

Acts 9:3-8

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 travelling 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.

Acts 22:6-11

Paul Tells of His Conversion

‘While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” I answered, “Who are you, Lord?” Then he said to me, “I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.” Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me. I asked, “What am I to do, Lord?” The Lord said to me, “Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do.” Since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, those who were with me took my hand and led me to Damascus.

Acts 26:12-18

Paul Tells of His Conversion

‘With this in mind, I was travelling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, when at midday along the road, your Excellency, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.” I asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The Lord answered, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

Psalm 30

I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up,
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.
O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.
O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.
For his anger is but for a moment;
his favour is for a lifetime.
Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

As for me, I said in my prosperity,
'I shall never be moved.'
By your favour, O LORD,
you had established me as a strong mountain;
you hid your face;
I was dismayed.

To you, O LORD, I cried,
and to the LORD I made supplication:
'What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the Pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?
Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me!
O LORD, be my helper!'

You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you for ever.

Slide: Paul on the Damascus Road

Approach To Damascus

This morning I have been gifted a wonderful section of scripture from the Revised Common Lectionary out of the book of Acts—Saul’s encounter with God and the risen Christ on the Damascus Way. To give a bit of an overview for my sermon we will look at the biblical texts of Saul’s experience on the Damascus Road; we will consider the implications of Saul becoming Paul; and we will ponder what this might mean for our world. It is a full docket, let’s get started! To the text.....

Slide: text comparison of Saul’s conversion

In your bulletin (and hopefully on the screen) you will find three scriptures from the book of Acts set alongside each other. We have discrepancies—yeah!! In the book of Acts we have three different accounts of Saul’s encounter of God / Risen Christ on the way to Damascus. All of us can study the texts at our leisure, but let me reference several items that caught my attention.

First, in the first two renderings of Paul’s faith story the writer of Acts notes that only Saul fell to the ground. The Acts 26 version has a plural—“we had all fallen”. Who falls to the ground and when is all a matter of recollection, I guess. The significant point for me is that the story changed; sometimes we remember things differently in the later chapters of our life.

Second, in versions one and two we have a difference on hearing and seeing. In Acts 9 “they heard the voice but saw no one”. In Acts 22 we read, “those who were with me saw light but did not hear the voice”. Version three from Acts 26 ignores the discrepancy by not referencing who heard or saw what when. Hmm... sometimes the details change, I guess.

Finally, do we notice the length of description between these scriptures of Acts detailing the same event? There is something quite fitting, I think, about our stories getting more elaborate as we move through the chapters of our lives.

Slide: How My Mind Changed (book cover)

By the way in which this kind of stuff actually happens in our world I offer a contribution from Paul J. Griffiths which appears in the book, *How My Mind Has Changed*, edited by David Heim.¹

¹ Paul Griffiths, “Turning Points” in *How My Mind has Changed: Essays From the Christian Century*; edited by David Heim (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), p. 3.

Indian Buddhism, which involves the study of Sanskrit and, eventually Tibetan, and after beginning those studies at Oxford I moved to Wisconsin to pursue them in greater depth...under the tutelage of Geshe Sopa.

Sopa teaches as a scholastic and as one thoroughly textualized. He has memorized the texts from which he teaches. The Tibetans like to say that if you have your learning in a book on the shelf at home, then of course you don't really have it; it needs to be in your head, ready to go...Each class begins with a chant of the verses memorized for that day and proceeds to oral exposition of the text...he simply teaches, calmly...He embodies his text and gives voice to it.

I want other things. I want to be given the skills that will provide me an academic career. I want my questions answered. I want him to argue with me. I do not want to submit to his text, and certainly not to him. My anger is about all those things. I vent it, take another adviser, finish my work with dispatch...find a job at the University of Chicago and begin, with rapidity and ambition, to claw my way up the academic ladder.

Geshe Sopa placed me beside myself with anger. He also showed me, though I was not then remotely ready to see it, what it might be like to set oneself aside in favor of a textual tradition, to permit oneself to be overwritten by it and made its creature. His lessons in this I can now see for what they were, and I am grateful for them. I learned from him what I had not learned from my Christian teachers, which is how to read. It took me a decade or so to begin to make sense of the lesson and to begin to use it as a reader of the Christian text. That is a practice in which I am still engaged and will be until death and beyond.

Applications that I see from the text and this story are some of the following:

Our stories change. Some revelations which push us beyond ourselves happen in a sudden flash or voice; others happen over time and reflection. The substance of our smaller and greater moments of enlightenment remain largely the same, but sometimes the details change. And that is ok. Sometimes our minds change. Sometimes the details of the story change. And that is ok.

Secondly, it often takes a community for the journey of trust with God to continue. Saul needed guides to navigate the way into Damascus. Ananias was willing to go with the persecutor known as Saul. It took a community to receive Saul / Paul into the Christian fold. This conversion business—it often takes time and it often involves a community and it always involves God.

A third observation: if we are able to extend ourselves such compassion on the learning curve, we certainly need to be gracious to those around us who are loved by God on their way to deeper understanding. This past Tuesday I had breakfast with my mother-in-law who has newly moved into Bethany Place. She

skips the meal downstairs and we eat boiled eggs, toast, and maybe some fruit. We have devotions from multiple books, which cite the bible. The passage suggested from the Upper Room this past week was from 1st Timothy 4 and included this verse: “For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe” (1st Tim 4:10). God is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe. I was stunned. God is the Saviour of ALL. God is about the business of saving ALL. Those who believe, I think, are privileged—but God is the Savior of ALL.

From here we move into the second part of the sermon: a consideration of the implications of Saul becoming Paul.

Chapter 9 of Acts begins with Saul breathing threats and murder against the disciples of Jesus. We have people in this world of ours breathing threats and murder. We have Putin; we have the Saudi Crown Prince; we have Assad; we have settlers armed with AK 47s manufactured in Russia terrorizing West Bank communities in this Ramadan season; we have.... and the list goes on. We know about people breathing threats and murder. What shall our Christians response be?

First and foremost, we pray for the persecutors (as Matthew 5:44 prescribes) and learn to love our enemies. We do this trusting in God’s incessant love for even the most unlovable. God is their saviour as well, 1st Timothy would suggest. God is out there actively engaging the enemy and persecutor. The question is if we are as diligent. In our morning prayers over porridge, do we remember Putin? In our evening prayer do we remember Assad? How do we redemptively engage such threat breathing and murderous elements in our world? In relation to these questions, I have two items to share. The first comes from a *Christian Science Monitor* in a letter to the editor. From Diane Goderich of Ghent, Belgium who grew up in Russia.

Image of Protest with Ukrainian and Russian Flags

People keep asking me what I think about the war [in Ukraine]... But what I want to shout about too is the other war going on, the one in which people are not dying under bombardments or bullets, but slowly dwindling from empty accounts, empty shelves and inability to speak their mind... What will become of Russia? Will it turn into a self-isolated tightly regulated state along with China and North Korea?... For me these questions are filled with faces of people I love, flashes of streets I walked on, smells and tastes from my childhood. As I stare into my sun-flooded garden, far away from the sound of

falling bombs in Ukraine and the echoing emptiness of stores in Russia—my heart has a place for both.”²

Image of Sting text for “Russians”

How can I save my little boy from Oppenheimer's deadly toy?

There is no monopoly on common sense

On either side of the political fence

We share the same biology, regardless of ideology

Believe me when I say to you

I hope the Russians love their children too

There is no historical precedent

To put the words in the mouth of the president?

There's no such thing as a winnable war

It's a lie we don't believe anymore

Mister Reagan says, "We will protect you"

I don't subscribe to this point of view

Believe me when I say to you

I hope the Russians love their children too

We share the same biology, regardless of ideology

But what might save us, me and you

Is if the Russians love their children too

Way back in 1985 Sting produced an album called *The Dream of the Blue Turtles*. One of the tracks is called “Russians”, and in it Sting hopes and affirms that the Russians love their children as much as we do. I know Putin is a bad man, but there are many good people living under his oppressive politics who do not agree with him. Saul was a bad man who turned course. Our texts today invite us to offer solace to those afflicted by tyranny on any side of the border. And we are invited to become the Ananias who helps murders and those breathing threats to receive healing. In this resurrection season we are invited to find this somewhere within ourselves and share it somewhere in our world.

Image: Aron Toews from *Peace Be With You*

² Diana Goderich, “Spare a thought for innocent Russians caught up in the war” in the *Christian Science Monitor Weekly* (April 4, 2022), p.31.

My final illustration comes from a book called *Peace Be With You* authored by Cornelia Lehn. It is a children's book, but really a book for all ages. Here is the abbreviated story of Aron Toews.

It was the winter of 1935. In the Mennonite settlement of Chortitza (Ukraine) and in the surrounding area, most of the ministers had already been arrested and banished. The last of the ministers, Aron P. Toews, was in prison for many months. After an endless number of cruel cross-examinations in which the authorities tried to get him to renounce his faith in God, he was stuck into a small cell with young criminals...

In an instant the gang was upon him. "Give us tobacco! Give us something to eat!" they yelled in menacing tones...he said to them, "Listen carefully. It is true that I am in your power, but remember this: you as well as I are under a higher power. That is God. You cannot do anything that God does not see!"

A howl of rage was the answer. Some grabbed the bundle that Mr. Toews was carrying and tore it to pieces; others jumped on him and pounded him to the floor. They tore the false teeth out of his mouth and took his warm blanket...

One night when everyone in the cell was asleep and the moon was shining through the little barred window, something stirred. Mr. Toews felt something tugging at his sleeve. When he raised his head he looked directly into the pleading eyes of a young boy. "Grandfather," whispered the lad, "tell me something about your God. Do you really believe in him?"

Mr. Toews sat up as comfortably as he could and started telling this boy God's story of salvation. Gradually more and more boys awakened. They raised their heads and listened quietly. Aron Toews told them about the love of God which was for each one of them and which surrounds the whole world.

The next morning there was a different atmosphere in the cell. Mr. Toews did not know how much of the conversation had been absorbed by the boys, but he looked into the future with new and vital hope. He was convinced that the love of God has no limits.

Thankful that he had been able to serve God in prison, Mr. Toews later went into banishment. At his side walked the boy who had awakened him that night".³

In Conclusion:

- We change; we can change. The Saul within us can become a Paul.

³ Cornelia Lehn, *Peace Be With You* (Newton, KS: Faith & Life Press, 1980), p. 88.

- Our stories of change evolve, and if we take our Acts as a guide this is normal and fine. Tell the story of change as it comes to you now.
- It takes a community to shape the values of an Aron Toews or an Ananias. We are called to be communities in which compassion and conversion are modeled and taught. Compassion for ourselves and compassion for the other.
- Finally, it is in the end God's work. We do the best we can. We share our bit of God's story to those in our families and the cells around us. And then, sometimes, we go into banishment. Sometimes we go into retirement. Sometimes we go to the grave. The essence, however, is that God's ministry through us will continue. And for that we give thanks. Amen.

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