

Chosen Instruments

Acts 9:1-20

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Third Sunday of Easter

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One of my all-time favorite novels is John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. I don't recall that I've ever discussed it in a sermon, although it's entirely possible that I have, after writing hundreds of them throughout my adult life. If you've never read it, I highly recommend it. There are sad parts, mysterious elements to the story, powerful images of love and grace, and some scenes that are flat out hilarious.

The novel is narrated by the adult character John Wheelwright and set in the 1980s, but there is another track of the story in which John is looking back at his childhood growing up in a small New Hampshire town with his best friend, Owen Meany. Owen is an unusual child who grows up to be a likably strange adult. He is physically tiny, and he has an unnaturally shrill voice caused by a damaged larynx. From the time he is a young kid, Owen makes statements from time to time that he believes he is "God's instrument," someone with a mission to fulfill, a destiny that he cannot avoid. At first the reader thinks he just kind of a weird kid – perhaps one who thinks more theologically than most children do. However, as John and Owen's shared childhood unfolds we start to wonder if Owen is right. Different life events are recounted, which in the moment seem funny or tragic or just odd. It is only at the end of the story that we realize Owen was right. There was something he had to do that only he could do, and most of the stories that make up his life turn out to be pieces of his tapestry. All of his quirks come together in a haunting way to bring him to this one moment in which he sacrifices his own life to save the lives of a group of Vietnamese children.

Owen's courage is even more evident when we grasp the fact that he has *known* since childhood that his whole life is leading to this moment. Due to dreams and visions that come upon Owen Meany throughout his life, he knows the precise date of his death and he knows some of the circumstances that will lead to it. Owen hopes that he is wrong, and even his friends dismiss his convictions, thinking he is just having terribly vivid dreams but that they aren't based in reality. When we see in the last pages of the book that Owen has been right all along, we can hardly understand how he walked right into a situation that would end in his death. I don't think I need to point out the parallels here between Owen Meany and Jesus - but Owen is not resurrected. At the end of the story, Owen's friend John is still hoping that he will be.

I've read the novel twice and will do so again this summer – it's one of the readings for my Colorado retreat in July. By the end of the novel, when everything finally makes sense, we see that Owen really was an instrument of God. But that raises the question for me of "Aren't we all?" I don't believe that every move we make or every mundane decision leads us to one intense moment in which our destiny is fulfilled...John Irving has used some narrative license with the way he ties

everything up so neatly at the end of *Owen Meany*. I do think, though, that each of us has a call on our lives. There are things that will not get done, lives that will not be touched, if we do not each pay attention to where God is leading us and what God needs for us to do. That includes even the most flawed and broken among us.

Whenever I come across God's words in Acts 9:15 I think about Owen Meany. God says to Ananias, about Saul (soon to be known as Paul): "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel..." There is no reason, at least on paper, why Saul should be the one chosen for such a task. Saul is a known persecutor of Jesus' followers. He's involved in arresting and imprisoning those who claim Jesus as Lord. The first time Saul is mentioned is in Acts 7, at the stoning death of Stephen (the first martyr). We read that those who were throwing the stones "laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul," and that "Saul approved of their killing him." Even if he didn't actually throw rocks himself, Saul condoned and enabled the ones who executed Stephen for his faith in Jesus. In the third verse of Acts 8, Saul is obviously *all in* on going after the Christians. We read that "Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison. Not someone who would be my first pick to lead the early church and spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

And yet...God chooses him. God appears to Saul, dramatically, as Saul travels the road to Damascus. The writer describes a light from heaven, Saul falling to the ground, and a disembodied voice admonishing Saul that he (Saul) is in fact persecuting Jesus with his harassment of the Christians. There were men traveling with Saul who could hear the voice but did not see the bright light. The last thing the voice says is "Get up, enter the city, and you will be told what to do."

I find it interesting that Saul is blinded in this encounter...there's all kinds of symbolism embedded there. Saul was actually more blind before he traveled the road to Damascus...he either couldn't or wouldn't see who Christ was, and therefore was missing opportunities to love and serve him. Moreover, his zeal for protecting the tradition of the temple priests led him to do terrible things to people he did not understand. He was so blinded by the way things had always been that he failed to perceive what could be.

Could it be that Saul had to be literally, physically blinded as a way of humbling him, helping him to see how dependent we all are on God's wisdom and guidance? When we can acknowledge that dependence, we finally start to move from having eyesight to having vision – or sharing God's vision for the world. Furthermore, being blinded allowed Saul to see who Jesus was and who God was calling him (Saul) to be. What are the scales on our own eyes, the barriers that prevent us from grasping the truth that God can use us – that God *needs* us if God's vision is to be fully realized?

The experience in Damascus, and afterwards at the hand of Ananias, so transformed Saul that he changed his name as a way of demonstrating that he was, literally, a new person – after the conversion he is known as Paul, the Apostle Paul, and we all know how instrumental he is in sharing the faith through Greece, Rome,

and Asia Minor. The church as we know it would not exist today if Paul had not stepped up to organize it and written down some of the basic expectations of life lived in community. That's what can happen when we are willing to live life as God's chosen instruments.

And, let's take just a moment to give a shout out to Ananias. He is not named as such, but I see him as an instrument of God too. We know that at the time of this story Ananias was already a believer, a disciple who lived in Damascus. It's easy to see why he was wary of Saul. Nevertheless, he followed God's instructions to go and lay hands on Saul and restore his eyesight. It is only the unifying power of God that could make Ananias go to Saul, this person who started to Damascus with the explicit mission of tormenting Christians, and address him as "Brother Saul." Many of the wonders God performs could not happen without a whole chain of people who choose to be obedient, who intentionally follow God's lead, even when it places them in peril. The road to Damascus is really about two of God's instruments and how they converge in the right time and place. Together, they are a turning point in our history as a people.

And where does that leave us? We are two weeks out from the pageantry and jubilation of Easter Sunday. Perhaps we are a little like those early disciples...starting to come to grips with the concept of the Risen Christ, but unsure what to do next. Occasionally we find ourselves asking the question "Now what?" What do we do and how do we live in such a way that the resurrection is a visible reality? How do we live as God's chosen instruments?

The answers to those questions are going to be different for each person. We all have the same call-to live in ways that are useful to God and bring glory to Christ. However, the talents and skills and interests we have are so marvelously varied that there are millions of ways to be God's instruments. There is the added problem of individuals who believe they are called by God to certain positions (usually to positions high in prestige or personal power) – or who allow huge swathes of a population to claim they are called by God – and then they use their elevated position to harm other people. That's a major problem, one we could talk about for days. For right now, it's sufficient to acknowledge that such a problem exists and that we have to be wary of it – both in ourselves and in our observations of the world around us. My sense is that when we are truly called by God – whether it is to teaching or public leadership or dentistry or pastoral ministry or anything else – God does not call us to demean other people, to denigrate their humanity, or to exploit them for our own gain. God's call is along the lines of Jesus' words to Peter in John 21: "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep." For today, I'll leave it at that.

To discern a way forward, I go back to one of my favorite literary characters mentioned earlier – Owen Meany. Owen remained steadfast in his conviction that he was God's instrument, even when those closest to him thought he was way off base. Owen *pays attention* to the way things in life fit together, leading to a situation where he can save others when no one else possibly could. Furthermore, Owen trusted his own instincts, even when they led him to places others thought were strange or

self-destructive. I offer the possibility that that's where we start as we live into our identity as God's instruments. Pay attention. Trust your instincts. Thanks be to God. Amen.