

Two Conversions

Fifth in a Series on the Acts of the Apostles

by

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Acts 9:1-20

Meanwhile 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. Now 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.”

I cannot count the number of times I have heard this story invoked in conversations when people have been invited to share something about their experience of faith. You know how this goes. You are with a group of church folks introducing yourselves, and everyone is asked to give the others a glimpse of their faith journey. These kinds of conversations often take place during retreats or Officer Training or in Confirmation Classes or a new group for fellowship and adult education, and almost invariably someone will make a comparison to Paul's conversion like this: "Well, I've never had a Damascus Road kind of experience... but I grew up in the church, or my first memory of church was attending with my grandparents, or we moved when I was in High School and a friend invited me to her youth group." These almost apologetic comparisons to Paul's conversion could make you wonder if most of us have had a lightning-bolt entrance into the faith, when in reality, most people come to trust in God through the faith of our parents and grandparents, or growing up in church, or by the simple invitation of a friend.

Paul's kind of conversion may not be common, but it does testify to the power of God as a wonderfully dramatic, fantastic, bewildering and miraculous moment – for the church at large. The Book of Acts will tell it two more times, and the Letters of Paul will refer to it repeatedly.

We have already had a glimpse of the Saul we encounter today. Remember how he watched from the sidelines as Stephen was stoned to death, and how he dragged women and men from their homes to prison if they were followers of Christ. So animated is he by his violent power, today we find him traveling well over a hundred miles just to bring Christians back from Damascus to Jerusalem, bound in chains. But the Living Christ has had enough of Saul's persecution, and intervenes with this very dramatic conversion, a complete reversal of his evil ways. Saul is changed from seeing to being blind; he is changed from leading captives home in chains to being dependent on others to lead him; he is changed from exercising violent power to being overpowered by Jesus. No wonder this conversion story of Saul plays big in our imaginations.

No wonder most of us describe our own faith with quieter, more humble descriptors by comparison.

But there is another conversion in this text that should not be overlooked, even if it gets lost in the shadows as soon as that blinding light puts Saul in center stage. This other conversion – may be more akin to our own experiences of engaging the ways of Jesus Christ. I am talking – of course – about Ananias. While Saul is harassing disciples, Ananias is identified as simply “a disciple.” He too receives a vision of the Lord. He is understandably doubtful, because he knows Saul by reputation. When asked to go and lay his hands upon the villainous Saul, Ananias rightfully protests: “But Lord, he perpetrates evil against you and your disciples; he uses his power and authority against you and your people.” The Lord, however, responds to his protest by promising to turn the evil Saul into an instrument of the gospel. Then on that word alone, Ananias goes and does a remarkable thing. He enters Saul’s room and calls him, “Brother.”

You see two conversions are taking place here. One may be so dramatic it’s hard to imagine, being struck down by a lightning-bolt, rendered blind and forced to change the mission from sheer evil to unimaginable goodness. And then there’s the other conversion that may come a bit closer to home: the willingness to change our perspective of righteous judgment and indignation toward another, and instead to open one’s heart to claim that person a member of the family – my sister, my brother.

Biblical scholar Matt Skinner says of these two conversions: “What’s important here is not that Saul sees a flash and hears a voice, nor that Ananias encounters Jesus. Rather, the key detail is that each of their experiences expands the vision of what is real and what is possible.”¹ Each of them changes his mind and their direction when Jesus comes near.

¹ Matthew Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, p. 67-72.

In our day we know new perspectives rarely take hold easily. They often require something outside of ourselves – an idea, a message, another person – to open us up to a new way of seeing the world and one another. Here, Ananias walks into a house where the church’s presumed arch-enemy waits for him, and the church’s arch-enemy becomes the church’s greatest advocate and evangelist. Hope for a new day dawning is unleashed in the world.

Theologian Paul Tillich once said that the saint is a saint not because he or she is good, but because he or she is transparent for something that is more than oneself. Being a window of opportunity, being a means of grace, being a place in which the Holy Spirit makes its dwelling, is the vocation of ordinary people. This, he said, was the miracle of resurrection. Not just that Jesus rose from the dead, but that you and I may rise from the death in which we now find ourselves, and become in our ordinary lives beings of extraordinary witness to Christ.²

In this moment, in which we are surrounded by death and despair, if we are looking for a conversion with which to identify – look at Ananias. The big conversion of Saul is God’s indictment of a culture that has become so violent and oppressive and in which we can find persecution of every form – in systemic modes of racism, classism, sexism, and xenophobic persecution of the other. But, in this season of deep division about all manner of things from politics to religion from how best to achieve a greater equality to how to serve the common good, it’s the conversion of Ananias that is meant to come into our homes and to lay hands upon us.

“In our time,” wrote Presbyterian churchman and theologian, Shirley Guthrie, “to live in Jesus’ company is to believe in and live by the good news of the love of God that includes rich and poor, black and white, male and female, moral and immoral, political liberals and

² Peter Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p. 91.

conservatives, those who share our religious convictions and those who do not. And in our time, the greatest barrier to faithful proclamation of this good news – the greatest barrier to others’ hearing and believing it – is the self-righteous exclusiveness on insiders...” Guthrie went on: “We should have religious debates in the church about what is good and true and authentically Christian. But we would be modest about the correctness of people who are ‘on our side’. We should be willing to learn and be corrected by others... And even when differences remain, we would seek to demonstrate in the church’s life and the public policies the church advocates, the love of God that includes and wills the common good for all people, everywhere, no one excluded, everyone included.”³

Friends, are we ourselves willing to embrace new hope for what might be possible in us and in our world? From our own narrow corners where we hunker down with our own view of the world, are we willing to be converted, redirected, repentant of old ways of being, and freed from letting our judgments of others get in the way of calling them “brother” or “sister.”

Years ago in South Africa, when Nelson Mandela came out of prison and sought to unify the country as the long systemic racism of Apartheid was dismantled, he formed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. You remember how the Commission invited those who had perpetrated oppression, torture and secret killings at the hands of the government, to come forward to confess the truth of what they had done, leading these people not to imprisonment, but to amnesty. The hope was that the truth telling would heal the country, so that they could live not as a nation of oppressors and oppressed, but as one people. The work of the commission would be deemed absurd except for those believers, like Desmond Tutu, who said, “God does not give up on anyone, for

³ Shirley Guthrie, “The Good News,” in *Renewing the Vision: Reformed Faith for the 21st Century*, Cynthia Campbell, editor, p. 6-7.

God loved us for all eternity. God loves us now and God will always love all of us, good and bad. God's love will not let us go."

That's what the conversion of both Saul and Ananias was all about – being overpowered by love. Conversion to this kind of faith, always results in a change from self-absorbed righteousness to the righteousness of God, a willingness to move in the direction of Jesus Christ, participating as ordinary people in the healing of the world. May we be willing to be converted anew, to become more transparent for the work of the Holy Spirit to shine through.

AMEN.