

The Bethel Pulpit —

Pastor William R. White

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



On the web at www.bethel-madison.org



The Sermon Text — Acts 9:1-22

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 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. 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. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' 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, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' 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; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul 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.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.' All who heard him were amazed and said, 'Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?' Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

SERMON - THE SPREADING FLAME: CONVERSION OF PAUL

In the days following the death and resurrection of Jesus, those who met daily for prayer and hymn singing thought of themselves as reformed Jews. They ate kosher, observed the Sabbath and worshipped at the temple. They thought of themselves as Jews, though Jews with a slightly different view of God, and Jews who believed that the Messiah had come. If they initially didn't see a radical difference between themselves and the main body of Jews, the Jewish authorities did, and treated them as people walking on a totally different path.

Initially the Christians, who called themselves, "The Way," only received a cold shoulder from the Jewish leaders, but as their group increased in numbers, particularly after the huge Pentecost celebration, they were told they were not to teach near the temple or any other public place. That warning didn't stop them, and when confronted Peter and John said, "We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard."

When they resumed their teaching they were thrown in jail. Upon their release they again refused to obey an order to stop. This enraged the authorities. Some wanted to kill them, (5:33) but wiser heads prevailed. Instead the authorities had them flogged, ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them. The Christians celebrated, Acts tells us, because "they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of Jesus."

When all these warnings did no good the harassment increased, and a goon squad was organized who began to beat up Christians. The thugs even went so far as to stone to death a charismatic young Greek speaking Jew by the name of Stephen. The leader of this goon squad was a man known as Saul of Tarsus.

To suggest Saul was zealous is to announce the obvious. He grew up in what is present day Turkey, but was sent to Jerusalem at an early age to be trained as a rabbi under the tutelage of the greatest Jewish teacher of his day, Gamaliel. A person was not accepted in Gamaliel's circle unless that person was the son of respected and wealthy Jewish parents. Saul was bright and energetic and quickly rose to a prominent position, where he was assigned the important task of making life miserable for the followers of The Way. He was more than successful. He did such a good job that many of the Christians fled Jerusalem. At first the Jewish authorities cheered, "We have them on the run." On second view, however, they were not so sure about their strategy when they discovered that those who left Jerusalem formed new churches wherever they settled. The persecution helped Christians fulfill the Great Commission to go into all the world and preach the gospel to all people.

When Saul heard that some of the Christians had established a following in Syria, in the city of Damascus, he became furious and decided to continue the harassment. He left for Damascus "Still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord."

However, on the way to Damascus God intervened. A light from heaven flashed and Saul was struck blind. He heard a voice say, "Saul! Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Saul's replied, "Sir, who are you?"

The voice answered, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

Can you imagine what Saul thought at that moment? He was on a holy crusade against a man he believed to be a fraud and a heretic, a man who was dead, although his followers thought he was alive, and the man talked to him! God now had Saul's full attention. Was he on the wrong side of the fight? Was he actually working against the God that he served?

The rest of this story moves quickly. A blind Saul was led to Damascus where a Christian by the name of Ananias reluctantly took care of him. Soon, Saul switched sides. Soon Saul was working for the Christians. Soon he was Christianity's finest missionary, reaching across the northern Mediterranean into the homes and lives of hundreds of Gentiles. To mark his change in status he changed his name from Saul to Paul.

We have just witnessed the conversion of a rascal. The Old Testament is full of these stories. Rahab, a prostitute, Moses a hot-head who had murdered a man, Noah, who had a drinking problem, David, an adulterer, Jacob a con artist who ripped off his brother, all ended up working for God. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, who saved a *wretch* like me..."

Paul's is not the only conversion story in the book of Acts. Peter's sermon, in Acts 2, about the power of the Holy Spirit is a sermon by a convert. This is the Peter who denied Jesus three times on the night before his crucifixion. His was a conversion from confusion to confidence.

Acts tells of the other apostles teaching near the synagogue, unafraid of being jailed. These are the same disciples who ran like frightened little children when Jesus was arrested. What has happened is that they have experienced some form of conversion, a conversion from fear to courage, from doubt to faith.

Every believer mentioned in the pages of the New Testament had a major change experience. Some changed from being devout Jews to being believers in Jesus. Others changed from being polytheists, people who worshiped fertility gods, and wood and stone gods, to the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

The history of Christianity is full of conversion stories. Augustine, the great teacher of the church in the fourth century was a boozier and a womanizer. The witness of his mother, Monica, the prayers of friends, and the power of God led him to faith. Later he wrote such books as "The City of God," and helped give substance to the early church.

Francis Collins, the scientist who headed the Human Genome Project and who recently was appointed by President Obama as the director of the National Institute of Health, whose work now includes direction of Stem Cell research, tells of his conversion from unbelief to belief in "The Language of God." Collins credits C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* as a major factor. In the book he writes, "Lewis seemed to know all of my objections, sometimes even before I had quite formulated them."

It is not possible to become a person of faith without experiencing one or more conversions in your life time. More than likely they will not be conversions similar to Paul. Our conversions will less dramatic, from self-confident

independence to child-like dependence, from knowing to trusting, from accumulating to giving, from judgment to grace.

Our conversions may include giving up control of our life or becoming more gentle and compassionate. Some of us have given up our uses of substances. The only way that could happen was when we decided not to be in control of our own lives and to let a power greater than ourselves take over the wheel.

Some experience a conversion from living for self, to living for others. It may include deciding that the world does not revolve around us.

Our conversion always involves prayer, and faith and hope, and it always includes trust in a God who raises the dead to life.

Most of us do not have a conversion, but conversions. It is not enough for us to be born again. We must be born again, and again, and again. The catechism suggests that we need a daily washing, a daily renewal, a daily change.

Some of the finest Christians I have known have never had a dramatic religious experience. But then I know people who have had wonderful marriages that have lasted 60 years, and never had a powerful love experience. Theirs was a quiet love affair that endured the rocky road of life. Different strokes for different folks.

Elijah went up on the mountain to meet God. God told Elijah to go out on the mountain and to wait, "for the LORD is about to pass by." Elijah did what he was told. At first there was a great wind, so strong that it split the mountains, but the LORD was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. Then there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. Then there was sheer silence, and Elijah encountered God.

You may meet God in an earthquake, or a fire, or on the Damascus road, but chances are it will be less dramatic. Almost always the one requirement is you must wait for him, for if you do he will find you. And when he finds you he will assure you of his love. His love will open your eyes to new realities. He will lead you to change, in small and large ways. He will not force you to change; rather his love will create a desire in you for conversion. And then, chances are that he will call you to serve. Your adventure may just be about to begin. Amen. © 2010