

Brother Saul (Acts 9:1-6 (7-20))

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The Third Sunday of Easter (Psalm 30; John 21:1-19; Revelation 5:11-14)

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/brother-saul

The 50 days leading to Pentecost are the days of surprise when God uses ordinary people and the events of everyday life to do extraordinary things.

In the next several weeks, we'll explore these Easter stories. Today's story is a mind-boggling tale when the early church's chief hater is knocked to the ground by a dazzling demonstration of holy signs interrupting his mission to go to Damascus. Saul's mission? To terrorize the Jewish converts to Jesus in what was known as "the Way." Saul and his entourage meant to take as many converts as he had manacles back to Jerusalem to face the ire of the Chief Priest.

There are two ways to make a U turn in life. You can do it the way the stunt drivers do in the "Fast and Furious" movie franchise - at top speed with your hair on fire, with smoking tires burning rubber in an instant in the middle of a busy street.

Or, you can do it the way the singing group, The Willis Family, described in the old trucking song: "Give me forty acres and I'll turn this rig around." Saul's turn was fast and furious as he did a dramatic 180° from persecutor to preacher. Timothy's conversion, on the other hand, was more gradual and described by Paul, *how from infancy he knew the "holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ"* (II Timothy 3:15). Young Timothy could not remember a time when he wasn't a believer and both stories are legit.

Maybe Saul's dramatic conversion story is a model of conversion that describes your decision to be a Christian ... or may not. I've heard hundreds of people tell how they became a Christian. Some salvation stories are decisive, dramatic even, but many, many others are not decisive or dramatic at all. Some describe never thinking they were ever *not* a Christian. They're sure they are, but they just don't remember a conversion moment. There was no being knocked out in the middle of the road, no shining spotlight, no booming voice, no blindness, no miraculous healing. In fact, I would guess there's a significant number of people who are not at all comfortable even telling their testimony of how they became a follower of Jesus as they are shy and consider such a moment as private and personal.

It would be helpful for us to recognize while the DRE, aka, the Damascus Road Experience, is one of many paths people take on their faith journey, there are many other paths of Christian transformation, and the blinding spotlight from heaven is only one of them.

Part of the drama is baked into the story from Saul's pre-conversion reputation. He was a

feared character in the days following Jesus' 3-year ministry. His story of transformation stands in stark contrast to his role of fear-monger in the early church. Saul was a man of violence. He's described in Acts 7 at the stoning of Stephen because he was a true believer. Saul may not have thrown any rocks, but he held the cloaks of those who did. That footnote to Stephen's stoning is told so we have a better understanding how amazing his conversion was.¹

But this faith story is not about Saul-turned-Paul alone. This story includes the whole community of believers in Damascus who were the target of Saul's violence. Saul had identified many of them by name to the high priest in Jerusalem who authorized him to search for them in Damascus so he could bring them back in chains to Jerusalem where they could be punished by the priests. Saul breathed threats of murder and the community of believers in Damascus knew of his impending arrival.

Often our lives are given direction by the mystery of the slender threads that occur. The slender threads are any unplanned gift or curse of circumstance that alters the trajectory of your life. Slender threads are the counter-melody to your wish to intentionally direct your path through the decisions you make, or they are the steps you take to control your future. The slender threads are those happenstances you don't control but that control you.

Even though we exert our free will and make plans and set goals and proceed with full confidence as though we are in control, it also seems true there is a larger hand at work in directing us through life. Call it fate or blind luck, call it destiny, or call it the hand of God. Call it what you will, but know, there are events and plans we control and there are intrusions and surprises we don't control.

At the same time Saul was knocked off his mount, God was also speaking to Ananias who was described simply as "a disciple," or better, "*just* a disciple." He was not the leader of the community, nor was he described as particularly heroic or courageous. Ananias was a common man and the Voice interrupted his personal concerns of safety and security.

Ananias makes a cameo appearance in Saul's conversion. We know nothing about him before or after this scene, only that he had a supremely important job in the history of the church. The job? Go visit Saul and deliver the will of God for his life: Saul was to take the name of Jesus to the Gentiles and kings and to the people of Israel. At first Ananias doubted the wisdom of this plan arguing: "You do know who this guy is – right, Lord?" "Go!" the Lord said. So, Ananias went.

It wasn't long before Saul took a new name. Often when a dramatic conversion captivates us and our lives are redirected to a new direction with a new purpose and a deeply spiritual encounter that grows out of the ashes of the old life, we may choose a new name. So, Saul

¹ C. Eric Lincoln, "Have you been to Damascus?" Sermons from Duke Chapel, Voices from "A Great Towering Church," edited by William H. Willimon, Duke University Press, 2005

became Paul. Paul later described his transformation this way, *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”* II Corinthians 5:17 (NIV).

Jesus’ voice was heard but he wasn’t the one who led Saul by the hand to Damascus after he was struck blind. Most often, God chooses everyday people to do God’s work. God chooses nothing special people who are members of the supporting cast of characters of God’s work, mostly unnamed people who are not remembered by name but may be remembered for their faithfulness. More often than not, God uses supporting cast members to shape and guide great events that go into the amazing story of God’s story of salvation. Saul-turned-into-Paul is remembered in the Bible while Ananias and many, many others are mostly forgotten.

Maybe you’ve vaguely known this story but you couldn’t pick Ananias out of a biblical lineup of characters. That’s a shame because Ananias deserves our consideration. The role Ananias plays may be overshadowed, but he is to be commended for acting in obedience to his own calling. In spite of his massive fear, he took a chance and obeyed God.

When he met Saul face-to-face, he didn’t scout out the situation or even self-protectively test Saul’s repentance. Ananias instead greeted him as “Brother Saul.” And in so doing, Saul’s sight was restored and the scales fell from his eyes.

When I imagine the hands of Ananias, I can't help imagining they are really the hands of Jesus, in a cameo role. A lot of God's work in the world is like this. It looks like a cameo role. But it is really the main thing.

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