

Scripture: Acts 9:1-20

The Conversion of Saul

9:1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and 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. 3 Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5 He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 8 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. 9 For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." 11 The 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, 12 and he has seen in a vision[a] a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." 13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." 15 But 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; 16 I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 17 So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul[b] 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." 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul Preaches in Damascus

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, 20 and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Today's Message:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Throughout this Easter season we're going to work our way through the book of Acts. This book records the events that took place Jesus' resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit to

the scared and scattered disciples. The Spirit of God has been turned loose into the early church, these people who were hiding in a locked room last week are now as bold as lions.

The church in Jerusalem had already grown to a few thousand people, and Peter and the rest of the crew were preaching on city streets, in the marketplace, the synagogues – wherever they could find an audience.

And this is where we encounter Saul. Saul appears earlier in the book of the Acts than this morning's reading, and not in a good way. At the end of chapter seven, the men who were stoning Stephen (after he delivered a particularly confrontational sermon) "laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul" and the story notes Saul's approval of the killing of Stephen.

It appears that Saul really got himself worked up into a religious frenzy, he began "ravaging the church by entering house after house; and dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison," and then by chapter nine, where we are this morning, Saul was "breathing threats and murder".

Paul was what today we would call an extremist; so firm in his beliefs that he was even willing to kill those who disagreed with him. In Saul's case, he is a Jew who is breathing threats and murder. There is a lot of attention being paid these days to Muslims who breathing threats and murder. Buddhist extremists kill and burn minorities, and in Christianity we have also had our share of fanatics who likewise kill innocents.

Our reading this morning is about turning away from this kind of radicalization. It is about change, about new identities, about new beginnings, about new life. In this way it is consistent with the whole of the bible which contains example after example of new beginnings: from Abraham's setting off into the unknown, to Joseph's second chance in Egypt, the nation of Israel moving from bondage to freedom, to Thomas being set free from doubt and insecurity. It's the same message over and over again. New life. New identity.

In this morning's reading, Saul's identity changed. His official renaming happened a little bit later, but this experience of the light, the voice, the blindness and the healing of Ananias which lead to his baptism - all of these together form the period in which Saul was changed to Paul. He changed from being the persecutor of the church to the stalwart defender and promoter of the church. Where Saul tore down, Paul built up. Where Saul breathed murder and hate, Paul wrote eloquently of love as the greatest gift of all. There have been some significant changes in Saul, to make him into Paul.

But as dramatic as this story is, the Saul/Paul character is not who I want to focus on this morning. There is another character in this story who also has to change, and in a pretty substantial way. Ananias. When Paul was struck blind by the light, he was taken into Damascus to recover.

And in Damascus was a man called Ananias – one of those new Christians – indeed, Ananias is exactly the kind of person that Saul set out for Damascus to find. Saul’s breathing of threats and murder were directed at Ananias and his friends. And this poor Ananias had a vision in which God asked him – not to hide from this man Saul – but to go find him, and heal him. Is it any wonder that Ananias, who initially answered God in the words of Samuel saying ‘Here I am Lord’ suddenly was sputtering saying wait – what now? Heal this man? Don’t you know who he is? What he’s done? What he came here to do?

You see, this story is not just about Saul’s change. Saul’s new heart forced Ananias to also experience a change of heart. Ananias may have thought that he was figuring out this new Christianity thing, but we see that he understood very little. For Ananias the crucifixion of Jesus was a very recent event. In fact, it was this very crucifixion and the following resurrection that caused the whole Christian movement that Saul was trying to shut down.

And if the crucifixion teaches us anything, it teaches us how Jesus treats his enemies. Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you. Forgive them Father, for they don’t know what they are doing. Jesus responded to his enemies hatred and condemnation with love and forgiveness. And yet, here we find Ananias responding to God’s call to minister to Saul with ‘but Lord – don’t you know that he’s my enemy? Why would I help him?’

Saul’s conversion caused a conversion in Ananias. It’s infectious. New life, and new thinking is spreading to those who don’t expect it – maybe those who think they don’t need it. And this hasn’t changed in two thousand years.

This is precisely what happens when we invite new people into the church. It doesn’t just change them – it also changes us. Jesus used images like salt and yeast to describe the church in society – a few good Christians can have a positive effect on the whole neighbourhood - but that also applies to the individuals in the church. Just as a little salt will change the flavor of the whole stew, and little yeast will change the very nature of dough – so also the addition of one single person can change the whole church. Nikki is joining our church this morning – no pressure at all!

Look what happened when Paul became part of the church. Not only did he have an effect of Ananias, who had to learn how to respond when face to face with a former enemy, but he ended up changing the whole church.

Paul began as an ‘other’ – he was a religious elite who was a persecutor, what about the people that he started to invite in afterwards? At least Paul was a Jew like Jesus, but then he started sharing the faith with Pagans – those idolators and fornicators. He invited in the Greeks, the Romans – remember how horrifying this would be to the other Jews.

The Jews are a people set apart – all their laws were put in place to identify them as God’s people – as different than everyone else. The foods they ate, the clothes they wore, their festivals and rituals – the Jews were God’s own people – not like the rest of the rabble out

there. The Jews couldn't even sit down to dinner with non-Jews, in fact couldn't even go in their houses – that's how different they were. Their whole identity was predicated upon being 'not like them.'

And those others were exactly the people Paul started bringing to church. Let's also remember that there weren't churches like this in the first century – church happened in people's homes. How can you do church if you have to let someone defiled come into your house, where you eat, where you sleep – or if you have to go into an unclean person's house?

How does that work? Are you still the people of God when you begin violating those rules? If you throw out the rules and traditions and break bread with a Gentile, then what is your identity? Are you still one of God's people? Jesus was Jewish, can you possibly follow Jesus without first becoming Jewish? How could you be a Christian without first becoming one of God's chosen people? These were huge questions at that time that caused many divisions in the early church.

And not much has changed since. As a church, we want new members. At least, we know we're supposed to want more people to hear the good news and become part of the family. Certainly we want growth and the good feelings of progress that growth implies. But are we willing to take the changes that come with growth?

Growth assumes that things will have to change – if there is no change, there hasn't been any growth – so how do we deal with the changes that will come? Because we only have two options – welcome newcomers and we grow alongside each other, or try to keep things just as they are now, and become a museum.

Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda. The church is reformed, and always reforming. Life is change. Change is constant. Of that we can be sure.

Like the early church, we are apprehensive about change – and for a few reasons. Some of those reasons are simply preference. We like things the way they are. We've been doing things the same way for forty years and it's just easier to repeat the same things over and over again than to think of new things.

But more importantly, change affects our identity. This is what the early church wrestled with. While some changes are inconsequential to who we are, how will we know which changes are important? Which is the change that will make us no longer God's people?

Can we still be Christian without egg salad sandwiches? I think so. Probably no longer Presbyterian, but still Christian.

What if we served wafers instead of bread at communion? Or worshipped with a guitar? Or had a minister with a tattoo? Not so long ago having a woman as a minister was considered heretical.

My point is that as long as we aren't clear about what makes us Christian, we will be nervous about change. Because we don't know which decision is the one that will push us out of God's family we resist all change, just to be safe. But then we cease to grow – and for all intents and purposes we also cease to live.

I'm not going to conclude this sermon with an answer, but a question. This question applies to us individually, as a congregation, and as part of the world-wide church. What is it that makes you a follower of Christ? How are you able to discern what is essential to your faith, and what is preferential?

If a Saul comes along and we are forced to rethink what church is – when a stranger shows up and asks why do we do this instead of the other thing, how do we answer them? It is only by knowing what makes us Christian, by knowing where our identity lies, that we are able to accommodate the newcomer without worrying that we will become lost ourselves.

So, your homework is to answer the question – deeply, not a Sunday school answer – what is it that makes you a Christian. That answer will be the core that you hold onto as you go out into the world, and as we invite the world to be here with us.

Because as we continue to engage with Jesus we will find just as he did that we cannot change the world without also being changed ourselves.

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.