

Sermon written and delivered by the Rev. John Crosswaite to St. Thomas' on May 1, 2022

Let me begin our reflection this morning with an observation made by author William Muehl about “we who gather on Sunday mornings.” He writes: “when you look over the gathered congregation, one can imagine that many of those sitting in the pews almost did not come today. Many considered staying home because in their minds, their faith does not measure up to the faith of others who might be here.” Let me repeat his words.

Our passage from the Acts of the Apostles chapter 9, often called the CONVERSION OF SAUL, contributes to this “faith inferiority complex.”

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When people like ourselves share something about our own faith journeys, many of us share a narrative that begins something like this: “I was raised in the church and never knew a time when I was not a Christian.” There is something comforting about having such an early faith identity. There is nothing wrong with such a faith statement unless you compare it with Acts chapter 9: then it lacks “drama and may seem woefully inadequate.”

If truth be known, we have some discomfort with the story of the conversion of Saul we might say, “even though I never had a Damascus Road experience, I still believe God has been at work in my life.” This seems to reflect that real conversion in faith only takes place dramatically; but it doesn't.

It is important to remember that what happened to Saul was noteworthy precisely it was not typical of the way most people became converts. In William Willimon's commentary of Acts 9, he encourages us to pay careful attention to this story so that we may gain insight for our lives. He suggests that the story is so familiar that its meaning may be taken for granted and therefore misunderstood. He cites an interesting quote from Flannery O'Connor, the novelist, who wrote: “I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.” Willimon reminds us that the story in Acts does not say anything about Paul riding a horse!

Despite O'Connor's addition of a mount for Paul, Flannery guides our attention in the right direction. The main character in this and every conversion story is GOD. It is God who changes our lives. The one thing clear about Saul's Damascus Road experience is the power of God that turned Saul from someone breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord to someone called Paul, “who proclaimed Jesus as Lord so that all who heard him were amazed.” So that ALL who heard him were AMAZED!

Saul's conversion was not something he decided to do on his own. It was God's doing. It is ALWAYS GOD'S DOING... bringing us around to God.

Here God needed to get a witness... to carry the good news of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, to the powerful, and to the people of Israel. God chose someone who had been a witness against the followers of Christ to become a powerful witness for Christ. Thus, the story here of Damascus Road is not so much about Saul as much as it is about the way God works to change lives.

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In the book of Acts, Luke places today's text in a series of other conversion stories. Following Saul's conversion story, Luke recounts stories of a Roman Centurion, Samaritans, and an Ethiopian. In all God touches unlikely people from diverse backgrounds to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Further in our text here it is easy to identify with Ananias. When the Lord tells Ananias in a vision about Paul, Ananias is dubious. One can imagine Ananias might have said, “you must be kidding. This guy is out to get us!”

Experience teaches us to be cautious about peoples’ ability to change, doesn’t it? “It is hard to teach old dogs new tricks.” However, in our scriptures, one consistent theme we find is that when God is the agent of change, “all things are possible.” This story of Paul is a helpful reminder that conversion – our coming to know God as real in our lives – is not primarily about us, but about God meeting us as we are.

There is not one religious experience that fits all.

What happened to Paul on Damascus Road was dramatic and had a significant impact on the church. Our task, especially NOW, is to remain open and attentive to what God is doing in and around us. How is God getting our attention? Making us all do a double take with our lives?

So how do we meet God? And when we do, do we trust that it is God? That at times is the biggest challenge, that something happened, and can we trust that it is God and that God wants us to bear witness somehow.

That is really part of the challenge we have in our more secular time with so much of our everyday reality seeming to be absent of God. Can we trust meeting God? That something or someone we might come across is really part of that Divine Presence; not dramatic, not earth shattering, but ordinary and points us to God.

Many years ago, when I was finishing my Masters in Spirituality at the University of San Francisco, my classmates in the program -- other clergy and Catholic nuns -- retreated north of San Francisco to Bolinas, along the coast, to a retreat type home that held twenty of us there. It was on a high cliff above the Pacific Ocean near an inlet to a river. We were doing what was a JOURNALING WORKSHOP with materials from IRA PROGOFF: reflecting and writing about our family of origins and faith development.

On Saturday morning, after we had spent two days doing some intensive work and writing, I was the first one up of the men (I think I got up because George in the next bunk bed was snoring and I just couldn’t sleep anymore.) I went downstairs from the dorm area us guys were in, made coffee, grabbed a large mug, put my jacket on over my sweats, and walked on the damp grass to the edge of the cliff - with a view of the ocean below and the inlet. It was wet and soggy from the fog that had comes in and I stood there for not sure how long. I was savoring the coffee and the morning time; I was just looking out beyond the shoreline of the Pacific Ocean and hearing the waves comes in and out on the beach below.

And then down below to the left, where there was the inlet that flowed into the ocean, I saw two seals/sea lions swimming as the tide was receding. They caught the stream/tide going out back into the ocean and for me it was a moment of meeting... of meeting God... and knowing something that despite some of my life experiences up until then, **God had me**/God loved me. That kind of experience, which I still hold as a sacred moment, was not dramatic (standing with a cup of coffee, wet from the morning fog, watching what was natural -- two sea lions returning to the ocean), but it has encouraged me to this day to

be attentive to God elsewhere, with the hope I can be in the end be what it is God wants and serve the risen Christ with my life.

The writer Eric Elnes talks about these less dramatic Damascus Road experiences in his wonderful book, **GIFT OF THE DARK WOOD, SEVEN BLESSINGS FOR SKEPTIC SOULS**.

He writes: “Have you ever experienced a sudden flash of insight or awareness that rocked your whole world?? Perhaps you experienced a sudden flash when you encountered your first love or life partner, or when a child is born, or perhaps you went out for a casual walk in the woods one day, only to return a different person?!

“Why do we describe these moments as sudden flashes or seeing the light when we see nothing? Why do we claim that they rock our world, which they do, when our actual world remains stable?

“Like the ancients, we are forced to describe interior change or insight by using concrete, external metaphors. When the ancients spoke of the God through lightening flashes or claps of thunder, they meant that the voice of the divine comes through momentary **FLASHES OF INTUITION** or awareness that trigger sensations that reverberate within us like rolling thunder. Those inner reverberations can last a lifetime.”

My fellow faith travelers, let us be attentive, especially this Easter season, to what God might be up to with us. How is God trying to get our attention? And can we trust that it is God? So that like Paul we might witness to what God has and is doing in the risen Christ in our own lives!

Let us pray:

On this Sunday morning, we break from the routine of doings, O Lord,
and pause and make space to notice you.
You are always with us in surprising guises.
Jesus of the flesh,
we meet you in the worker and friend,
the stranger and pilgrim,
the student and mentor,
the needy and the needed,
the questioner and questioned.

So when we meet you,
may we deepen trust, deepen life, deepen justice, and deepen joy,

And when you meet us,
Help us approach our activities and deliberations
With presence, with love and humility, with courage and dignity.
In Jesus name. Amen.