

Words of Introduction – Gerald Neufeld

The scripture passage read today is part of a larger story where a man named Saul is going around arresting new Christians and dragging them off to jail. He strongly believed he was doing God's will by persecuting people who followed Jesus Christ. During an incident where he was blinded by a bright light, he heard the voice of Christ, and he realised that it was Christ whom he was persecuting. After the incident he was blind, and it was then that God called the Christian, Ananias, to go visit him and pray for him that he may see again. After the prayer, something like scales falls from Saul's eyes, and he can finally see. His vision is not just healed, his heart is changed and he finally sees the truth of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one through whom God showed God's love to the world. Saul's life was changed. He was later known as the Apostle Paul, one of the worlds greatest evangelists.

Today, we are here to celebrate the work of Jesus Christ in Jay, as well as in all of us. Jay wasn't a persecutor of Christians, but he has a sense of God's leading in his life, and there are moments when he's sensed that God was giving him a message, leading him to take a step in his faith journey. We might not these moments very often, but we all have times when, by God's grace, we sense a message from God. It may be just a thought through which we sense that God is urging us to take a step of faith. Maybe it's a sense that we need to change a direction. Saul went from being blind to seeing. In a sense, we all have areas where we are blind, and in need of the light of God's message to us in our lives. When Ananias prays for Saul, he is healed – something like scales falls from his eyes and he can see. Saul is then baptised. It's important to note that he was baptised AFTER he was healed and could see. The baptism was symbolic of the change that had already happened in Saul.

For us, baptism is a symbolic ritual. It is a time for the person being baptised to share publicly a sense of the leading of God's Spirit that has already happened inside him or her. Jay has sensed the leading of the Spirit in this way. Baptism is not a destination. It's a departure point. Baptism is a "visual testimony of our commitment to Christ." It is a declaration of an intention to follow Jesus Christ for life, seeking the guidance of God's Spirit. It's a declaration that we are all in need of the grace of Christ.

The church represents the body of Christ. Just like the human body has many parts, we are given different spiritual gifts to build each other up as we seek to follow the way of Christ. When someone is baptised, the person is taking a step of faith in walking with God. But, not only that, the person also formally commits to becoming a member of the church. Part of the baptism service involves the church representatives who witness the baptism. They also commit to walking along in faith with the person who is baptised. Since, Jay has not yet found a home church here in Tokyo, he has chosen to get baptised with MJCF, in this natural location.

Pouring or sprinkling water symbolises the pouring out of the Spirit of God on those who believe. Today, we will be using that form of baptism.

I invite Jay now, to share something of his faith journey.

Testimony – Jay Neufeld

Growing up in a Christian household, going to church every Sunday was “atarimae”, something I didn’t question or argue against. Christian practices like giving thanks before meals and praying were built like habits and encouraged, along with your “normal” habits, like brushing your teeth. Last year, I moved to Japan to start my university life and started living away from my family for the first time. The freedom that I suddenly obtained was thrilling. I could eat anything; eat all the snacks and drink all the pop I wanted, with no one scolding me. I spent my Sundays traveling or hanging out with friends. I wasn’t attending church at all, which made me feel guilty, as I knew I had to return one day. With all the entertainment in Tokyo and new exciting things in my university life, it was easy to forget about God and the church, but it was at my mental lows - when things weren’t going well - that I found myself thinking about God and how I always used to pray in times of need.

It was in June when I failed my dormitory’s ‘Residential Assistant’ application that I fell to my lowest point. This was an extremely important application that would guarantee me to live in the wonderful dormitory I live in until graduation - free of rent. Failing to become an RA meant that my contract would expire the following year and I would have to leave my dorm, leaving the friends and connections I made there, and having to find a different place to stay. I believed I was perfect for the role, and had the support of many friends and current RA’s at the dorm, so when I found out I didn’t make it, it left me in shock. I passed through the stages of grief: denial that I wasn’t qualified for the job, anger towards those who judged me unworthy, depression as the truth settled in, and so forth. It was one of the lowest points of my life.

The following day, while eating lunch with a childhood Christian friend, whom I was reunited with for the first time in 10 years, I was asked if I was still regularly attending church. It stung me to answer that I hadn’t been attending at all, as it showed how I had given into my selfish desires while in contrast, he had been faithfully attending all this time. After talking to him about my situation, he told me I should start going to church again. It was such an obvious and common idea that had been circulating my subconscious over the past few months, yet this time, it almost felt like God speaking through my friend, calling to me. It was enough for me to set my morning alarm on June 26 and participate in MJCF’s worship. There, I decided to really listen and pay attention to the sermon, not just drift through it like I always did in the past.

That week, Pastor Yoshiyuki was speaking, including his struggles of falling into despair while he was hospitalized in the past. He preached of how we experience things we may not want to experience and lose sight of God in the midst of our troubles, yet we must trust in God’s plan for us. He talked about the March 11 earthquake and tsunami disaster, and quoted Dr. Akira Sato of Fukushima, who said, “When I saw the things I could see disappear in an instant, I really understood that such

things - (the things I could see) - cannot be depended on.” I instantly realized that I was too caught up in trying to pave my own path to success, when God already had a plan for me. I felt like a burden was lifted off my shoulders when I understood that I am in God's care, and that I only needed to depend on God.

I'd like to read the last part of Pastor Yoshiyuki's sermon, he ended with:

One elderly teacher said, "Faith, in the end, is an experience. In that sense, it is also important to have a God experience. (experience of being taken care of by God) is important. We are sometimes forced to experience things that we would prefer not to. We see no hope of going through it. We believe that no matter how unpleasant the experience is, it is ultimately in God's hands, and that God has deep thoughts about it as well. Then hope comes. And that joyless experience must surely be transformed into a "grace that is strengthened". Believe that God's hand is there, surrounding us in every moment. (Again, I would like to say this) - "Be strong, I am with you, do not be afraid."

Finally Today, I have two messages for you: "Trust in God's help" and "Trust in God's care. Ayako Miura once said. In life, there is no such thing as 'this is the end. God is there. God is in charge. These are the words of God's experience. The Lord said, "Be strong, I am with you; do not be afraid. With these words as our support, let us walk forward in this life of faith, which is full of many things

The sermon by Pastor Yoshiyuki felt like it was hand-tailored for exactly what I was going through, like it was God speaking directly to me. This was my “kami keiken” that I needed. I always believed that God answered my prayers and was watching over me, and realized that this situation was no different, I just had to trust in God's care. It was this experience that made me feel that this was a sign for me to come back to God. Not only to come back, but to follow God in a new light, to follow him on my own will.

I spent the following weeks attending different churches and thinking about baptism. I was always told by my father that I understood what it meant to be baptized and how there is no unmet condition that's stopping me. However, I didn't truly wish it from my heart until after that experience. To me, becoming a disciple of Jesus means to live a Jesus-centered life. I don't want to live a life controlled by money, by status, or by how many social media followers I have. I want Jesus to be the center of my life and set me free from everything that binds me to the materialistic world. Living in Tokyo, I feel like I understand this better than ever. I believe the joy and true happiness I seek cannot be bought with money, I believe the stability and peace I seek within me cannot be obtained no matter how much fame or recognition I receive. I believe I need God to be the center of my life.

To live as a Christian in the Mennonite tradition means that the church and congregation is included in your journey. I've visited a few other churches but concluded that I feel most at home at MJCF, and want to continue being apart of this community. Although I don't know what the future holds, I can rest easy knowing that God is looking after me. I want to continue to build my relationship with God, as well as the church, and that journey starts with baptism. I hope MJCF can support me on this journey, and I want to also become a contributing member to the church. Thank you.