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“Paul’s Conversion and Call to Follow”

Part IV of the Lenten Sermon Series, “Following”

Acts 9:1-20

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When considering a preaching text, there was much to choose from. Almost a third of the New Testament is attributed to him, either written by Paul himself or by his contemporaries. But to understand Paul is to understand his encounter with the Risen Christ. His “Damascus Road experience” is both a conversion and a call. Paul believed in the God of Israel and in the covenant relationship that bound Israel as God’s people; he was a Pharisee, “a son of a Pharisee.” Yet, Paul was changed, he was converted. And he receives a new call.

So, let us listen to Paul’s encounter with the Risen Christ, as it is told in **Acts 9:1-20...** and let us listen for the Word of God.

¹Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and 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."⁷The 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."

Did you know, I once played a character in a children's TV show. Well, I was only in the pilot episode, and unfortunately the series wasn't continued. I had my 60 seconds of fame I guess. The show was based on a book series called Baxter's Bunch, which is about ball characters that "Teach Values through Sports." Baxter is a basketball. My character was not in the books. I was Ben E. Boo the Dancing Guru, and I brought the show to a close with a fun dance to get the kiddos moving. And in the pilot episode the closing dance was called the "Baxter Boogie!"

The night of the premier, my call to ministry began—or I should say, the first call in my journey of conversions began. You see, I was a church kid growing up. I was baptized as an infant, a cradle Presbyterian—a Presbyterian of Presbyterians. So, the simplistic meaning of conversion, as going from non-believer to believer, does not fit my "journey of conversions." However, that night at the premier, my call and conversion began.

I was approached by a friend's older brother about a corporate position for a local communications company—Lead Generation, you know "cold-calling", "smiling and dialing". A reminder: I was the Assistant Camp Director for YMCA Camp Cherokee at the time, so I spent



most of my days in the woods with kids. Thinking it was time to “grow up” and get a real, “buttoned-up” job, I answered that call and resigned from camp and made my way to the cubicle.

Long story short, there were many small and big moments over the next year or so that led me to seek out seminary education and continue my discernment to ministry. It was a long, hard year, and it has been a journey of conversions ever since—

Sometimes I wish I just had a Damascus Road experience!

But looking back, I don’t think I would be here today if it wasn’t for being approached about that new position, which led me from camp to cubicle and then to a call.

And I think the same can be said of Paul and this encounter. Flannery O’Connor once said of Paul, “I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.”¹ Of course, there is no mention in the New Testament that Paul was ever on a horse on his way to Damascus. But as we reflect on Paul’s call to follow Jesus, just as we reflect on our own call to faith, we see that we are guided to focus not on our agency and decision to follow, but on God’s initiative. It is God who changes lives. It is God who interrupts. It is God who transforms.

Saul is, in his own words as he writes to the church in Philippi, “of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the Law, blameless.” Saul is Paul, and Paul is Saul. He was not given a new name following his conversion on that Damascus Road, as is often understood. Saul is a Hebrew name; Paul is a Roman name. So, these names do not reflect two sperate periods of his life; rather, they represent two cultural identities of his life—identities God uses for the advancement of the gospel.

We are first introduced to Saul in chapter 7 of Acts. Luke, the gospel writer whose second volume is the book of Acts, calls him a “young man” who holds the coats of those who stoned Stephen. But Saul was not just a young man momentarily turned coat rack. He was more than that. He not only approved the stoning and watched as Stephen was killed but led a violent crusade persecuting the community of believers. He “ravaged the church, going from house to house, dragging men and women off to prison.” In his understanding, his mission, his call, is to rid the world of all who oppose God.

Yet, enroute to Damascus to carry out his mission to save Judaism as he knows it, he is interrupted. A bright light engulfs him, knocks him down and a voice pierces through with a question: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” As William Willimon states, “[that] question—

¹ Cited by William Willimon in his commentary on Acts (*Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*; John Knox Press, 1988, p. 73).



accentuates the close relationship between the Risen Christ and his disciples—to persecute a follower of the Master is to persecute the Master.”² And for Luke, Paul is *the* persecutor; he is enemy number one. Paul’s response is interesting because he wants to know who the “me” is: Who are you, Lord? Can it be that Paul, the persecutor of God’s enemies has become God’s enemy? Could it be that this zealous Pharisee, educated in the Torah, a student of the Law, has broken the 3rd Commandment: Thou shall not take the Lord’s name in vain?

The voice then moves from accusation to commission, from a calling out to a calling in.

Saul’s sight is taken. Saul’s freedom is taken. Saul’s self-reliance is taken. Saul is being changed. The once powerful, persecutor of the Way, is now blind, helpless, and must rely on others to find his way.

This is what happens when we encounter the Divine. We are changed. We are transformed. There is a turning from what we were to what God call us to be.

Intertwined in Paul’s conversion and call story is the call story of Ananias. Ananias has his own encounter with the Lord, through a vision, by which he is told to seek out Saul of Tarsus and lay hands on him so that he may regain his sight. But Ananias pushes back because he knows who Saul is; he has heard what an evil man he is and the evil he has done and the evil he intends to do.

The voice responds with, “Go.” And Ananias went.

Ananias finds Saul and lays hands on him. And in that moment, the truth about God’s initiating call is found. Eyes are opened. Relationships are changed. Lives are transformed. No longer does Saul persecute all who call on the name of Jesus, rather he bears the name of Jesus to all. No longer does Ananias speak about “this man”, rather he speaks of “Brother Saul.” No longer does Saul cause suffering to those of the Way, rather he suffers as he follows the Way. No longer is Saul a self-confident person who knows everything about religion, rather he is humbled through blindness and must learn from the disciples he once despised.

God is a God who interrupts. God is a God who transforms. And by following Jesus who is the Christ, we are interrupted and transformed, again and again and again.

When the voice of God calls out to us, when the voice of the Lord calls us to follow, we enter into something bigger and deeper than individual salvation and vocation. Conversion is never an end in and of itself. It is a beginning. We step into something new for ourselves and for the community to which we belong. A new reality. A new chapter in the life of the church, a new initiative or mission, and a new life in Christ for the individual. Following Jesus is both individual

² William Willimon. *ACTS, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*; John Knox Press, 1988, p. 75.



and communal, you can't have one without the other. The individual receives the call; the community affirms the call.

And in the conversion and call and life of Paul we see a reminder that following Jesus involves a series of conversions, a series of journeys, encounters, pilgrimages, and turnings as we venture into unexplored territory.

Paul spent the rest of his life parsing out what the life of faith truly meant. He continually reflected on his conversion and call in his writings as he came to a deeper awareness of who he was and a deeper understanding of his relationship with Jesus Christ and with the community around him.

“There is no longer Jew nor Gentile,” Paul writes, there is no longer “slave nor free, male and female, all are one in Christ.”

Following Jesus is joining in the work of transformation, to be transformed and be an agent of transformation. When we follow Jesus we experience a transformed reality where division becomes unity, oppression is swallowed up by freedom, hatred is answered by love, enemy turns to beloved, persecutor is now the persecuted.

Light stopped Paul in his tracks. Light blinded him. As Ananias laid hands on Paul, scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. He now had eyes to see, to see the “mystery of participation”³ that he is now “in Christ.” He now lives in the Light to share the light with the world.

May we be so bold to claim what Paul was so bold to claim, “Because of Christ, I now consider my former advantages as disadvantages—all of it is meaningless if only I can have a place in him—for I no longer live, not I. But Christ lives in me.”

Today is a special day in the life of the church. Today we celebrate a “conversion” if you will, as we ordain and install the Elder Class of 2026. Every year, the newly elected class of elders meets before worship and each elder is asked to share a bit about their journey of faith and their call to serve as an elder. And each year it is a remarkable moment that expresses the variety of experiences of God at work in and through their lives. Many times, they share stories of other people assisting them on their journey, much like Paul's travel companions and Ananias, encouraging them, guiding them, or simply walking beside them hand-in-hand. And we will lay hands on these elders today, just like Ananias did to Paul so long ago.

³ Richard Rohr talks about how our life of faith is a joining in the Divine of transformation as we participate in Christ. This comes from Rohr's audiobook titled *Great Themes of Paul: Life as Participation* (2002).



As we reflect on and celebrate the Paul's conversion and call to follow Jesus, and all the conversions of his life, let us reflect on and celebrate the wonderful and unexpected ways God is still at work here in this time and place, not only in the lives of these new elders, but also in our own lives and in the life of the church.

Our hymn of preparation states, "Lord, when I came into this life, you called me by my name; today I come, commit myself, responding to your claim."⁴

Let us stand and sing as we affirm this call individually and as the body of Christ!

⁴ This is the first verse of "Lord, When I Came into This Life," hymn number 691 in the Presbyterian Hymnal *Glory to God*.



