

“Conversion”

*As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” <sup>5</sup> “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied (Acts 9:3-5).*

Today, in the story of Saul’s conversion, God has a message for each one of us. For some of you, this message will be uncomfortable. It will challenge your view of the world and call you to rethink relationships and people in your life that you may have written off. For others, today’s message will be a word of peace and a beacon of hope as God’s grace is revealed to you in a new and powerful way. And for all of us, the message we find in the account of Saul’s conversion will bear witness to God’s story...and it is a miraculous story of change. It is a story of resurrection and new life. It is a shocking and surprising tale of redemption and nowhere do we see this story displayed more dramatically than in the conversion of Saul of Tarsus.

We are first introduced to Saul in Acts chapter 7, but his story had begun long before Luke mentions him here. Saul was an accomplished and respected man in a Jewish culture that encouraged religious fervor and demanded strict adherence to the Law...and nobody did it better than Saul. In Philippians 3, the Apostle Paul talks about his life before experiencing the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus and the resume he presents is impressive. Paul writes, “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, (I was) a Pharisee; as to zeal, (I was) a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, (I was) blameless” (Philippians 3:4-6).

Groomed for leadership in the Jewish ruling council, Saul was an educated overachiever who had garnered the attention of the religious establishment by taking a leading role in tracking down and punishing the followers of Christ. When Luke first introduces Paul in Acts 7, it is in connection with the murder of Stephen and, as the vicious mob attacked Stephen and dragged him out of the city and began to batter his body with stones, we learn that “the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:58). This brutal murder provided the first martyr of the church and, as the life left Stephen’s body, Luke tells us that, “Saul was there, giving approval to his death” (Acts 8:1).

But Stephen’s wasn’t the only blood on Saul’s hands. Later, in the book of Acts, we learn in Paul’s speech to the crowd in Jerusalem that he had systematically hunted down and persecuted followers of Christ “to their death” (Acts 22:4). To put it simply, there was no one more fiercely and violently opposed to the cause of Christ than Saul. He was a bounty hunter commissioned by the Jewish leaders, motivated by religious purity, and driven by political ambition and no one was more feared by the early Christians than Saul of Tarsus.

As today’s text from Acts 9 begins, we learn that Saul is on his way to Damascus with the authority of the high priest to hunt and capture (or worse) anyone who claimed Christ. Although Damascus was a three or four-day journey from Jerusalem, the political structure in Damascus provided a freedom to Saul that he would not have had in Judea. If Saul felt that violence would serve his cause, Damascus was the perfect setting and, as he approached the city, his death squad had the ability to use any means necessary to accomplish their objective. And it’s here, just miles outside of the city that Jesus steps in. Luke writes that “suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do’...And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”

Saul’s conversion is a spectacular and dramatic example of the power of God to break through the hardest of hearts and bring about a change that any reasonable person would’ve considered impossible. We have it right here in black and white and throughout the pages of the Bible – which by the way we confess to be the inspired and inerrant Word of God – we see God making things happen that are completely outside of what we would consider possible. He heals the sick. He gives sight to the blind. He parts the waters and calms the storms. He changes hearts and forgives sin. *He brings life from death...*and yet, when it comes to *our* world and *our* individual lives,

we don't act like we believe this. We treat these stories like allegories and fairy tales. We stick to the facts. We do our homework, we hedge our bets and we make reasonable and realistic decisions based on our experience and assumptions, not on the sovereign and sacred Word of God...and that is why Ananias is so important!

There's no debating the miraculous conversion of St. Paul, but that's not the only miracle in this text and today, the truth that we need to hear and the challenge that we need face is found in the story of Ananias. You see, this saint of God and brother in Christ fights a battle against reason and realism. In this story, God calls Ananias to an unreasonable if not impossible task. Coming to Ananias in a vision, the Lord directs him to seek out Saul of Tarsus and heal him of his blindness. This word from the Risen Christ was crazy and His instructions to Ananias must have sounded suicidal. Ananias was *hiding* from Saul! Along with the other Christians in Damascus, Ananias had heard about this man and knew why he and his posse had come to Damascus and now Jesus was directing him to come out of hiding and go right into the belly of the beast! Any reasonable, realistic person would have pulled a "Jonah" and fled from Saul as fast as his legs could carry him. But Ananias is not a realist...he is a disciple of Jesus and he goes to Saul with the Words of the Risen Christ and Saul is healed, Saul is baptized, he is filled with the Holy Spirit and the Lord's world-changing purpose in the apostle Paul begins to unfold.

Today, we need to hear the message of God to us in the story of Ananias. Today, we need to understand that God's promise of conversion and His impossible-looking and unreasonable plans still unfold in our lives as well. This story should rock our world and open our eyes to the inspired and inerrant promise that "with God nothing is impossible" and that in Him "all things work together for good." This story teaches us that, in Christ, we can *never* write people off; that when we speak in fatalistic stereotypes about poverty or race or political parties or our co-workers or neighbors or relatives or even ourselves with words like "useless" or "never" or "typical" or "unlikely" we are moving away from faith.

The story of Saul and Ananias is one of conversion and it is a bold reminder that God changes things. This account tells us that change is not only possible...change is what God does! It is how God works! This is the inspired and inerrant message of God and this promise of change underpins everything we do as the body of Christ. We support the mission work of Tony and Connie Booker as they reach out with the Gospel in a godless culture because we believe that God changes things. We are reaching out into our community to transform the homes and lives of the people in our neighborhood because we believe that God changes things. For 35 years we've sponsored a Stephen Ministry program because we believe that by the power of His Word God Changes things! We pray for people who seem uninterested or hostile and we speak the Gospel to an unregenerate world because we believe that in His time and according to His plan, God changes things!

The book of Acts was written for us! The story of Saul and Ananias is God's message to us because here we see the power of the Risen Christ to change things. Faith allows us to see beyond the realistic and reasonable constraints of our world. Faith looks beyond poverty and unemployment, beyond cancer and disability, beyond addiction and broken relationships, it looks past sins and current failures and instead, it points us to the promises of the Risen Christ in whom "all things are possible." And if we stop believing this...if we stop living by this promise of God...then we should close our doors.

In our baptism, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to possibilities, even when the prevailing wisdom and our own common sense tell us that change is impossible. And it this Spirit-given, baptismal promise and reality gives us our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ.

This week I spent some time with a disciple of Jesus named Susan Clark. Susan's children Greg and Kelly and their families are members of our congregation and for many months now we have been praying for Susan as she has struggled with a very difficult cancer diagnosis and the recovery from a stroke she experienced in the middle of her treatments. This past week, she had some complications that landed her in the hospital and I had a chance to visit her. As we spoke, we talked briefly about the medical issues she was dealing with but then our conversation shifted and Susan and her husband Terry began to tell me about a recent experience.

Over ten years ago the Clarks were involved with a ministry called "Hand in Hand." It was run by Epiphany Lutheran Church on the northeast side of Fort Wayne and was designed to provide Christian care for at-risk

children from some of the poorest and most violent neighborhoods in the city. The children served by “Hand in Hand” were routinely neglected and often victims of physical and emotional abuse. These were children considered too difficult for local Head Start programs and, in many ways, the obstacles they faced were impossible. Terry drove a van for “Hand in Hand” and would go into the neighborhoods where the children lived, pick them and bring them to Epiphany where they would be fed, cared for and taught about Jesus. Susan served in the program as a preschool teacher.

As time went on, she began to develop strong ties not only to children in her room, but also with a few of the parents. One family in particular formed a strong bond with Terry and Susan. The mother, who had spent significant time in and out of jail, would often call Susan for advice or help and frequently Susan and Terry would take her children for the day, bringing them into their home to make Christmas cookies or simply spend the day together. Even after the “Hand in Hand” program ended, the connection with these children continued in the years that followed.

A few weeks ago, Susan and Terry went to see the oncologist to get the results of a scan Susan had received several days before. The news wasn’t good. Susan and Terry had been told that her cancer was no longer responding to the treatments and had started to spread aggressively. Many of you have been in this situation with a loved one and know how deflating a prognosis like this can be. They left the doctor’s office with some difficult decisions to make and waiting for them when they got home was a message from the mother of the family they had cared for through “Hand in Hand.” She was calling to tell them that one of the girls that Terry and Susan helped over the years was in the hospital. This 14 year-old child had become pregnant and the baby she delivered had been born with severe physical defects and died shortly after birth. In the face of such a tragic circumstance the mother and now grandmother had called on the Clarks for help.

Dealing with their own difficult news, it would’ve been reasonable and perfectly understandable for Susan and Terry to ignore the message or decline the request, but that’s not what they did. They next day Terry and Susan went to see this little girl in hospital. The mother who had called the Clarks didn’t know about Susan’s cancer and when Susan and Terry walked into the room she broke down in tears. Susan’s appearance had changed a great deal from the vibrant and healthy woman who had taught preschool and cared for her children for so many years.

Susan later told her own kids, “I didn’t know what else to do but I know that someday she’ll remember that Mrs. Clark told her that Jesus loves her.” And with that message in her mind Susan climbed into the hospital bed with this grieving 14 year-old mother, put her arms around her, held her tight and sang to this child, “Jesus Loves Me this I Know.” The witness of Susan Clark would bring Ananias to tears.

My friends, God works! From outside of us – with absolutely no help from us in any way and against our sinful and selfish will – God breaks through. Unearned, undeserved and unwanted, the Risen Christ breaks through and no matter who you are or what you have done; no matter how brazen and bold your sins have been you are never outside of God’s reach. Our reasonable view of reality is not God’s. There is no impossible situation! There is no one beyond the reach of the Risen Christ! *And as you proclaim the Gospel to the people God puts into your lives* the Holy Spirit is working to change the heart and whether that happens in a preschool room or hospital bed or on the road to Damascus...conversion is always possible. Live boldly for Christ with the peace of this promise. Amen.

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