

# **Trinity United Methodist Church**

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**“Action Packed Summer: Who’d a Think It?”**

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## **Scripture: Acts 9:1-19a**

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!” “Yes, Lord,” he answered. The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.” “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.” But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

## Sermon

Not many people know what A or B, sometimes C in an assigned Scripture reading means. A means -- go back to the verse. So A means -- there's how many parts of sentences in that verse? Two, right? "And after taking some food he regained his strength," period, in the second sentence. So A means you read the first half of that verse and then you stop there. Or sometimes the Scripture reading might start with verse 19b. So then you would start the Scripture reading with, "Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus." And if it's a really long verse -- like I said, sometimes there's C and D. These are things that nice, expensive piece of paper on the wall in my office that says I graduated from Wesley Theological Seminary -- these are things that you pay good money to learn in those types of places. So there you go. So don't feel bad. You got it right!

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

Though it is not recorded for us, I'd like to think that Saul could probably name the specific date and time that he encountered Jesus on that road to Damascus. That he could always look back to that precise moment where he was converted to Christ in that moment. Because in many Christian circles, this account of Saul coming to Christ (he later became Paul, and it's hard not to call him Paul), this is THE definitive account of how conversion is supposed to happen. To have this miraculous revelation of Jesus, to have this getting knocked to the ground, blinded by the light encounter in your life, after which you follow Jesus. In fact, in some Christian circles, I've heard pastors, I've been told, that if you don't have such an experience, then you're not legitimately saved. There's a problem with that. I haven't had such an experience in my life. So does that mean that I, as your pastor, am not saved? You might want to talk to Bishop Kammerer about that. She ordained me a number of years ago.

But the thing of it is, is that I have not had such a dramatic experience in my life. I was born and raised in First United Methodist Church in Hopewell. I think my first outing after birth was likely to church. I was in the kids' choirs and programs. I wore the little cherub dresses -- they were dresses, and we boys hated wearing the dresses. I spilled orange juice one Sunday all over my nice white choir outfit (and Mom's like, "Yeah, you did."). She helped make them and all that. And we've just always been involved in the life of the church. I became president of the youth group because no one else wanted to do it. I started singing bass in the choir with Dad when I was in sixth grade because my voice went almost this deep in sixth grade. And the children's choir director said, "Listen to Daniel. He's singing what we call *a whole octave lower* than everybody else!"

I grew up in the church district in conference levels, and I've always had God in my life. I've always had a relationship in one way or another with God and with Jesus. It's just been a part of who I am. Yes, there was the typical late teenage doubts that many of us wrestle with, and when I got to Virginia Tech as a freshman, grown up as the third adult of the family, being an only child, so when I realized I was four hours away from Mom and Dad knowing what I was doing and when I was doing it, I had my childhood when I got to Virginia Tech. And I began to figure out who I was and so forth.

And there was that night when I was talking with my freshman year roommate, giving him all my reasons for doubting and things like that. I never really turned my back on God, but I wasn't paying him a whole lot of attention. Zach looked at me and said, "Well, it just comes down to faith. Do you believe or not?" And that was the moment that I attribute to, from then on, my faith becoming **my** faith and not just what Mom and Dad had taught me and not just what my grandparents had taught me, not just what First Church had taught me. But it wasn't this dramatic, blinding light, knocked on my rear-end experience. It was just a conversation. And everything before that in my faith journey is an integral part of my faith journey. It wasn't for nothing.

Remember that word. Journey. Many of us have been made to feel that if we don't have that blinding light, knocked on your rear-end by Jesus experience, that you're not legitimately saved. Some of us, like me, have been told that, perhaps. And nothing could be further from the truth, because the Good News is that conversion to Jesus happens in all kinds of ways.

In fact, Saul's conversion, that's hailed as "the" conversion experience in so many Christian circles, is actually one conversion in a series of conversions. We first encounter Saul back in the beginning of Chapter 8. It's at the tail end of Stephen's story. The stoning of Stephen, when it happened, the men doing the stoning and those who were watching took off their coats, their outer garments, and they laid them at the feet of this man named Saul. It's the first time we hear about him. And then we read at the end of that experience that "Saul approved of their killing of Stephen."

And then we don't pick back up with Saul until the beginning of Chapter 9. We go through all of Chapter 8. So what happens in the meantime? We read stories of other people and of their coming to faith in Jesus. Particularly of people who were not Jewish. Up until this point in the story in the book of Acts, most of the people coming to faith were people of the Jewish faith who began to accept that Jesus was the Messiah and began to follow Christ in that way. But remember, Jesus told the early disciples, "you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." That means more than just Jewish people were going to be coming to faith. And we begin to see it happen.

We first pick up in Samaria with Simon the Sorcerer in Samaria. How do you like that for alliteration? Simon boasted that he was someone great. He enthralled the crowds. That was, until Phillip came to Samaria and preached about the kingdom of God and about Jesus, and Simon found himself included in all the baptisms that began to happen. But then Peter and John heard about this going on. They came to Samaria from Jerusalem. They began to lay hands on people so that they would also receive the Holy Spirit, and Simon, who thought he was this big “somebody,” sees Peter and John, these big “somebodies,” and this big gift that they have of the Holy Spirit flowing through them to other people. And seeing these wild manifestations of the Spirit and the good things that were happening, and Simon said, “I want some of that.” So instead of praying about it to receive it, he offered money to Peter and John, saying, “give me this gift that you have.” And he was rebuked for it and he repented, and the gospel goes on.

The next person we encounter is an Ethiopian man, an important official in the court of the Queen of Ethiopia, way down in Africa from Israel. And he had been all the way to Jerusalem to worship. This foreigner had come to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He had some knowledge already of who God was. And so, evidently along the way, he picked up a copy of the Hebrew scriptures, because we’re told that in his chariot he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit leads Phillip to run beside this man in his chariot. You know, sometimes doing what God tells you to do takes work, like running. And he runs beside him and he hears him reading, and he says, “Do you understand what you’re reading?” When’s the last time you read through the prophet Isaiah? He makes all kinds of references to random people and places and events, it seems, and it’s hard to understand exactly what he’s talking about, even today.

So the man invites Phillip up into the chariot, where at the moment he’s reading the prophecy of the suffering servant. One of the prophecies about Jesus, the Messiah. We read then Phillip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. They come upon water and the man asks then and there to be baptized.

Then in that series we come to Saul’s conversion, where he was blinded by the light, right? And then after Saul’s story we read healing stories, where people come to faith through healing and the healing of others. And then we get to chapter 10, the great story of the conversion of Cornelius, a God-fearing but Roman centurion. And in the midst of that story we read of the continuing conversion of Peter. Yeah, the same Peter who was an original disciple of Jesus. He’s continuing to be converted, especially to the mission of taking the Gospel to the Gentiles.

The point of all this is to point out that it takes Saul’s conversion as *the* ultimate conversion story by which all other conversion stories must be compared, and by which all other conversions are supposed to happen. To do that takes this story grossly out of context, when really we read that coming to Christ can happen in various ways.

Even still, Willimon points out that there are common threads in these conversion stories and in ours as well. The first is that there is objectivity versus subjectivity. Subjectivity is more about how we *feel* about things, how we interpret things, how we perceive things. Objectivity: That's the way it is. That's that. And God is objective in our lives, not simply subjective. Saul is encountered by The One who is wholly different from who He is. Paul didn't just somehow take an internal journey and find himself in God.

And our struggles can certainly be a part of our faith journey. But there's this moment where we're confronted and encountered by God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Simon the Sorcerer didn't find Jesus in any of his acts. The Ethiopian man had been worshipping God, but he encountered Jesus in the Scriptures. Saul was directly confronted in a vision, as was Cornelius and even Peter.

In all of my inner journey and finding myself and my faith, it wasn't until God spoke to me through my freshman year roommate, a math and physics double major, nerd if there ever was one – nothing against nerds – but God often comes to us through other people outside of ourselves. That's the first mark of the conversion.

The second is that conversion is something that *Christ* does, not something that *we* do. We call that *grace*. It's a gift. Such that when Paul writes his letter to the Galatians, he talks about "when God *chose* to reveal His Son to me." It wasn't something that Paul went looking for. It's something that God did in his life.

Willimon writes it this way: "Admittedly, it is a peculiar gift, since it is a gift which will involve suffering. We might wonder why Christ has picked this zealot as a chosen instrument. The choices of God are usually inscrutable, particularly when those choices involve persons who are chosen to do the work of God."

Saul joins a long list of reprobates like Jacob, murderers like Moses, and odd characters whom God has chosen as vessels for God's work. After all, Jesus Himself told His disciples, "You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you."

Simon couldn't buy it. The Ethiopian couldn't make sense of it. Saul couldn't see it, literally. And Cornelius didn't know he was missing it. And God knows I made enough boneheaded decisions in my life that I know, left to my own devices, there is no way in God's green earth that I would find my way to God through Christ, without God's grace working in my life to draw me to Him.

You remember that word I told you to remember? Journey. Conversion, lastly, is a journey. It's not, we get there, we accept Christ and *boom*, we've arrived. Wesley said it's only the first half of the gospel. The conversion truly is an ongoing journey, one from self-confident independence, thinking we know it all, to childlike dependence. The one who knows so much must become as one who knows nothing, one who must be led by

the hand, healed and instructed by the very ones he despised. In this painful, baffling interim we turn and become as a little child. Didn't somebody in the Bible say something about if we want to enter the kingdom, we have to become as little children? We progress by regression and go forward by failing backward. Such turning and helpless regression accompanied by blindness, confusion, speechlessness, hunger, and childishness is, for our peculiar faith, the very beginning of wisdom. The way I would say that is that the more I get to know Jesus, the more I realize how much I don't know.

In the end, it's God's grace that transforms Saul, the enemy of the church, into a brother. God's grace transformed Jacob, a liar and a cheat, into Israel, the father of a nation. God's grace transformed Moses, a murderer, into a liberator. God's grace transformed Mary, a teenage peasant, into the bearer of God incarnate. And God's grace transformed me, a college student member of a drinking fraternity with a service problem (we thought about putting that on our rush T-shirts one year), into a United Methodist pastor who is still being converted by God's grace.

For God still seeks to convert us. In the Wesleyan tradition, we call that *sanctification*. God still seeks to shape us and mold us into the people He would have us to be.

So where are you in that process? Where are you being confronted by Christ? Where do you need to give up control and allow Christ to work in your life? What do you need to un-learn in the journey from self-confident independence to childlike dependence on God?

Saul, who changes his name to Paul, writes in Philippians, "I thank my God every time I remember you, and in my prayers for you I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. Being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." And may we all be confident that Christ will indeed do that.

Thanks be to God.