***A DAMASCUS ROAD EXPERIENCE***

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Text: Acts 9:1-31

How did you come to believe what you believe? Where and when did you become a Christian? Was it a Damascus Road experience like that of Saul or was it more like the Beatles’ *Long and Winding Road*? In some traditions there is an expectation that all Christians have a dramatic experience of conversion – an “aha” moment when a tepid believer or non-believer suddenly becomes a “real Christian”, a specific point in time to which you can point and say, “That is when I became a believer!” Anything less is regarded with suspicion. Some of you have had such an experience – a moment in life when God suddenly became real and you embraced the promises of Christ and found your life changed. Those are awesome moments! But many of you came to faith without such a moment to point to, without any Damascus Road experience that suddenly made you a Christian instead of whatever you were before.

I was born to Presbyterian parents both of whom attended Presbyterian colleges and a Presbyterian seminary. I am the grandson of two Presbyterian elders and a grandmother who taught a women’s Sunday School class for about 150 years. I was nurtured from my earliest days by a loving and caring Presbyterian Church before I headed off to a Presbyterian College where I met my Presbyterian wife who was the daughter of two Presbyterian elders. The church has always been important in my life, and my faith has been nurtured over time by hundreds or perhaps thousands of loving, caring Christians who embraced me, cared for me and taught me about the love of Jesus in tangible and intangible ways. There was no “aha” moment to which I can point and say, “That’s when I first believed!” I’ve always believed – or so it seems.

Between the cradle Christian like me and the Sauls with Damascus Road experiences are a host of stories of faith that describe various journeys that led to the road we call Christian – or simply “the Way” as the early Christians were known. The Book of Acts tells a host of stories of people who came to Christ from a variety of backgrounds and experiences – no two are alike. Some are moved by stirring speeches and some are awed to faith by miraculous healings and some are transformed by chance encounters and some have been brooding on this Christian Way for a long time before arriving. There is no normative experience to becoming a Christian, no template to say, “This is how it must be done!”

This week I met with the guys who will be installing a new dishwasher in the Great Hall kitchen. I was told that this dishwasher has a 120 second cycle. In other words, it takes two minutes to wash and dry the dishes. We could have opted for the 90 or the 150 in place of the current dishwasher which I believe is on about a 3 week cycle. Or we could have opted for the energy saving, elbow-greased, human model that has a host of people washing and drying by hand. All of those models – except perhaps the defective one we are now replacing – get the dishes to the same spot: clean and dry. But there is more than one way to get there.

The Christian faith is defined more by that common destination which is really not a destination but the beginning of a journey together in the Way of Christ – than it is by any one experience that leads to that faith. Some of us arrive suddenly and some have been soaking in this faith for a lifetime and some are still searching for the Way among a host of ways. Jesus says, “I am the Way” but there are a lot of ways to get to his Way, a lot of ways to come to faith! In the words of William Muehl, “The roads to Christian faith are as varied as the people who profess it.”[[1]](#endnote-1) If so, then Saul’s Damascus Road experience is not a template for all others. What then are we to make of it?

Saul is not your ordinary person upon whom the light of faith suddenly dawns. He is a strong believer in the Lord and the Lord alone as the 1st Commandment states; while he is awaiting the coming of the Messiah, he does not believe Jesus is that Messiah. He believes those who regard Jesus as messiah are corrupting the faith, and so he becomes a persecutor of Christians, a zealot determined to stamp out the lies about Jesus as the crucified and risen messiah of God. Uniquely among those accounts in Acts of people who come to faith, Saul is not just non-Christian, but anti-Christian! Some of you have encountered Sauls along the way, those who are not content to not believe, but who condemn you for daring to believe. Some of them are killing Christians as agents of ISIL in Syria, and some are persecuting Christians in the Middle East, and some are making life difficult for Christian neighbors in our nation, and some are themselves Christian by name who are self-righteously persecuting other Christians because they don’t buy into their particular brand of Christianity.

Such self-righteous certainty has been the source of a lot of conflict and violence across the ages. It has given rise to the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition, to Salem witch trials and Belfast bombings, to a Jewish holocaust and ISIL beheadings and Ku Klux Klan lynchings. It is violence in the name of faith, violence with the perceived blessing of God, violence against those others who do not believe as I believe. Christians have been the victims of such violence, but also the perpetrators of it, which is ironic given that we claim to be disciples of one who was persecuted and killed and yet said, “forgive them” and “love your enemies” and “pray for those who persecute you.” Saul stands out as an example of the dangers of self-righteous certainty that would find expression in persecution.

But even Saul could not withstand the hand of God. Flannery O’Connor once said of Paul, “I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse”[[2]](#endnote-2) – or perhaps more accurately, off his high horse. Saul’s Damascus Road experience stopped him in his tracks and brought him face to face with the risen Christ in a blinding light that left Saul sightless. The dominant, persecutor of Christians was suddenly left vulnerable and confused and humbled. God has a way of humbling us. We may prefer God to give us humility, but God generally teaches us humility and it is often a lesson painfully learned. For Saul it meant being confronted with the errors of his ways, however well-intentioned they may have been, being humbled to the core with indictment of his past and uncertainty about his future. Sometimes that is what it takes – recognizing the wretch we have been in order to receive God’s amazing grace.

But we misread the text and mislabel the event if we think that the conversion of Saul happened there on the Damascus Road and there alone. Saul did not suddenly find his heart strangely warmed and profess his faith and head out on a new path as a follower of Jesus. He staggered into town and awaited God’s next move. Even for Saul conversion did not happen in a moment. It stretched, says Luke, over three days. Three days in which he was blind, three days in which he ate and drank nothing, three days in which he waited for something to happen without knowing what the something would be. That something turned out to be someone – Ananias by name.

Ananias had every reason to be fearful of Saul, for Saul’s mission was to persecute the followers of Jesus. Ananias did not know that Saul had met Jesus in a blinding light on the Damascus Road. He did not know of Saul’s conversion or temporary blindness. He knew only that the Lord told him to go to Saul. He voiced his fears to God, but then he went, not knowing what would happen, but perhaps anticipating the worst. Like Abraham who pulled up his tent pegs to follow where God led him, Ananias went with only the promise of God to hold on to. And because he went despite his fears, he became an instrument of God’s healing and God’s conversion of Saul from persecutor to apostle of Christ.

Faithful disciples trust God and are willing to act on that trust, even at their peril. They are willing to leave their comfort zones in order to follow God’s call. They are unwilling to let excuses stand in the way of a faithful response. Like Ananias we can voice our concerns to God about where God wants us to go or what God wants us to do; we can make our excuses. But ultimately the test of discipleship is whether we go. Jesus tells a parable about two sons who were asked to work in the vineyard. One said he would go but didn’t; the other said he would not go but did. It was the son who went who was faithful, says Jesus. Your actions speak louder than your words. It is not enough to say you trust God; you must act on that trust. It is not just believing that someone can push a wheelbarrow on a tightrope across the Grand Canyon, it is getting in the wheelbarrow and placing your life in God’s hands.

That is perhaps what Ananias would teach us – that God can transform any life – can move any heart, even the heart of our worst enemy, and in so doing, transform our hearts. We may look skeptically at those who have turned over a new leaf and suddenly proclaim their lives changed. But such transformations do happen through the power of the Holy Spirit; as great a challenge may be the transformation of our hearts in order to accept them, forgive them, and welcome them as brothers and sisters in Christ – as Ananias did. It is too easy to hold on to a grudge, to refuse to forgive, to remember the past without looking at the present. But if we believe in the power of God to change lives, then we have to believe that even our worst enemies can be transformed into faithful disciples. As Will Willimon notes:

*Like Ananias, contemporary disciples must be ready to be surprised by God’s transformation of our enemies into our brothers and sisters, for the church knows not who may be the recipient of the inscrutable choices of God.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

Perhaps your worst enemy will be the one God chooses to transform for God’s good purposes or perhaps you are that one to be transformed or to be the instrument by which God brings about such change in someone else – as Ananias was for Saul. Can you be open to that possibility – that life could suddenly change in some unexpected, unpredictable, uncomfortable way that would make you an instrument of God’s good work?

The Damascus Road Experience is not first and foremost about what happened to Saul, or about what Ananias did. It is about God and what God did, what God did for Saul, what God did through Ananias, and what God did and does and will yet do – in and through and, when necessary, despite you and me. Alleluia! Amen

1. William Muehl quoted by Joseph S. Harvard in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol.2, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2009, p.406 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. William H. Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts*, John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1998, p.73 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. William H. Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts*, John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1998, p.79 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)