

The Damascus Road
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**First Presbyterian Church
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Acts 9:1-22**

An old Irish man is lying in bed, very ill. (After all, we just celebrated St Patrick's Day). His son is sitting at his bedside, expecting the end to come at any moment. The old man looks up at the boy and says, "Son, it's time for you to get me a Protestant minister."

The son is astounded. "But, Dad!" he protests, "You've been a good Catholic all your life! You're delirious. It's a priest ye be wanting now, not a minister."

The old man looks up at him and says, "Son, please. It's me last request. Get a minister for me!"

"But, Dad," cries the son, "Ye raised me a good Catholic. You've been a good Catholic all your life. Ye don't want a minister at a time like this!"

The old man manages to croak out the words, "Son, if you respect me and love me as a father, you'll go out and get me a Protestant minister right now."

The son relents and goes out and gets the minister. They come back to the house, and the minister goes upstairs and converts him. As the minister is leaving the house, he passes Father O'Malley coming quickly through the door. The minister stares solemnly into the eyes of the priest. "I'm afraid you're too late, Father," he says. "He's a Protestant now."

Father O'Malley rushes up the steps and bursts into the old man's room. "Pat! Pat! Why did ye do it?" he cries. "You were such a good Catholic! We went to St. Mary's together! You were there when I performed my first mass! Why in the world would ye do such a thing like this?"

"Well," the old man says as he looks up at his dear friend. "I figured if somebody had to go, it was better one of *them* than one of *us*."

Thank God "Catholic/Protestant" relations have greatly improved! We share so much in common! Did you see me on Catholic TV being interviewed with my good friend Monsignor Vince Grimalia? Ok, I won't give up my day job. But, how far we Christians have progressed in understanding and respect for each other, just as Jesus so dearly wanted- THAT ALL MAY BE ONE!

After all, even to the continued amazement of some of my relatives on my father's Catholic side- a Catholic University (Misericordia University), actually allows me (a Protestant) to teach religion in one of their universities! (These are wonderful relatives, but Vatican II, never happened in their minds). Protestants and Catholics don't need to convert each other. What matters is for the human heart to CHANGE!

This morning I want to consider the concept and the reality of conversion. It means to change direction.

In the Old Testament, Conversion is "SHUBH", meaning "to return" or "turn back". The verb form of the word appears over 1,000 times in the Old Testament. In the New Testament we have

“EPISTREPHO” and “METANOEO” both of which also have to do with a change of direction. Change is what conversion is about.

The anthropology of the scriptures witnesses to the need of the individual to be more than he or she is. There is a lack within the human species. The person is not what he or she should be.

This is somewhat exhibited in the story of the fall in the Garden of Eden. Humanity was wrestling with the fact that we human beings do not behave the way we sense that we should. There is disparity in our ideals and our actions. The Eden story endeavors to explain this disparity in the “will” the volition of humanity, and in our finitude. There is a mixture here that continues to confound us to the present day.

When all is said and done, Christianity posits that the human being is fragmented and alienated from his or her beginning – that is from God.

And this fragmentation corrupts all of our relationships! Not only are we alienated from God, but we are also alienated from each other, and from ourselves.

The Eden story was trying to make sense out of this realized situation.

Humanity, you and me – are not the people we need to be, unless we return to our roots. Our Roots being God. We are in need of conversion, a turning around. A turning back to our Creator. A transformation is needed. A transformation from alienation to reconciliation. Reconciliation with God and with humanity. Spirituality and Morality are of 9ne piece!

This brings us to one of the most dramatic conversion experiences that the Christian world has ever known. Paul’s transforming moment, radically changed his life and the life of Christianity. By no means are we to make this narrative in Acts 9 – the only way to experience God’s action in our lives, but this account can be a paradigm for us in reference to our individual need to be transformed into a right relationship with God, humanity, and ourselves.

Paul the apostle. His personality is the most vivid of all the authors of the Bible. He was a human dynamo. In Paul’s writings we do not have a systematic theology, but rather we have theology in action. Christ is alive! Christ offers a new beginning! Christ will put you on the right track in finding the Way to live your life!

Originally Paul was called Saul. His genealogy was respectful- of the tribe of Benjamin. Named after the first king of Israel, but perhaps somewhat inappropriately. King Saul was a tall man, while it appears that Paul was not very tall.

The apocryphal Acts of Paul describes him as: “Paul, a man of little stature, balding, bow-legged, but his body was in good condition, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked, full of grace! Sometimes he appeared like he had a face of an angel.”

St. John Chrysostom said this about Paul: “He was five feet high but with a reach beyond the stars.” A Roman citizen. A Jew. A Pharisee. A tentmaker by trade. Early on Saul/Paul became a fanatic in persecuting this new heretical Jewish sect – Christianity. This seems to be within the personality traits of this man. What he believed in – he placed his total commitment. ALL OR NOTHING! He saw this “sect” as harmful to the true religion of God, therefore he committed himself to its eradication.

We first encounter Saul/Paul in Acts, where he watches the martyrdom of Stephen the first Christian martyr (look over to the stained glass windows on the south wall, and focus on the top left window. There, Stephen a declarer of Jesus and his Way, is being executed, as Saul looks on). We read in Acts 8:1: “And Saul was consenting unto his death.”

A Biblical scholar has written:

“Perhaps the impression left by Stephen, perhaps virtues and convictions of those he arrested, perhaps what he had heard of the life and teachings of Jesus were undermining his confidence in the rectitude of his actions, and were preparing him for the most momentous conversion in history, on the road to Damascus, when Paul was knocked to the ground.” (p. 25)

Saul had become a hunter of heretics. His zeal was second to none. He procured permission to capture these foul beings of the “Way”. The word “Way” here refers to early Christian faith.

Saul knew what he had to do. It was written in his very soul that – God’s laws must be upheld and no heretical sect must be allowed to stain God’s Torah.

We must remember to keep Saul within the first century of the Common Era. It was either “my” religion or “burn in hell”. Thank God, many of us who profess a religion have advanced enough to realize that God transcends all of our limited constructions of theology and reality. Nevertheless, in our very day there are destructive religious forces actively seeking to destroy those who reject their dogma, and will do anything to eradicate what they dismiss as wrong. Again, in 2018 we have made immense gains, but the battle for religious enlightenment is engaged, and we must not fail to step into the fray! (Another story).

It is not the fervor that needs to dissipate today, far from it. What we need today is Paul’s intensity to share the Gospel of God’s love and the Gospel of God’s justice!

The story has Paul traveling on the road to Damascus. His eyes were intent on spying out those perverters of Torah and destroying them! Thank God for Conversions of Light! (Look to the upper right stained glass panel- there is Saul’s Damascus road conversion/ turning around).

“...And suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground...” Here, Saul, to become Paul, had a conversion experience. The “Transcendent”, “Loving”, “Justice Seeking” God, got his attention and changed his course of action and changed his heart. This type of experience has also been called a “Transforming Moment”.

Lewis Rambo, a scholar on faith development defines conversion as "...a significant, sudden transformation of a person's loyalties, patterns of life, and focus of energy." James Fowler, another scholar on faith development further elaborates on conversion. "Conversion is a significant re-centering of one's previous conscious or unconscious images of value and power, and the conscious adoption of a new set of master stories in the commitment to reshape one's life in a new community of interpretation and action." (p. 281-282).

On the Damascus Road! Conversion is not a one shot deal. Within our life experiences we should encounter various types of "conversion". The re-centering of our previous images in terms of value and power is necessary for our continued human development. These experiences are not – lighthearted in nature. When they occur – major shifts of orientation take over!

In conversion – my life, your life is radically changed. Speaking in religious terms – God reveals God's plan and purpose to you, for you! In your finite, self-absorbed way of viewing this life – God breaks in, and a new "way" is grasped.

Saul's conversion, his "transforming moment" took place on that road to Damascus. An encounter with the Divine, will be as varied as the people who will experience God.

As the Ancient Garden of Eden story realized, we are indeed: fragmented, incomplete, broken individuals. We are Creatures with only a sense of emptiness, day to day drudgery and confusion, in need of an encounter with the Creator and Restorer of the Universe!

But, when the Creator, the God of all Being – reveals Himself to you – conversion takes place/ a new Way of living life guides, reorients your whole being!

In that transforming moment, that turn around, that epiphany, your previous paradigm (view) of reality is changed. That view of emptiness, purposeless and "what's the use" is transformed into a new vision, a vision that God is and does care. That even in the midst of all my confusion and hurt – there is a God, and this God as revealed in Jesus Christ – is with me!

The biblical story continues after Saul falls to the ground.

"...he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I am Jesus, who you are persecuting...'"

How many of us are on our own Damascus road? That trip that has us looking for the wrong answers, headed in the wrong direction?

There are those existential times when we need that blinding light that knocks us off of our place of pseudo security, and changes us into seeing God, humanity, and ourselves, in the true light of who we are- a Creation of the Moral God of all Creation, gifted to love, be loved, and live responsibly!

Amen.

