

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

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

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

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He became one of the most famous and misunderstood people in human history. No, I don't mean Jesus. Throughout the entire first third of Luke's Acts of the Apostles, the man I'm talking about is notorious to the early church as an extremely dangerous man. And because he is a Jew born outside Palestine, he goes by two names.

His Hebrew name is Saul and his Roman name is Paul.

Luke introduced the young Saul as he was in the middle of the brutal stoning of St. Stephen. Saul was keeping an eye on the robes of those who rushed Stephen, but he was more than a casual observer. He approved Stephen's destruction.

That same day, a great persecution broke out that scattered all Jesus' followers except the apostles throughout Judea and Samaria. Luke tells us

that Saul wreaked havoc on the church, going into house after house, hauling both men and women off to prison. And then Luke described the results of these persecutions that seemed mostly to stimulate the spread of the Jesus movement rather than shut it down.

In the opening of this morning's reading, Saul is still snorting out menaces and slaughter against the faithful followers of Jesus. He is demanding letters from the chief priest to the synagogues in Damascus.

Now, there is a detail here that reveals something crucially characteristic of those early believers.

Saul is searching for evidence of people following "the Way." The disciples of Christ will not be called Christians for a while yet. In these early days, those folks are known by their *character*, not by a check-list of beliefs. Their faith is a living, active way of life; a grace-filled life dedicated to sharing reconciliation and peace, forgiveness and wholeness with the world.

Saul chases followers of the Way on a road leading some 150 miles from Jerusalem to Damascus in Syria. And on that road, a flash of light drops him to the ground, drains him of his blood-lust and strikes him blind. The voice of Christ shatters his cherished worldview and leaves him helpless for three days.

Meanwhile, Christ speaks in a vision to Ananias, a follower of the Way in Damascus. Fearing for his life, Ananias resists, but Christ sharpens the point: "Go, because this man is a vessel chosen for me..." Ananias obeys and goes to the house where the near-dead Saul is waiting.

When he finds Saul, Ananias lays hands on him, prays for him, baptizes him and feeds him with sacramental food. After three days in the darkness, God brings Saul into new life, fills him the Holy Spirit, restores his eyesight and inspires him with a new worldview.

So, you see, this is more than a morality story about a man who learns a lesson, although Saul does notice a greater good. It's deeper than a lesson in emotional intelligence, although Saul does gain some self-awareness. And while Saul has some new ideas, this is a tale of transformation.

And only in that sense, is it a story about conversion. Just as there has never been a horse in the story (*that* came from Caravaggio's influential painting), this story has never been about a Jew becoming a Christian. It has

always about the active presence of God in the pattern of death and rebirth that energizes and draws our spiritual development.

We get this reading during the fifty days of Pascha because this is a resurrection story; an example of how encounters with God change *us* with consequences for the way we experience and understand the world.

Luke will refer to this story twice more in Acts and will eventually stop using the name Saul, referring only to Paul, his Roman name. Even so, Paul understood himself to be a loyal Jew; a circumcised Israelite from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, a Roman citizen and a Pharisee, *and* the apostle to the Gentiles.

These are essential influences on Paul's newly expanded worldview that Christians largely misunderstood or ignored for centuries. Only since the Shoah, the horror of the Holocaust, have we really started recovering Paul's Jewishness to refute anti-Jewish interpretations and inconsistencies.

In short, after experiencing the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Saul became a Jesus-following Jew, not a Christian.

As a Pharisee who understood the original covenants from Hebrew scripture, Saul saw that Jesus was threatening the boundaries of Israel; blurring traditional lines, not only between Judean Jews and Hellenist Jews, but between Jews and Gentiles. And so, as the self-proclaimed protector of Judea, Saul was on the way to Damascus, unprepared to face the reality he dreaded most.

His traveling companions saw the intense flash of light that blinded Saul, but only Saul heard the voice saying to him: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Repeating the name emphasizes the significance of the call. God called Moses twice from the burning bush and Samuel twice as he lay near the ark of the covenant. These are the kinds of calls that make us assume that there is always drama around them.

What is more compelling is what we can learn from the way our grandmothers and grandfathers in faith responded to a wide variety of calls.

Sometimes, God's call comes with fire and lightning. Sometimes it comes like a whisper in the night, like when Samuel said, "Speak, Adonai, for your servant is listening." It can come from the lips of an angel with specific

instructions like God's call to Joshua or Deborah or Mary, who said "May it happen to me as you have said."

A call can be filled with detailed and lengthy teachings, like the call of Jeremiah, who passed instructions on to the people. Or the hallucinogenic call of Ezekiel, who brought the yearnings of God to the people exiled in Babylon.

Frequently, the call comes in a dream, like Solomon's, when God said: "Ask. What shall I grant you?" to which Solomon said, "Grant your servant a listening heart."

Sometimes God knocks us senseless and defenseless, so that we have to rely on our friends and, on rare occasions, on our enemies. If that happens to you, keep asking, "Who are you *now*, Lord?"

Always remember: You have died with Christ and have risen with Christ. You will do so again. Keep praying, even if you can't yet see.

Far more often, God wakes us up in the middle of the night. Instead of blaring trumpets, we more frequently get the quiet thrum of the refrigerator, weather sounds or maybe the dog's gentle snoring for company.

Keep listening.

The rush of angel's wings is rare. Christ shows up in circling hawks, in dew on spiderwebs and sudden spring rains. And also in strangers, in traffic jams and situations that knock us off-balance.

Keep watching and wait. Because a change is coming.

Whether God catches your awareness in broad daylight or at 3:00 in the morning; whether God has dropped you to your confused knees or has breathed in your sleeping ear, a change is coming.

If God is exposing your misguided behaviors that harm or burden others, return to God's utterly inclusive life and love, and pray: "How shall I make amends and share this new awareness?"

If God is asking something of you, open yourself to the dialogue and pray: "Speak, God, for your servant is listening" or if you are ready, pray: "May it happen to me as you have said."

If God is curious about what you want God to grant, ask for wholeness and pray: "Grant your servant a listening heart."

God is with you.

God will be with you.

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