

“Conversion, Call and Community”
Sermon delivered 4-18-10
Immanuel Lutheran Church
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Acts 9:1–6 [7–20]

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. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But 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. ⁸Saul 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. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. ¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹The 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, ¹²and 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." ¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." ¹⁵But 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; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷So 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." ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."]

Familiarity

Our familiarity with Bible stories can be a blessing and a curse at the same time. The story of Paul on his way to Damascus is a familiar one. So familiar, most of you probably know the name of the horse he was riding. Just kidding. No horse is mentioned in this story. Michelangelo paints a horse into this story. Our familiarity with a story may cause us to lock onto a particular understanding, and block out other possible words from the Lord for our lives. If you are like me, in the world of the church I like things to be consistent, steady, stable, with a strong bent toward consistency. But, this bent blocks wonder, serendipity, mystery, and surprises, along with the dreaded sense of change.

Through scripture, God is one who constantly breathes new life. Jesus said, "You can't put new wine into old wine skins." Darn it! Conversion stories - from Abraham, Moses, Amos, Paul to our own lives, are about the new thing God is doing in our lives. This is difficult to put mildly, because we all resist. We love hymns like, *Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine*, but what if someone wrote a hymn like *Blessed disturbance, I am Jesus?* What would happen if you stopped locking out the movement of God in your life? What do you fear would happen?

Paul

Let us examine your life through the lens of Paul's transformation by God. God breathes new life into Paul by changing the way he saw God, faith, tradition, and other people. I am sure you would agree that you have made up your own mind on these issues, and it would be difficult for even God to change it - short of a catastrophe. Can we agree on this?

The Book of Acts addresses Paul's conversion in three different places. The lesson we read this morning is from chapter 9, and then we have the conversion in a different light in chapter 22 and 26. In order to make any sense out of this story, you need to know the story behind the story. How many of you think that Saul changed his name to Paul after his conversion? How many think his name was always Saul? Saul/Paul didn't change his name due to his conversion. This is an urban legend. Saul is simply the Hebrew form of the Hellenistic name for Paul. So, I will refer to Saul as Paul.

Paul was convinced this Jesus and his followers were dead wrong. The proof, for Paul, lied in the fact Jesus died a criminal's death. This was enough for him to be convinced God had rejected him and his disciples. So, by the time he gets to Damascus, in our reading this morning, he has developed a reputation as one who wants *the people of the Way*, (Christians) to be obliterated from the face of the earth (8:3). He put his stamp of approval on the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr. (8:1) He disagreed with his teacher Gamalia, who wanted to leave the people of the Way alone because he thought that if the people were of man they would just disappear, but if they were of God, nothing could stop them (5). Paul got a letter from the high priest to go to Damascus to bind up the people the Way and bring them to Jerusalem. On the way he was thrown to the ground, became blind, and was asked by Jesus why he was persecuting him.

Conversion

The word "converted" is a loaded word for us in the faith/denominational tradition. Paul goes through a change/conversion after this dramatic experience on the road to Damascus, but he doesn't convert from one tradition to another. He didn't change from being a Jew to being a Christian. Christianity, as we know it, did not yet exist. What you need to know about Paul's conversion was that the people of the Way, the disciples of Jesus, considered themselves to be Jews. Like, for example, Mormons consider themselves to be Christian, and we consider ourselves to be Christian, also the Jehovah Witness' and the Seventh Day Adventist, and the Roman Catholics. In Judaism they had sects. known as people of the Way, Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots, and Essenes. Different messages - like between Lutherans and Catholics. The people of the Way believed the love of God was for the world, for all people, this belief didn't take away your Jewishness. They were a family and fought like a family. Only later when the Way evolved into Christianity did it break from its Jewish roots. Paul's conversion was not anti-semitic.

Conversion for Paul is different than the Pope becoming Lutheran, Bishop Wells becoming LDS, or Rabbi Fink becoming a Buddhist. Conversion for Paul was a new way of seeing God, letting go of the God he had locked on to. He began seeing in an exclusive manner, and embracing the God in Christ that makes all one - no male, female, Jew, Gentile, slave, free, black, white, poor, rich, sober,

drunk.” Paul remains the same believer in God, but shifts from exclusivity to inclusivity. This is what conversion does to us.

For me, the greater conversion in the reading this morning seems to be Ananias, who is a member of the Way, called by God to go to the house on Straight Street to heal a man who wanted to get rid of people like him. Would you accept such a challenge? I don't know if I would. He does protest, and a considerable amount of ink is spilt on him. He accepts the mission. His opening words to Paul were “Brother Saul”. Now most of us have an opinion about others, and they have an opinion about us. We, like Ananias, wonder if a leopard can change its spots. Can people do life differently with the power of God in their lives? Can we see others, and can they see us in a transforming light? Can you, or would you, greet another you have put into a box?

Brother Saul

You have more power than you know. Being greeted by Ananias as “Brother Saul” shaped Paul's life, theology, and ministry. This greeting became the core of his theology. This idea of no Jew, no gentile, no male, no female became the cornerstone of how he saw the grace of God moving in the world. You have power in greeting others as Ananias greeted Paul. You are more significant than you know with the power of God working in your life. Who needs to hear such a greeting from you? Who is sitting on the other side of the fence this morning in your life?

The playwright George Bernard Shaw was playing a game of “What if” with some friends shortly before he died. He was asked if he could live his life over again and be anybody he wanted to be who would he be? He responded. “I would choose to be the man George Bernard Shaw could have been, but never was.” Who would you like to be this morning? Someone else, or the you that you can be with the power of God working in your life?