

Acts 9:1-9a

There is no story in Acts more important than the call of Saul or Paul, and his encounter with the risen Christ. Not only does the narrator tell the story of Saul's transformation from persecutor to apostle in today's excerpt, but Saul himself re-tells the story twice when defending himself before persecutors (before the tribune in Jerusalem, and before Agrippa).

It is important to note that in the writings of Paul himself, those whose eyes have been opened to see the raised Christ are enumerated. They are: Cephas (Peter), the twelve, five hundred brethren, James the brother of Jesus, the apostles and Paul. It is also important to note that no description of that experience on the part of any on this list is offered. We also need to be aware that Paul himself never speaks anywhere of a Damascus road conversion experience, though that experience is an important part of our Christian story.

Paul never mentions his supposed blindness. He never mentions the carefully crafted conversation he was supposed to have had with Jesus during that conversion experience, or the role that Ananias played either in the restoration of his sight or in his baptism. Those things remained for Luke to relate to us some thirty years after Paul's death. So whatever it was that Paul "saw", it was not the physical Jesus. Even if the Damascus road experience was assumed to be literal history, the date of Paul's conversion is generally thought to be no earlier than one year and no later than six years after the crucifixion.

Paul is universally believed to have experienced his conversion, become the great Christian missionary, written all of his authentic epistles, and been martyred, prior to the writing of the first of the gospels. Paul does tell us in Galatians that just three years after his conversion, he went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas/Peter. He says he saw none of the other disciples “except James the Lord’s brother”.

Luke wrote two books or volumes - the first his gospel, then the Acts of the Apostles. No one knows where, when or how Luke converted to being a Christ follower. During his travels, Luke encountered both Peter and Paul. Probably after Paul’s death, Luke undertook to compile his orderly account for the most excellent Theophilus. Luke would have taken notes during his association and travels with Paul. It appears that the first fifteen chapters of Acts are records of eye witness accounts, possibly Peter’s as they include events “witnessed by a disciple”.

Luke does not tell us how he came to be the travelling companion of Saul. Another companion was Barnabas who also journeyed to Jerusalem with them. Understandably, the Jerusalem disciples were suspect of Saul, and probably never became comfortable with Saul or his ministry.

Luke was a well-educated Greek who had embraced this theology because it was logical. Education and logic, which go hand in hand, embraced this theology because it was logical. Coupled with God’s Holy Spirit working in him, Luke went to great lengths to pass on his witness to all generations. Although Luke became part of Paul’s entourage, he does not appear to be called to evangelize, but to witness

and record. His extensive record is an indication of his continued dedication to the evangelistic efforts of Paul. Luke's witness suggests an access to the upper echelon of Greek society. His work imparts a first hand eye witness account of the Apostles' actions.

Now the Jewish authorities were only interested in their own well being and were willing to do anything to denigrate this emerging sect of Jesus followers. As the sect grew, the need for someone like Saul became apparent. Emerging Christianity was not only a threat to the Jewish status quo but to the Romans who were determined to keep the *Pax Romanus* - the Roman Peace.

Now if Paul did not write about a conversion experience, why would Luke add this to his account of his experience with Paul? Remember that the New Testament writers and their audience are well aware of the Old Testament stories - including stories of conversions, some of which were very dramatic. Examples of conversion in the Old Testament included Abram, Naaman, Rahab, Ruth and the sailors on board the ship with Jonah, as well as the Ninevites who listened to Jonah and repented. The sailors transporting Jonah experienced a violent life-threatening storm. Jonah's prayers brought the storm to an end, leading them to conversion, to belief in Yahweh. So, following the Old Testament tradition, Luke used a dramatic story to bring his message to encourage the Gentiles to convert, to become followers of Jesus.

The man we know as the Apostle Paul started out as Saul. He had set on his

path which happened to be persecuting the new Jewish sect that would become the Church. On the way to the city of Damascus he has an encounter that changes his life. He had one reality and slowly but surely gave way to a new way of living, becoming one of the enduring leaders of the early church, the one that moved the faith from a sect of Judaism to the worldwide religion called Christianity.

Saul's change is actually part of a string of conversions that take place in the book of Acts. It starts with a group of Samaritans, followed by the Ethiopian Eunuch, and later the conversion of Cornelius, a Roman soldier. With the inclusion of Saul, we see each conversion moving us farther and farther away from Jerusalem, putting the words of Jesus into action: *"Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* So who was Saul and why did he become Paul? It's important to note that "Saul" is a Jewish name, while "Paul" was a Latin name. The name change is a way of showing what Saul was going to be doing, preaching to the Gentiles.

But it also reflected the young man's double identity: Jewish and a Roman Citizen. Saul grew up in Tarsus, a large commercial and cosmopolitan city. The city was known for its intellectual life and it in many ways rivalled Athens when it came to thought and philosophy. Saul would have been raised in a Jewish home, but the Jews who lived in Tarsus were influenced by the Hellenistic (Greek) culture around them. The everyday language would have been Greek, not Hebrew. Even the scriptures used for study and worship would have been a Greek translation of the

original Hebrew.

You would think living as a minority in a Hellenistic culture would have made Saul more open to other ways of thinking, but that was not the case. Instead, Saul became a zealot for his faith and he was hellbent on trying to destroy this new Jewish sect. In a way, he was at war with himself, the zealot for his faith going against the Hellenistic Jew.

The first glimpses of Saul are not the cosmopolitan man from Tarsus, but as a violent young man that breathed threats and murder. Saul is on the way to Damascus to persecute followers of this new sect.

This is Luke's dramatic story of Saul's conversion. Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee in Jerusalem after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, swore to wipe out the new Christian church called "The Way". Saul was "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples". Saul obtained letters from the high priest, authorizing him to arrest any followers of Jesus in the city of Damascus.

On the Road to Damascus, Saul and his companions were struck down by a blinding light. Saul heard a voice say: "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*" When Saul asked who was speaking, the voice replied: "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.*"

Saul was blinded. They led him into Damascus to a man named Judas, on Straight Street. For three days, Saul was blind and didn't eat or drink. Meanwhile,

Jesus appeared in a vision to a disciple in Damascus named Ananias and told him to go to Saul. Ananias was afraid because he knew Saul's reputation as a merciless persecutor of the church.

Jesus repeated his command, explaining that Saul was his chosen instrument to deliver the gospel to the Gentiles, their kings, and the people Israel. So Ananias found Saul at Judas' house, praying for help. Ananias laid his hands on Saul, telling him Jesus had sent him to restore his sight and that Saul might be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He arose and was baptized into the Christian faith. Saul ate, regained his strength, and stayed with the Damascus disciples three days. After his conversion, Saul changed his name to Paul.

Paul's conversion showed that Jesus himself wanted the gospel message to go to the Gentiles, quashing any argument from the early Jewish Christians that the gospel was only for the Jews. The men with Saul did not see the risen Jesus, but as the story goes, Saul did. This miraculous message was meant for one person only, Saul.

Saul witnessed the risen Christ, which fulfilled the qualification of an apostle. Only those who had seen the risen Christ could testify to his resurrection. Jesus did not distinguish between his church and his followers, and himself. Jesus told Saul he had been persecuting him. Anyone who persecutes Christians, or the Christian

church, is persecuting Christ himself.

In one moment of fear, enlightenment, and regret. Saul understood that Jesus was the true Messiah and that he, Saul, had helped murder and imprison innocent people. Despite his previous beliefs as a Pharisee, he now knew the truth about God and was obligated to obey him. Paul's conversion proves that God can call and transform anyone he chooses, even the most hard-hearted.

Saul of Tarsus possessed perfect qualifications to be an evangelist: he was versed in Jewish culture and language, his upbringing in Tarsus made him familiar with the Greek language and culture, his training in Jewish theology helped him connect the Old Testament with the gospel, and as a skilled tentmaker he could support himself.

Paul's life-changing experience on the Damascus road led to his baptism and instruction in the Christian faith. He became the most determined of the apostles, suffering brutal physical pain, persecution, and finally, martyrdom. He revealed his secret of enduring a lifetime of hardship for the gospel: "I do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Ever since Jesus' resurrection and subsequent gifting of the Spirit to His people, the Church is now, in a mysterious way, the Body of Christ. Jesus also taught and practised loving the enemy. Stephen, considered the first martyr, prays for his enemies even as he is being stoned to death. Saul is being confronted, but is considered by God a chosen instrument.

The encounter on the road is both judgement and mercy; where God closes one door for Saul and opens a new one for Paul. So what's the point of this conversion experience? This story demonstrates a few things. First, what Saul went through is something that God does. It is not a self-improvement project. God is in the business of choosing people that most of us would never choose like Jacob, who was a thief, or even Moses who killed a man. By showing such extreme examples, we show that God is the one that changes us and not us. The other thing to remember is that conversion went from independence to dependence, which is incredibly counter-cultural. Here was a guy that knew what he wanted and where to go. He meets God and now has to be led by the hand.

Progress in God's kingdom is moving backward, at least in our world. The people with Saul who are wondering what's going on, will pick him up and carry him to a house in Damascus where we have this side story with Ananias. He is a follower in Damascus and God calls on him to go and tend to Saul. Ananias has second thoughts and probably third and fourth thoughts. *"Lord, I have heard many reports about this man. People say he has done horrible things to your holy people in Jerusalem. He's here with authority from the chief priests to arrest everyone who calls on your name."* But God commands him to go and heal Saul because he is the agent chosen by God to preach to "kings, Gentiles and Israelites". Ananias obeys and heals Saul's eyes.

In 1993, Laramium Byrd, age 20, was shot and killed by Oshea Israel in Minneapolis. Israel was sentenced and served time in prison for the murder.

Towards the end of that sentence he received an interesting visitor, Mary Johnson, the mother of Laramium Byrd. She wanted to know if he was the same man who killed her son or if there had been any change. Back then, she wanted to hurt him, but after a long conversation with Israel, she ended up hugging the killer of her son.

It was then she realized that all of the anger and hatred she had carried over the prior decade was gone. She had moved from bitterness to forgiveness. As she changed, so did Israel's life. He became her adopted son and he gained a mother.

Conversions, changes of heart, are not things that happen immediately and more often than not, they are not things we do. Instead, it is an internal process that changes people, be it a man in the Middle East or a mother in Minneapolis that make the impossible, possible. Change is not about learning to be a better person, it is allowing God to make us better persons, persons on a mission.

Amen.