



Tell Your Own Story; Tell God's Story The Conversion of Saint Paul 2009

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Sunday, January 25, 2009*

Acts 26:9-21:

'Indeed, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is what I did in Jerusalem; with authority received from the chief priests, I not only locked up many of the saints in prison, but I also cast my vote against them when they were being condemned to death. By punishing them often in all the synagogues I tried to force them to blaspheme; and since I was so furiously enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities.

'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."

'After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.

I'm going to approach this in three steps. Picture, if you will, a pond; with a great splash in the middle and the rings rippling outward to the edge. We'll begin at the edge, move inward, then reach the core. First at the outermost ring: the telling of the story; Paul telling his own story of his experience of encountering Jesus. Second: the content of that story, which is conversion; a story of conversion. Third and last: the source and the purpose and the meaning of it all; the one who set the whole thing in motion – which is Jesus come, as the love of God.

First, the telling of the story. Somewhere now lost to me, the wonderful preacher and writer Frederick Buechner has spoken of the importance of remembering; and retelling. Said he, 'If you believe as I do that God speaks to us in and through the daily activities of our lives; then to forget what has happened, is to forget the very Word of God spoken to you.' In our passage from the Acts of the Apostles, Paul is telling his story of what happened to him. He is telling about how he came to know Christ, how Christ came to him, and changed his life. It is late in Paul's life; he has pursued his work and his calling fervently, traveling through-out the Middle East, preaching in the market places, starting up little communities of worship and faith, writing brilliant encouraging letters to those communities. In some places, he has been received with favor and grace; in others, with scorn or anger, even locked in jail. But everywhere he has gone and, I believe, in everything he has written, he tells his own story of how he has come to know Christ.

Consistently through the years, one of the most powerful experiences in my ministry comes during the series of classes we have led here – sometimes called the catechumenate, now being called Via Media. (I don't know why we insist on avoiding plain English; it's a series in the fundamentals of Christian faith). Participants are asked to prepare a spiritual autobiography and then to share whatever portions of it they choose. A spiritual autobiography is our own story of God in our life. When and how did you first come to know something of God? At what times and in what ways have you felt that God was particularly present? Or particularly absent? Initially, most find the assignment daunting. Many imagine they will have little, if anything, to remember or to say. Yet, once engaged, everyone finds that she or he has powerful memories and experiences, of loss or joy, of emptiness or abundance. Perhaps it is because we do it

so seldom, but the experience of offering and of receiving those stories is a profound privilege and honor, marked by vulnerability and grace.

It's a powerful thing when someone tells her story; reveals some of the intimate details, and places them before her listener, in trust. Paul knew how powerful this is. In the Gospel, Jesus advises "be sly as a snake and simple as a dove." In our text Paul is standing on trial before the King, charged with blasphemy and disrupting the peace. How does he plead his case? By telling his story; sly as a snake, simple as a dove. The telling of our own experience is as compelling in court as it is among the locals or the intellectual elite.

Moving in to the next ring: the experience Paul recounts is of his conversion. We just heard it read: About how Paul was persecuting the early Christians, hunting them down, wherever they were – with zeal. He was on the road to Damascus when he was suddenly struck down by a blinding light. A voice cried out, "Saul! Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

"Who are you?"

"I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting. Stand up. I have need of you."

When he had regained his sight, had listened anew to this teaching of Christ, and had spent time making sense of his own experience on that road, Paul awoke – a changed man, a converted man: now, the most articulate, passionate, zealous disciple for Christ the world would ever know. His zeal led him to the markets, the temples, and the halls of power and influence throughout the known world.

If we step back and ask, "What's going on here?" there are several ways to answer the question. It's the story of a person headed along a certain path, who experienced a sudden awakening, a revelation, the hand of God. That experience turned him around, and set him going in a new direction. The word "convert" literally means "to turn." The path Paul had been following is called into question, literally: "why are you persecuting me?"

We all experience conversions of one sort or another during the course of our lives. We thought we were going to be a ballerina or a superhero, and then we discovered... architecture, a passion for teaching, a facility with numbers... and off we went in a new direction. Many in this land are suddenly, if tardily, awakening to the connection between our own behavior and the well-being of the earth and its inhabitants. We are awakening to the truth, and turning around, amending our lives. Some conversions are major; change the course of our lives for the duration. Others fall more in the category of "aha!" moments.

One of the important things to note is that in being converted Paul does not lose his passion or abandon his gifts and abilities. He retains these, yet now directs them toward a different end. Paul was a bright, zealous, energetic, creative, determined individual. He excelled in the law and persecuted Christians with zeal. Once converted, he brought all of that with him; he excelled in the gospel and proclaimed Christ with zeal. When Jesus called Simon and Andrew – who were fishermen – to set down their nets and come, follow him, he told them their skills would be of use, but in a new way: "I will make you fishers of people, and of souls." If we were to experience conversion, would not mean starting entirely anew.

Yet, it prompts the question, to what end are we applying the gifts and abilities that we have? I know a woman who worked for many years with great success in the corporate world. She appreciated the rewards she received, but ultimately found it soul-less and unsatisfying, so she left. She decided to use her expertise and her experience in the non-profit sector, to contribute in a way that she found meaningful, consistent with her beliefs.

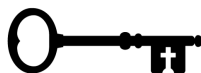
Let's move now to the center, the core. Paul was not converted to new ideas about the environment, nor even to acting in a way consistent with his true values. Paul was converted to faith in Christ. It was an immediate and personal encounter that initiated an intimate relationship with Jesus. The results of these new relationships were far-reaching for Paul and, as it turns out, for all the rest of us as a consequence of his effort.

One of the immediate and clearest changes is that once Paul was a zealous guardian of the faith, protector of God; he persecuted those whom he saw to deviate from the traditional and familiar ways of God. Where once he guarded, he now flings wide the doors, inviting everyone he can find – Greek or Jew, slave or free, woman or man – to receive and to share in the love of God, given freely to all. Conversion to Christ means recognizing that God's love is given freely to all.

We might describe Paul as having experienced love at first sight. Others, too, have experienced sudden and overwhelming conversion to Christ. For many, it is more subtle, more gradual. I have had a couple of experiences during prayer in which the voice of God or of Christ spoke powerfully and decisively to me. I am grateful for those experiences more than I can say. Yet I see my own relationship with Christ not as hinging on a single event, but as a progression.

After college – a long period in which God had no place in my thoughts or plans – I was studying in Japan and practicing Zen Buddhism, meditating regularly. My father had given me a Book of Common Prayer to take with me, inscribing in it, "may you have good company on your journey." I picked it up one day and decided to start reading Morning Prayer as part of my practice. I read the opening verse, from Psalm 122 – "I was glad when they said to me, let us go into the house of the Lord" – and found that I was glad. And as I prayed that day, I heard God say, "I was wondering when you were going to show up."

Several months later I was trying to discern if ordained ministry was the right path for me to take. An older family friend who was a priest and I had been talking late into the night, he encouraging me to go to seminary. As I hemmed and hawed and wondered if I was truly called, he said with exasperation, “What do you want, man, doves?!” Yes. Doves, even one dove, would really clinch it. I never got doves, but I have trusted the hints and whispers that I have heard, spoken in prayer, on the lips of others like you, in the midst of life. I have heard these things as if spoken by God, and have taken what steps that I am able to nourish that relationship. I try to use the abilities that I have been given, trusting that God does not ask us to do what we cannot. God asks us to do what we are able – and then some. For some, it is preaching. But we’re not all preachers – thank heavens. Some of us teach, some of us cook and feed, some offer comfort and care, some plan and build, some are strong and durable, others nimble and quick. Gifts from God, discerned and honed during our lives. These things that are yours to do, do them; do them for the love of God. Said St. Francis, “Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.”



Open hearts. Open minds.