

WORSHIP

Sermon | 4.29.2018



Getting Knocked Off Your Horse

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Acts 9:1-9, Acts 9:10-19

Last week we started a new sermon series called Living Unafraid in a Scary World. It's a series about what it means to live like Jesus is Lord – to trust the promises of resurrection – in the midst a world that can sometimes feel confusing, or overwhelming, or even downright scary. Our guides in this series are those first followers of the resurrected Jesus – the disciples we meet in the book of Acts. Today we're focusing on the story of a Pharisee named Saul and his experience along a Damascus Road. You've heard the first part of his story. Now it continues...

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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.

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The closest thing I've ever had to a Damascus Road experience actually had nothing to do with faith, but, rather, loyalties.



I was a senior in high school. Since 1986 with Johnny Dawkins at the helm, I had been a Duke fan. I had posters. Sweatshirts. A wallpaper border at the top of the walls around my room. I cheered for Christian Laettner. And Bobby Hurley.

That pass from Grant Hill...that shot against Kentucky. Heaven.

When I was a senior in high school, Cherokee Parks was the starting center and Pete Gaudet was the interim coach. It wasn't a good year to be a Duke fan. 13-18 on the season. 2-14 in the ACC. It was painful. Very painful. In February of my senior year Duke played Carolina at Cameron. I was in the throes of decisions around college – waiting on acceptance letters (they were actually letters back then) from my top three schools.

Carolina's basketball team was good. They went to the Final Four the next month. But on that Thursday night game, it was a battle. Jeff Capel hit that shot two steps in from half-court to send it into overtime. The score was still knotted up after one overtime. And then a Carolina victory. I was crushed. I lost my voice that night screaming for the refs to call fouls on Jerry Stackhouse and Rasheed Wallace.

The next week an envelope came addressed to me from Jackson Hall – zip code 27514. Would I accept a spot to be a Tarheel, class of 1999? Absolutely. How could I have ever thought anything else? The loyalty switched – in an instant. And now it's hard to imagine life in any shade darker than Carolina blue.

I love telling that story about my “conversion” experience because it is so dramatic – and that's what a conversion should be, right?

I mean, the good ones.

The real ones.

Dramatic. Clear. Impactful. Life-changing.

I remember I was sitting around a fire at Camp Grier in Old Fort, North Carolina. We were telling our faith stories. When did it happen for us? When was that moment when we believed? When did the relationship with Jesus get personal? When did faith become real?

Oh, how I wish I had a story to tell.

And what did it mean that I didn't?

My journey in the faith and to the faith was so...boring...so...natural...so...vanilla.

It was the air I breathed. It was the water in which I swam.

And I didn't have a “moment.”

So did that mean my faith wasn't as good? Wasn't as real? Wasn't as adequate as the faith of those who had obviously had an *experience* that impacted them in such profound ways?



From the first time I remember hearing this story of Saul, making his way to Damascus – letters in hand to serve persecution on those early disciples of Jesus – from the first I heard of his **experience** – hearing Jesus’ voice calling him by name, seeing a bright light, turning his life all the way around in an instant – I was jealous.

Saul – later known as Paul – took that conversion experience and did something. He acted with conviction. With courage. He planted churches. He impacted thousands of lives for the sake of the gospel. He took what had been a fledgling movement and – with the help of Holy Spirit – established it into something that became a world-wide religion.

I mean – I get how someone who had a conversion like Saul’s might find the faith to live unafraid in the midst of a scary world. Might find the courage to trust God’s promises even in the places where it doesn’t seem like those promises could possibly be true. How could you **not** if you had that kind of Damascus Road experience?

But what if things were different?

Setting aside the whole – “used to persecute Christians” thing – ignoring the “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” – what if Saul was just a guy. Maybe a guy who had been born into a family who were early disciples of Jesus. A guy whose family went to church – and who was baptized before he could really remember it – and who did confirmation class and said all the right things – and then kind of stayed connected – but spent his 20s coming on Christmas...and maybe on Easter.

Would that guy have written 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament?

Would that guy have stood up to the Roman authorities?

Would that guy have argued theology with the philosophers at Mars Hill?

I can’t imagine.

So what does that mean for the quality of the faith for those of us who don’t have Saul’s kind of conversion experience?

These are the questions and insecurities that make me glad that we get to read the second part of the story about the disciple named Ananias.

To be honest, we don’t know much about the disciple named Ananias.

We know he lived in Damascus.

Later on in the book of Acts, when he was re-telling the story we heard this morning, Paul said that Ananias was a devout man who was in good standing in his church.

I have the sense that Ananias was kind of a low-maintenance disciple.

Probably someone who served on multiple committees.



Someone who showed up almost every Sunday for worship.

Someone who didn't even get one of those follow-up phone calls from the stewardship committee because he turned in his pledge card on commitment Sunday and he always tithed a full 10%.

But what I love is that Ananias had a conversion, too.

It was pretty dramatic in its own way.

He heard a voice – a divine voice that called him by name.

What God wanted him to do was so crazy that Ananias kind of tries to negotiate his way out of it...

“Oh – I've heard of him – of Saul – he's a bad man. Are you sure he's the guy you want me to go and help? Because I'm not so sure.”

“Yes,” God says. “I'm sure.”

So Ananias goes.

He meets Saul – and he calls him brother.

And we don't know what happens to Ananias after that moment, but his conversion is every bit as important for Paul's ministry as Paul's was.

When she wrote about the story of Saul's conversion along the road to Damascus, the great southern writer Flannery O'Connor said: “I reckon the Lord knew the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.”

That strikes me as a pretty good definition of conversion: Conversion happens when we are dislodged from the horse we rode in on – when our perspective changes in ways we didn't expect it could – when we feel something that we didn't know was there – when we are confronted by some vision of the future (or an acknowledgement of our past) in ways that shake us...and, maybe even, leave us dazed and disoriented for a while until the scales fall off our eyes and we learn to see the world in a different way.

And that happens a lot of times in life.

And it happens a lot of times in faith, too.

Saul got knocked off of his horse.

But so did Ananias – because Ananias discovered that God could use a whole lot more people than he had imagined.

Katherine Kerr was standing here in the pulpit and the sanctuary was packed.



The first four or five pews were full of young men and young women in their 20s with grief all over their faces.

Their friend had died too young.

The world they thought they inhabited – where things generally worked out – where life was full of unending possibilities – where they felt in control of their own lives – that world turned out to be different. And they needed someone to help them make sense of things.

Katherine preached about the gospel.

Where nothing in life – or in death – is able to separate us from Jesus Christ our Lord.

Where God doesn't cause or give us simple answers for why terrible things happen, but promises to love us; to suffer with us and the ones we love.

As I watched those upturned faces it was as if Katherine's words were living water to thirsty souls.

And sometimes conversion starts with something like that: with a group of people who hear the gospel make meaning out of an experience that disorients the way they used to think.

It happens with individuals, too.

Sometimes in dramatic ways – but most times gradual.

One of the joys of being a pastor is that I get the chance to be in relationship with you as you grow in faith.

And sometimes I see that growth after you've committed to spiritual practice for a while – a Bible study, a prayer group, a meeting.

Sometimes I see your spiritual growth in the kinds of questions you ask about faith – more probing, honest.

Sometimes I see it in the risks I watch you take in your lives – a new job, a new circle of friends, a new passion that leads you to be an agent of change.

You are a testimony to me of the ways that we are all converted to Christ in the midst of the everyday.

And that kind of conversion is real.

And it matters.

This week, as I have sat with our Scripture in one hand and the news in the other, I have been thinking a lot about our culture. About those moments when conversion is called for on a larger scale.



And as I read this story about Saul – breathing threats and murder against a particular group of people – and Ananias, who was one of those people, and yet who God called upon to remind us that we are all wrapped up in conversion together – I couldn't help but to think about a museum that opened last Thursday in Montgomery, Alabama.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice lifts up a part of our history that we would rather leave behind. Overlooking the Alabama state capitol, the centerpiece of the museum is a cloister where 800 weathered steel columns hang from a roof. On those columns are the names of close to 4,400 African American men, women and children who were lynched – whose lives were cut short by the hate a mob – in the decades long campaign of racist terror. General Lee for knocking on a white woman's door in Reevesville, SC.

Jesse Thorton for failing to address a police officer as “mister” in Luverne, AL.

Jeff Brown for accidently bumping into a white woman while trying catch a train in Cedarbluff, MS.

800 steel columns – representing the 800 counties across the South where these crimes were committed.

The museum is an initiative of an organization called the Equal Justice Initiative where a lawyer named Bryan Stevenson is the Executive Director.

Mr. Stevenson, whose great-grandparents were slaves in Virginia, has [written](#) about “just mercy,” the belief that those who have committed serious wrongs should be allowed a chance at redemption.

Part of redemption – and part of conversion – is to acknowledge the hard parts of history and their destructive legacy.

“I'm not interested in talking about America's history because I want to punish America,” Mr. Stevenson [said]. “I want to liberate America.”

Nearby the museum there is a warehouse where there are 800 replicas of those steel columns – one for every county that has a story to tell. Those columns are there for counties to come and claim with the promise that they will make efforts at racial and economic justice.

Mecklenburg County has a column.

There are two names on it:

Joseph McNeely - August 26, 1913 and

Willie McDaniel – July 29, 1929.

I don't know if our county has plans to pick up our monument.

I hope so.



I think it is important.

I think a journey like that is part of what it means to be converted – awakened – disturbed – and reoriented – even now...almost 100 years later...because, sometimes that's how long it takes – especially on such a large scale.

Conversion – whether it happens all of a sudden – or in drips and drabs; whether it happens to groups of people – or just to little old you and me – conversion can be hard work because it opens us up to see the world in a new way.

The good news is – God is in that work – because that new way is The Way – the future that Christ has secured for us because of a love that will not quit.

Let us pray:

Whether through dramatic encounters, or incrementally through the steady passing of days and nights, we pray, O Lord, that you would continually convert us and this world into the people that you know we can be – and that you create us to be. So give us courage. And faith. And hope...as we trust you with our future. In Christ's name. Amen.

