

Courage to Change
April 14, 2013
First Presbyterian Church of Independence
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Scripture: Acts 9: 1 – 20

Acts 9:1-20

9Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2and 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. 3Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." 7The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 8Saul 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. 9For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." 11The 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, 12and 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." 13But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; 14and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." 15But 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; 16I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 17So 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." 18And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, 19and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he

was with the disciples in Damascus, 20and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

This is the word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

The story goes on to say that this change of heart of Saul's was not well received among his synagogue brethren, and the as the new community of faith called The Way continued to welcome and nurture and care for Saul, there was an equal increase in the measure of rejection, then disdain, then hostility towards him so that finally in order for him to leave the city the faith community had to lower him from the city wall in a basket at night so he would not be killed by those watching the city gates.

Although Paul's story starts with a dramatic event that changes the paradigm of his life, it is what happens after this event that makes it worth telling about at all. Throughout Paul's writings on his journeys, in prisons, awaiting trial, and suffering with a health issue he descriptive about the way he feels, his impressions of what's happening to him, and his own struggles with his faith. He speaks strongly on occasion – he's not afraid to use fiery language to get his point across. But what he describes throughout his life after the experience on the road to Damascus is a developing faith story– NOT an understanding faith that was whole and complete in a moment, but one that had to be confirmed and ritualized by Ananias, and then nurtured and protected by the faith community in Damascus. Paul is always working out his faith with "fear and trembling", and in his letter to the Philippians advises new followers in the community in Philippi to do the same. In his letter to the Corinthians he uses another strong reference to developmental faith as he describes himself as "one untimely born". This is a genteel translation of Paul's strong metaphor meaning "I was an abortion of a person" – undeveloped, immature, still growing, still being formed but thinking that I was complete, whole. Paul's personal growth throughout his lifelong ministry demonstrates that faith is developmental and that God uses process – experience, reflection, education, conflict, choice, inspiration – to grow us spiritually. And God uses people – normal, weak, afraid, unimpressive, but willing – people to work out his divine plan.

You see, Saul's dramatic flashing lights story is not the only story of faith. There's another faith development story here. The story of Ananias. His faith works a little differently. Unlike Saul, he is not zealously possessed by an ideology that confirms that "it's our way or no way". Instead, Ananias has a regular dialogue with Spirit. When

God speaks to him there are no flashing lights or debilitating periods of blindness. His relationship is God is more familiar, more intimate. Ananias is practiced at both talking with and listening to God. They chat, discuss. Ananias feels comfortable sharing with the Lord his doubt that this plan will work –“Lord, this Saul guy is a crazed Christian-killer and I don’t think that just walking in an saying hi, I’ve been dying to meet you is the way to go”. But the Lord responds, and they come to an understanding, they work out a plan. So Ananias goes and greets Paul, prays with him, and baptizes him. And then, Paul is brought into the Christian community and develops his faith even more as he is nurtured in a community of faith. One that eventually protects him and helps his escape. They, the objects of Saul’s murderous wrath not so long ago, are now the protectors and the rescuers. All of them were developing and growing together. The “conversion” experience is really just a starting point. So perhaps what we call Paul’s conversion experience might be more appropriately referred to as a call – and he answered yes and kept growing. In the same way all of our conversion experiences – dramatic or not - are really not conversions but calls because it’s what happens after the conversions that makes it worth telling. After th conversion either we answer yes and keep growing, or we answer no and don’t change.

And although Saul’s conversion story is a very familiar one among Christians, it is being shared in the book of Acts as an extraordinary experience, not a normative one. It’s not expected that for most of us it will be like this. We are expected to consciously develop our faith – talk to God and listen to God, and be familiar with the tug and the call – the gentle nudgings as well as the alarms of life that call us to deeper faith.

God’s means, calls, and directions are tailor-made. Saul’s traveling companions didn’t see the light because the call was not for them. Some with subtler personalities than Saul’s, and some who are lifelong learners, come to know God by different ways because it is not as difficult for God to get their attention. But the lasting mark of conversion is not one date circled in red on the calendar, but the whole story of one’s life. In the end, Saul’s dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus is worth telling only because of what he did afterwards.

So whether your experience is dramatic like Saul, or more subtle like Ananias, will you say yes to the call to change? Do you have the courage to let your relationship with God make changes in how you see things, what you do, with whom you keep company?

Can you let even the every day experiences be ones in which you are drawing from a deep well of faith to be a living signal of the high vibration of God's Love? Do you have faith that God really is relating to you individually, custom-making a faith relationship that is particular to your needs, and personality, and to his unique plan for you? Can you imagine that perhaps every day is meant feel to you like a new adventure in Christ? Whether it's flashing lights or simply the peace that passes understanding – it all starts with simple willingness – with a small yes from you.....that becomes a big YES from God.

Dialogue

A: I am Saul

B: I am Paul

A: I am passionate about my faith

B: I am passionate about my faith

A: I will work tirelessly for what I believe in and I recognize that may hurt others in order to keep the faith

B: I will work tirelessly for my beliefs too and I also recognize that doing so can hurt others but living the faith is never going to be easy

A: I have made a choice to put myself on the line for my faith and if those who are out to destroy the faith get in the way, then I will move them out the way

B: I have made a choice to put myself on the line for my faith and will continue to do so even in the face of those who want to move me out the way

A: I am Saul

B: I am Paul

A: Faith is everything to me. It must be kept true at all costs. It is too vital to my culture, my traditions and how I understand life

B: Faith is everything to me. It must stand true at all costs. It is too vital for the Good News for traditions and culture to stand in the way of this new understanding of life

A: I will seek out those who destroy the faith

B: I will seek out those who limit the faith

A: I will keep our borders pure and our traditions clean from contamination

B: I will cross every border and welcome in Jew and Gentile, slave and free

A: I am Saul

B: I am Paul