

An Invitation to Conversion
Acts 9:1-20
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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So today we are moving into the book of Acts where we hear stories about the early church. These stories give us some glimpses into how the followers of Jesus found their way forward after his ascension - without him physically present. They give us some glimpses into how this group of Jesus' followers became a growing movement.

We hear stories of various leaders, from Peter to Philip to Saul to Lydia. We hear stories of how the message of Jesus got carried out well beyond the borders of Israel. We hear stories of how the communities that came to be identified as Christian understood themselves and how that understanding grew and changed.

So, today we are introduced to Saul. Technically he is first introduced at the end of chapter 7 as he stands witness to the stoning of Stephen, and then in chapter 8 as he persecutes those who are followers of Jesus.

So we have those mentions of him previously, but it is here in chapter 9 that we really come to know him. And we come to know him as he makes a change, a conversion in his life.

Now, before we dig into this story, let me say one other thing about Saul. For most of the stories about him that we find in the Bible, he is called Paul. He is known as the most prolific writer in the Bible, having written many of the letters that make up our New Testament.

While in other places we see name changes that are significant because of events or meaning, this situation is different. Saul, like many others in his time, had two names. "Saul" is the Hebrew name that would have been given to him by his Jewish parents. "Paul" is the name that would have been connected with his Roman citizenship and therefore is the name he would have used when traveling across the Roman empire.

So, it was not the case that he went from being called Saul to being called Paul, but rather that he was identified using the name that was appropriate for the circumstances. Perhaps in some ways we can think of this similarly to my husband's family of origin calling him James when he is back in Nebraska. Meanwhile, no one who has known him since he moved away to go to college over 40 years ago ever thinks to call him anything but Jim. You inevitably have similar experiences with your own name or the names of others you know.

So, having said that, let's spend a little time with today's story as Saul is headed north to Damascus. True to the reputation he has built for himself, Saul is on the road in order to gather up those who are followers of Jesus and haul them back to the authorities. Saul is nothing if not committed to his beliefs. This is true at the beginning of this story as he spends energy trying to stop the followers of Jesus, and it is just as true at the end of the story as he becomes - with the same zeal - a follower of Jesus himself.

Who Saul is doesn't really change. But his understanding of who Jesus is does. His understanding of what Jesus and his followers are about certainly shifts.

And before we think of this simply as the story of Saul's conversion from Judaism to Christianity...before we decide that this story is simply confirmation that Christianity is "right" or is "better"...let us remember a few things.

First, there were a number of very legitimate reasons why some of the Jewish people felt threatened by Jesus and his followers. It wasn't that they were mean people out to get others. Rather, they saw Jesus as a threat to their faith. They heard him interpret things differently and felt confused, cautious, concerned about those teachings. They heard the claims that Jesus was the Messiah but also heard similar claims about others.

Meanwhile, the Jewish people were also living under the thumb of the Roman empire and in constant threat themselves. The reality was that if things got out of control, Rome would take away their freedoms and would squash whatever seemed to be gathering energy. So, a movement of a ragtag bunch of people following a would-be-Messiah was truly perceived as dangerous. And that movement continuing after Jesus' death was particularly worrisome.

No matter how we feel about Saul's approach, it serves us well to remember that this was the context within which he was pushing back against the followers of Jesus.

And that was his mission as he traveled the road to Damascus and as he encountered a bright light that left him blinded for three days. Not only did he encounter a light, but a voice came with it questioning the persecution he was doing. It was, he quickly came to understand, the voice of Jesus.

Of course, we know, having listened to Maggie read this scripture for us today and perhaps having heard or read it many times before, that a parallel encounter with God was happening in Damascus to a disciples there named Ananias. Ananias also heard the voice of the divine and with that voice was a big ask. Ananias, who was aware of Saul and the way he was persecuting Jesus' followers, was asked to go to Saul and to lay hands on him so that Saul may regain his sight.

And, as you might imagine, Ananias was hesitant.

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Hesitant, but not unwilling. He went. Saul's sight was restored. And more than just his vision was changed. Saul found himself captivated by this message he had resisted. And before long he would become one of the most effective preachers of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Now, the easy thing for us to do would be to simply see this as a story about Saul and about his conversation from Judaism to Christianity. However, we want to remember that the Bible isn't only about telling history, but also about inspiring us.

Let us also remember that we want to tread cautiously on any stories that take us down a path that claims Christianity's superiority. While, for those of us who follow Jesus, Christianity makes sense and is the way we have come to know God best, I want to caution against our understanding that this means other religions are inferior. Remember, Jesus himself was a Jewish person. And so much of the most beloved teachings that we credit to Jesus were things that came from his Jewish faith.

It is also important to remember that we all need to be converted...not from one religion to another, but converted - even daily - to follow Jesus more closely.

See, in many ways this is really what was happening with Saul. It was still early enough in the movement of those who followed Jesus, that it was not yet established whether Christianity would be a separate religion, whether it would remain a sect of Judaism, or whether it would eventually be the way of mainstream Judaism. Christianity was not one of the world's major religions at this point in time. Here, Saul wasn't so much converting from Judaism to Christianity, but rather was a Jewish person who came to understand, alongside other Jewish people, that in Jesus the Messiah had come.

So, what about us? Again, remember that the stories we have in scripture tell us about people of old, about people who made a difference on behalf of God. But they were also chosen to be included in the Bible because they are useful and inspiring to us.

So, yes, we have learned about Saul today, but what can we learn about ourselves?

Verse 18 says, "And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored" (Acts 9:18a, NRSV).

When I hear that, I can't help but wonder...what scales are on our eyes? What is keeping us from seeing clearly? What might change in our lives and how we live our faith if we could see things differently?

If this is not only a story about Saul's conversion, but an invitation for us to be converted again and again, to become more like Jesus, to live more fully from God's

heart, what changes might be ready to take shape in our lives if only we are willing to listen?

How might we, if we were willing to be healed of what blinds us, see the world differently and live in it more fully?

How might we become more welcoming and more open, the way God has been to us?

How might we, as Melea challenged us a few weeks ago, live more fully as stewards of God's good creation?

How might we, in the midst of our daily lives, share more fully the love of Jesus?

Friends, if we listen, if we pay attention, we just might notice the voice of God calling to us, helping us to see another way, to see more fully. If we pay attention, there are opportunities for us to be converted each day, to be drawn into God's heart and to reflect God more fully. May it be so.