

## Paul – An Impression

### A Sermon by Janik Livera

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Like I asked our youth earlier. What makes up your identity? What makes up your story? What are some of the pieces that make up your character? Is it where your family is from? Is it where you grew up? Is it your education? Your job, your likes or dislikes? Your faith? What about how you arrived at this church, even this country? Our stories of origin create the people we are today. Many tell me that it's hard to believe that I moved to Canada when I was 14 because my accent has faded away leaving only twinges of it behind. Get me into a spirited conversation with another Sri Lankan and it seems to creep back in. What about national identity? Our brothers and sisters have just across the border have a well scripted national story but within that story there are pieces missing, some forgotten, some suppressed. Ask any fully immersed American what the thanksgiving story is and I'm sure that the story of the pilgrims arriving on Plymouth Rock and celebrating a once collaborative meal with the first people of the land would be at the tip of their tongues. Go to the south and the story of the civil war is relived and sometimes re-enacted amongst the people. The African American story is deep and rich with stories of oppression and slavery highlighted with overcoming that pain and rejoicing in a de-segregated land. What about a Canadian national story? Can we retell a legendary thanksgiving story or do stories of hockey and politics read louder? Do we know the stories of how this country came to being? On whose broken backs did this country come together? The stories of oppression that are suppressed? 2014 was the year of reconciliation here in British Columbia. An opportunity to hear the stories, difficult painful stories, of a people who were asked to forget their story of origin and conform to one that did not belong to them. And in doing so a different chapter was written. A different impression is made on those writing and hearing this part. I grew up in Mission at the edge of the Fraser valley. The city of Mission was a railroad town, the city of mission was formed around a Benedictine monastery by monks on a Mission. The City of Mission was small and rural, and has stories of cars and horses having to share a bridge over the Fraser with the trains until the new bridge was built. But what we don't hear is that the City of Mission was built on land that was taken away from the Japanese farming community when they were held in internment camps during the war. Stories are deep, they are complex and they change the way something or someone is viewed when the story behind the story is told. This is how Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul the Apostle, had to define who it is he was and why he was engaging the world around him the way he did.

We start off by hearing that Paul is about to be taken off to the Barracks. I don't know about you but if someone is about to be hauled off to jail, especially someone so influential to the context of the bible, I would want to know about why this is about to happen. Paul was arrested in the temple for... *"This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place; more than that, he has actually brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place."* Speculation, because earlier Trophimus from Ephisea was seen in the city and they presumed Paul had brought him into the temple. This call by the people to stop Paul was followed by Paul being seized and thrown out of the temple and the doors unceremoniously shut behind him. The story of the people of Jerusalem had a theme of survival. These were people who had their story written in Holy Scripture. A story that was co-authored by God. A people that had walked through the wilderness into the Promised Land, suffered through hardship and turmoil, saw kings called into power and kings fail their people. Their beloved land occupied by Assyrians. Their people scattered from their home. The return of the Diaspora, or the

scattered people back to Jerusalem. And through all this God, Yahweh himself, held these people in the palm of his hand. This was their story and Paul was blurring the lines between the Jews and the Gentiles. The Promised Land was for all! The Messiah had come and we were the ones who crucified him. Jesus is risen and will come again to judge the living and the dead. This new story was a threat, it threatened the very identity that the Jewish people had for themselves. Paul had to pay for this, the temple was a holy site, this was the house of God and he was telling the people that our story was wrapping up. The messiah was going to return and we would have to be counted. It wasn't enough that Paul was now shamed and thrown out of the house of God. The people were so angry they started to stone Paul. Threaten our story, well he will pay with his. If it wasn't for the Roman legionaries stationed close by, Paul's story would have ended right there. But they intervened and they carried him away to the tribunal. The mob was so bad that Paul was hoisted onto the shoulders of the soldiers and the crowds that surrounded them called for him to be put away. Just as he was about to be taken to the barracks Paul spoke. In a quiet beaten down voice he asked "May I say something?" The tribunal surprised by this request also realized that this was also a case of mistaken identity. He was assumed to be an Egyptian who led people astray but Paul spoke. I am Paul, A Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia. Cilicia was an important city. Rome was the capital of the empire but Cilicia that was the hub to the east. A bustling metropolis. It is the Vancouver to Victoria. The province may be run from Victoria but the activity and the hustle and bustle, Vancouver is the source for that. Paul was from this important city and this carried some weight. Can I speak to the people?

Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. The crowd who moments ago wanted him in jail, wanted him dead. And through the grace of God the crowd quietened. They stood still and listened. Paul spoke to them, not in Greek like he learned when he grew up. Not in Latin the language of the empire, but in the language of the Hebrew people.

"Brothers and fathers, this was in reverence for the elders that were present, Listen to the defense that I now make before you."

<sup>2</sup>When they heard him addressing them in Hebrew,<sup>[a]</sup> they became even more quiet. Then he said:

<sup>3</sup>"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel.

Gamaliel was a rabbi, a teacher who was highly respected and to be at the feet meant that Paul was educated in the history and theology of the Jews by a teacher who knew intimately the details - the story of these people. Educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today.

Paul was not a stranger. Paul was not unaware of the story of these people. Paul after all was one of these people. His story was another line in their story. Paul was not an outsider who did not know their ways and history of this people. Paul was fully immersed in this story. Paul's story of origin was one that was written among these people. His faith was their faith. His education was their education. His teachers were their teachers. His story was not just a line but intertwined in that of the people. His work was not trying to undermine these people. Instead Paul was proclaiming that their story was not yet done. God continues to co-author and narrate who they are. Through Jesus, God has essentially written Himself back into the story. And it was a mirror of the story that was written already. God delivered God's people out of slavery and oppression and into the Promised Land. God through Jesus, had now delivered God's people from the clutches of Sin and death and from a life devoid of God. Paul was proclaiming this story and telling of the coming of a new age. An Age where Jesus was king, not the

empire. Where truth, justice, and righteousness were the qualities they were seeking. A God who was no longer just in the temple and ruled from heaven but one who walked among them and with them – guiding and shaping their story. Paul makes an impression on those who did not know him. Paul's story surprises and compels a crowd that wanted to kill him to be quiet and to listen and to hear that God is working in their lives. Paul still continues to get people to be quiet and to listen. Paul was apocalyptic. He believed that Jesus would return before he was dead. Paul didn't get that God works on God's time and the world that needed to hear Jesus's story was much larger than he could imagine. But Paul speaks to us. Paul's actions were recorded in the book of Acts. Paul's letters form much of what we call the New Testament. Paul was speaking this New Testament - this new covenant that God made with God's people through Jesus Christ. God continues to love God's people so that the people can go out into the world and be a blessing to one another - to continue the story that God started. To be co-authors in a story that speaks of love, justice, peace, and righteousness for all, not just those names in the Bible. Every corner of the earth will speak, stand up before a crowd and the crowd will go silent. To hear the story of your origin, of where you came from and of how God has co-authored you and given you the gifts to spread the good news that is Jesus the Christ, our king over all kings, is leading us to God's commonwealth. The promised land.