

Practice Resurrection; Have You Seen the Light?

Scripture: Psalm 23, Acts 9:1-20 (Easter 4C)
Laura Smith Conrad/Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

Scripture: 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. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But 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. Saul 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. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." The 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, and 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." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." But 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; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." So 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."

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Proclamation of the Word

Change is one of those words with which we have a love/hate relationship.

Changing one's bed sheets is usually good.

Changing oil and tires both good.

But introduce changing hymnals from red to blue and there will be discomfort for some, excitement for others, and horror for others seeing the change in a hymnal as a sort of end times omen.

By the way, I should tell you that a new committee has been formed to create another new hymnal for much has changed in over 20 years. I want to give you plenty of heads up on that one. 10 years from now we could be talking not about the red and blue hymnals, but the "good ol' blue hymnal" not this new purple hymnal.

Change is good and bad.

It is difficult and welcome.

It is threatening and liberating.

It is friend and enemy. Such a paradox is change.

Both Scriptures we read today are about changes and transformations. For one the Psalm reminds us that in all changes of life, God is our protector, our sure comfort, and our closest companion leading us beside still waters and setting a table before our enemies. But the story of Paul's conversion/call is one of dramatic change.

Saul goes on a zealous rampage spewing violent threats at all who profess Jesus Christ as Lord. This is not the first time Saul who later becomes Paul shows up in Scripture. The first vigilante group lynching which takes place in the book of Acts is overseen by Paul, the Jewish Pharisee. You may recall the Stoning of Stephen, an apostle. You see, the people of The Way or those we would later call the Christians were upsetting the applecart and causing alarm among the religious status quo. And if we are to listen with first century ears to what is happening, we can understand that the way of life for the Jews is threatened. They have settled into a level of comfort after returning from exile. They are an occupied people who have negotiated a way of life with the Roman governors.

Can you think of other times in history when a way of life is threatened and those in power want to squash the change?? Can you see it in our world now?

I remember reading a my ancestor's journal from the late 1800s. Captain Samuel Aven Smith's journal is incomplete, but he tells of religious conversions at Camp Meetings on the edge of town, of his training in Charleston as a physician which meant basically reading medical books at the Library, and his experience as a Confederate soldier...amputating legs with saws and the help of spirits to ease the pain. And then he makes a comment about a certain political party which has been forming in the late 1860s which is defending the way of life for the southern white farmer. That political party was called the Ku Klux Klan. As a product of the post-civil rights era, I was shocked to hear the KKK described as a political party of the ordinary man. In fact, my home county was seat to some of the worst violence during Reconstruction. In 1871 President Ulysees S. Grant had federal troops take over and set up martial law. In effect the KKK had formed a militia and over many African American men, fathers, community leaders, and families were murdered because of race, economics, and politics. The local sheriff and authorities were also KKK. Federal troops arrested 195 men in York County alone. 500 turned themselves in. Over 200 fled to places like Arkansas according to history and my ancestor's journal. I was knocked over by the

reality of what my own family history of violence. These were Christians, Scots-Irish Presbyterian settlers members of Beersheba, Beth Shiloh, and Woodside Presbyterian churches. [My name/initials LC Smith is also the name of an historic gun maker. (They also made typewriters- whew- which I use as my tool- words on paper)] I was convicted that I must work for reconciliation among peoples of different races, classes and ethnicities as a Christian. I was convicted that hate and violence are never appropriate for solving problems. Conversion and call come in small revelations not just the dramatic ones.

Today, the threat of change can give rise to groups who lash out in violence. We can see it in various places throughout the globe. We can hear it in the level of public discourse as the language turns violent with phrases such as “Don’t retreat, reload.” (Sarah Palin) This week as the nation commemorated the 15th anniversary of the Oklahoma city bombing spear headed by militia member Timothy McVeigh, one bill in the Oklahoma legislature is trying to resurrect militias to protect states’ rights. Kathleen Parker, conservative columnist writes, “Whether we can now boast more wing nuts than in other times is debatable, though hate and vigilante groups, now numbering about 1,000, increased by 54 percent between 2000 and 2008, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. Anti-immigrant organizations increased last year by almost 80 percent.” 1

Christians must speak up and stand up against fear and hate. In 2010 we, as people of The Way and followers of Jesus Christ, cannot fall prey to such hate nor encourage lashing out in violence.

Just look at the mirror we see in the bible...look at Saul turned Paul-

The persecuted Jews gives rise to a persecutor.

The threatened administer the threat and death.

Jesus' disciples were upsetting the status quo.

Hear the accusation that caused the stoning of the disciple, Stephen in Acts 6:13, *"...this man (Stephen) never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs which Moses handed down to us."*

Be careful what you say.

It can get you into trouble.

And that is exactly what happens to Stephen.

Two chapters later, Stephen is stoned while Paul, the persecutor, oversees the whole thing.

So that is a bit of background on Saul who will become Paul. Saul was a man executing justice as his world was being threatened and his faith was being challenged.

Saul is breathing threats and will bring anyone men or women who claim to be part of "The Way" or to be followers of Jesus. Acts Chapter 9 verse 3 says and then "it happens!" (9:3; Greek: *egeneto*). The blinding light and Saul knocked to his knees, stopped in his tracks, and knocked the wind out of him.

The young independent man wielding threats and power is knocked down-literally.

Have you ever been knocked to your knees and become dependent like a child?

Charles Campbell, who preached here in the fall and who was our (Mary, Rodney and my) preaching professor at Columbia Seminary, says that Saul is "stuck...blind...helpless...dependent not only on the living Christ but also on other people to help him take the next step."

And there are, clearly, supposed to be next steps for Saul – the living Christ is not simply intervening to protect the apostles by deterring Saul from his mission. The voice that Saul hears gives him instructions right after that

poignant question, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (v. 4b), and we continue past verse 6 to hear what happens next, because we know, as Campbell writes, that "[t]he purpose of this encounter...is the mission to the Gentiles," not just Paul's own personal, private conversion experience (*The Lectionary Commentary*). With God, the picture is always big, very big, and each one of us is significant within it.

And who is this man Ananias? He is an instrument of God's grace, who at first is skeptical. He responds to Jesus' call to heal Saul with, "**Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.**" Certainly I can understand his hesitation to want to help the one who has been terrorizing Christians in the name of the faith. But 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; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.**" (Acts 9:)

Ananias puts himself at the mercy of the one who has terrorized people of faith. He deserves our attention. Ananias is "an 'ordinary' Christian" who demonstrates "extraordinary courage and faithfulness": in fact, he goes beyond the instructions given to him and calls Saul "Brother." The power of

this kind of reconciliation may be behind Paul's own life work of "reconciliation between 'Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female'" which Paul writes about to the Galatians. (*The Lectionary Commentary*)

Saul had spent 3 days in darkness.

Remind you of anyone else?

Jesus has been there in the tomb for three days

Then the scales fall from Saul's eyes as Ananias lays hands upon him ordaining him for service to Jesus the Christ.

He sees now with a new insight- a revelation.

He is forever changed.

The persecutor becomes a planter of churches

The Pharisee calling for adherence to the law is transformed by the law of love in Jesus Christ.

Where does Saul go with all of this? He gets baptized, shares communion, is "ordained," and to live his life in the company of others who followed the Way of Jesus. The enemy of Jesus the messiah becomes a brother.

The Jewish Saul takes on the Latin name Paul for he will plant and grow churches throughout the Roman Empire. He is a changed man.

But Saul who becomes Paul knows he is not saved, converted and called for his own personal gain. According to Campbell, "From day one, Saul learns that the Christian life is not an individualistic or isolated undertaking." Chuck Campbell writes, for Saul is "dependent on the wisdom, discernment, and faithfulness of other members of that community." No wonder, then, "that Paul's lifework would involve building up churches rather than simply 'converting' individuals" (*The Lectionary Commentary*).

Paul's conversion and call are deeply personal and confirmed by the community. This is how John Calvin, reformed theologian, understands call. Call is personal, but must be confirmed by the community.

For many of us conversion and call are not usually so dramatic. Perhaps you have had small revelations from God along the way in the form of insight or conviction.

Perhaps you, too, have seen the light when you least expected it and with the help of the Christian community around you to give voice to our understanding of faith.

Perhaps you have been waiting on God's gift of revelation.

Faithful Christians serve in mission to neighbors and come back converted anew in their faith. The Haiti mission travelers tell stories of men and women singing praise to God while waiting for hours just to see Doctor Bob. Then a man gone blind receive his sight and they all break out in song again singing praise to God and giving thanks to Jesus. The Christian travelers are renewed in their own faith and conviction to serve.

Saul was not one who had not been seeking to follow God.

He had not been antagonistic to faith and God.

Saul was one who had committed to the faith.

But with the help of God he was given new eyes.

There is danger in blindly adhering to a set of dogma without the illumination of God's Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God that the Spirit intervened and continues to do so.

Thanks be to God for the instrument of faith who became Paul so that we who are Gentiles might know God in Jesus Christ.

May we also be the converted and called who build up Christian community and share good news with persons who are outside the bounds of our comfort zone, but not beyond the love of God.

I believe that if God can change Saul to Paul, God can transform any one and the whole bunch of us!

QUOTES

Plato, 5th century B.C.E.

Conversion is not implanting eyes, for they exist already; but giving them a right direction, which they have not.

Madeleine L'Engle, 20th century

Conversion for me was not a Damascus Road experience. I slowly moved into an intellectual acceptance of what my intuition had always known.

D.H. Lawrence, 20th century

I believe that [one] is converted when first [one] hears the low, vast murmur of life, of human life, troubling [one's] hitherto unconscious self.

George Sand, 19th century

Once my heart was captured, reason was shown the door, deliberately and with a sort of frantic joy. I accepted everything, I believed everything, without struggle, without suffering, without regret, without false shame. How can one blush for what one adores?

John Updike once wrote a fascinating, funny, and unsettling novel about Africa, entitled *The Coup*.¹⁵ It's about a fictional African country, and the story is written in the first person, through the eyes of the first President of this new nation, a flawed man named Ellelou. Much of the novel concerns the cultural upheaval in this developing country: the bizarre interaction between the culture of Coca-Cola and digital wristwatches alongside the traditional, native African culture and the fundamental needs of the people. At one point, the President expresses his view

that what the white invaders brought with them, worse than their personal cruelties, was "the terrible idea...of the Sacred receding inexorably, leaving us to live and die to no purpose, in a state of nonsense." He sees that all the new business and economic activity have "pre-empted the mental spaces formerly devoted to battle and ritual, to death and God, so that these have come to loom not only as strangers but monsters." He concludes that, "The volume of mysteries upon which we float has been displaced." Alan Kelchner in Preaching the Lesson, Goodpreacher.com the Journal of Homiletics April 18, 2010.

(15) John Updike, *The Coup* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1978).

1. Kathleen Parker, *PARKER: McVeigh's legacy in the age of toxic politics* in nctimes, April 18, 2010 at http://www.nctimes.com/news/opinion/columnists/parker/article_9883fe80-a4a4-5975-9a61-b6d7b284e0af.html
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