

“SINCE JESUS CAME INTO MY HEART:  
III – PAUL ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS”

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Acts 9:1-22

The other day I received a brochure in the mail from my seminary, Wesley Theological Seminary, with information to give to prospective students, inviting them to come and explore the campus, and consider enrolling there. Not surprisingly, guess who was one of the smiling faces on the brochure? Carlos! Yes indeed, our very own Carlos! Who wouldn't want to go there with someone like him?

Carlos, by the way, is having a great time at Wesley, and our other seminarian, Sarah Alphin, is also having a great time at seminary in Boston, at the Boston University School of Theology – another United Methodist seminary. I'm so happy for both of them, and every time I hear from one of them it always brings back wonderful memories for me of my time at seminary.

My years at Wesley were three of the best years of my life. I embraced life in Washington, took advantage of all the wonders the city offered, and loved my studies at Wesley. I could have stayed there forever, but I have to tell you, that I almost didn't make it through the first week. Why?

Well, the first week all of us students were virtual strangers to each other. So those first days were times spent getting to know each other, and learning each other's "stories," if you will. One of the things that everyone talked about, of course, was their faith journey, which I kiddingly, or maybe not so kiddingly, refer to as "Can you top my conversion story?" It's like everyone had to prove that they really deserved to be there – so the conversion stories were quite dramatic.

One woman actually heard the voice of God speaking to her – audibly! Others had stories of when they were at a church camp accepting Jesus in a stirring moment. Well, the stories, mostly dramatic, went on and on, and the more they did, the more I felt like I should just creep out the back door, pack my bags and go back home. Because my story wasn't dramatic, mine didn't include the voice of God speaking audibly to me, mine wasn't about a stirring moment at camp – my conversion story was about a lifetime of dwelling in the presence of God, always sure of His presence with me, and my heart committed to Him. Sure, there have been those moments of intense awareness, and profound commitment and

recommitment, but I didn't have a "miraculous" sort of conversion experience, and I almost left seminary before I started. Thank goodness, the Spirit kept me right where I was.

Now, why did I tell you that? Because I think that sometimes when we look at stories like today's lesson from the Book of Acts, the story of the Apostle Paul's conversion, we can, like I did during those first days at seminary, start to question our own faith. We wonder if it's always supposed to be **that** way, and well, if it didn't happen that way for us, well, maybe we don't quite measure up, maybe something's wrong.

And even though we know that's not true, that God works in all sorts of ways in all of our lives, sometimes when we hear Paul's story, we at least wish we had had such an experience - a dramatic, powerful moment when God's presence was so very real, and God's power almost palpable.

So let's spend a little time together this morning looking at this dramatic and powerful moment.

Saul (his Jewish name which he used before his conversion) was from the town of Tarsus. He was a tentmaker, but he was also a religious scholar, a Pharisee. He trained with a master teacher named Gamaliel, and the more he learned, the more zealously he guarded the traditions of the Jewish faith.

When the early Christian movement began, when Jesus' followers in the era after the first disciples started proclaiming Him as Savior, Paul rose up against them, and tried to stamp them out. These are his own words recorded in the 26<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts: "I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I do so in Jerusalem; I not only shut up many of the saints in prison, by authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme; and in raging fury against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities." (Acts 26:9-11)

You can see that Paul went after the early Christians with a vengeance, and not because he was necessarily an evil person, but because he was zealous for the traditions of Judaism. The first time we hear about Paul in scripture is when he is standing watching Stephen, the martyr, being stoned.

After that, Paul was not content with just rousting out the Jesus followers from Jerusalem, he wanted to go further. So he went to the priests to get their permission to go after the Christians in Damascus, which they gladly gave to him, and off he went, to keep up his regular zealous activities, or so he thought . . .

You know what happened, Bethany read it for us just a few moments ago. But I want you to hear it as described by a great Christian preacher and storyteller named Frederick Buechner. He writes: “It was about noon when Paul was knocked flat by a blaze of light that made the sun look like a forty-watt bulb, and out of the light came a voice that called him by his Hebrew name twice. ‘Saul,’ it said, and then again, ‘Saul. Why are you out to get me?’ and when he pulled himself together enough to ask who it was he had the honor of addressing, what he heard to his horror was, ‘I’m Jesus of Nazareth, the one you’re out to get.’ We’re not told how long he lay there in the dust then, but it must have seemed at least six months. If Jesus of Nazareth had what it took to burst out of the grave like a guided missile, he thought, then he could polish off one bowlegged Christian-baiter without even noticing it, and Paul waited for the axe to fall. Only it wasn’t an axe that fell. ‘Those boys in Damascus,’ Jesus said. ‘Don’t fight them, join them. I want you on my side,’ and Paul never in his life forgot the sheer lunatic joy and astonishment of that moment. He was blind as a bat for three days afterwards, but he made it to Damascus anyway and was baptized on the spot. He was never the same again, and neither, in a way, was the world.” (Frederick Buechner, “Paul,” *Peculiar Treasures*, p. 129)

Oh, Buechner put it so well – Paul was never the same again, and neither was the world. After a few days in darkness, and some help from a servant of God, Ananias, Paul started a whole new life – reaching out with as much passion as he had before, but this time preaching Jesus, reaching out to His followers, instead of crushing them. And not only did he reach out to His followers, but because of his incredible witness, led masses of others to proclaim Jesus as the Lord of their lives.

It is an incredibly dramatic story, and if we’re not careful, we can treat it as just that – a dramatic event that happened in the life of one man – a dramatic event that we look at with awe and wonder, but then put on a shelf, as it were. Instead, I want to suggest today, that Paul’s story has much to say to all of us and our lives of faith. Indeed, I believe Paul’s story is our story as well.

So let me lift up just three things this morning that I think we can learn from Paul’s story. The first is this – that Jesus seeks a relationship with everyone – even those we might think unlikely candidates. We’ve seen that all over the gospels. Why, we’ve seen it just in the last few weeks, in this sermon series. Jesus’ choice of disciples – somewhat unlikely. Jesus seeking a relationship with Zaccheus, a cheating, self-serving tax collector.

Clearly, Jesus, over and over again, reaches out in love to persons, and, often, were we asked, some of those people would not be at the top of our lists of qualified candidates to be His followers. Yet, isn’t that good news for us? Isn’t it good to know that the Lord doesn’t seek perfection, that He doesn’t focus on those who have

it all together, who are strong, and self-assured and gifted? There is a place in God's kingdom for all – and that is great good news.

This week as I was preparing this sermon and looking through resources, two different writers in entirely separate publications, happened to mention the name of Blaise Pascal. I took that as a sign that maybe I ought to look more closely at his story. And what a story it is.

Blaise Pascal lived in the mid-1600's in France. He was, by all accounts, a brilliant person. His own father educated him, and decided to start with the arts and humanities, until he discovered that young Blaise, by the age of 12, had taught himself geometry. He just grew smarter and smarter, and is credited with the invention of many things, not the least of which is the theory of probability. He was a great scientist and mathematician, but he also was a great writer of literature, one of France's finest.

Now, many scientists have been skeptics when it comes to faith, since they base so much of their thinking on empirical evidence – if they can't see it or figure it out, it's not real. Such was the case with Pascal, until on November 23, 1654, there was a two-hour period of time in which he had his own "road to Damascus" experience with God. It was so profound that when reflecting on it, Pascal simply wrote down five words – "Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace." Then he wrote, "Forgetfulness of the world, and of everything except God." Finally, he wrote, "Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy."

The experience so changed his life that he took that piece of paper upon which he had written those words, and had it sewn into the lining of his jacket, so that it always rested upon his heart. It was there until the day he died. (J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Preaching About People*, "Blaise Pascal: A Night of Transforming Passion," pp. 49-50)

If you were putting together a list of people whom Jesus would call to touch the world with the power of His love, Blaise Pascal might not have been at the top of the list – scientist, mathematician, realist. Yet when Jesus touched him and changed his life, many others came to know Christ through this gifted scientist, this man of deep faith. Thank goodness that Jesus reaches out and seeks a relationship with everyone – even unlikely people, even you, even me.

Secondly, though certainly they're not all dramatic, and nowhere near all alike, every person of faith has a conversion story. That means that you have a conversion story. If you've never told it, I invite you to at least think about what you would say were you given the opportunity to share it. Perhaps your coming to Christ happened in a moment with a date and time you remember clearly. Perhaps you heard the voice of God, or felt His Spirit tugging at you. Maybe you were one of

those kids at summer camp, or at a youth rally, and you knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God loved you, and you said you loved Him.

Or maybe you were like me, always in church, always surrounded by faithful witnesses, always seeking in a number of ways to grow closer to the Lord – there’s not one particular moment that was “it.” Whatever your story is, it is valid, and it is as valid as Paul’s, and someday, sometime, someone will want to hear it – and it just might be the thing that gets them to come to Jesus too.

Finally, there is one thing from Paul’s story that is exactly the same for us, and it is that his life as a person of faith became his witness. His conversion, his total change of heart, was evident every single day. The people remembered him before – as the great persecutor of Christians, and now they watched in awe as he became Jesus’ great evangelist. People knew by watching him that the Lord has touched his heart, and changed his ways – and when they saw it, they were drawn to the Lord themselves.

As I always tell you, never forget that people are watching us – us Christians. They’re watching to see if our conversions to Christ have made a difference in what we do and say, how we act, and how we treat others. So I want to finish by telling you two brief examples of just how true that is.

First, a boy named Ted one day wandered into a church just to see what was going on. He was curious, and it could have been the start of something big in his life – except that, at that moment, a man inside confronted him, asking who he was and what he was doing wandering around in the church, accused him of trying to steal things, threatened to call the police and then shooed him out. Crestfallen, the boy never returned thinking that, if that’s what Christians were like, he wanted no part of it.

A number of years later, after he had grown up, he made the acquaintance of a pastor and admitted to him that since that day, he had never been in a church. He couldn’t get the memories of that day out of his mind, remembering the look on that man’s face, his attitude, and his cruel words. (Now, I know that that man may have had trouble with young people before, and he was probably just being protective of the church, but look what that did to someone who was seeking.) Happily, after talking with that pastor, and accepting his invitation to go to church, Ted discovered that not everyone was like that, and he came to Christ, and found a home there. (James W. Moore, *There’s a Hole in your Soul That Only God Can Fill*, p. 42)

Friends, people are watching, they want to see if we’re living what we say we believe, and what we do can draw them closer to Christ or drive them away.

A final story – from our old friend Tony Campolo. One summer when he was working as a counselor at a youth camp, he noticed that many of the boys were making fun of one of the other campers, whose name was Billy. Billy couldn't talk right or walk right, and Tony winced when he saw the other boys mock him. Sadly, they played tricks on him, and Tony says that the cruelest trick they played was making him be the main speaker at the worship service on the closing night of camp. They thought it would be funny to watch him struggle to say something.

When Tony found out about it, he was furious. But by the time he found out, it was too late to do anything about it, and besides, Billy was actually excited about the prospect of doing it. So the time came for the service, and as the boys gathered snickering in anticipation of what was to come, Billy went forward and gave his speech. Tony says it took Billy at least a full half minute to say these words – “Jesus . . . loves . . . me . . . and . . . I . . . love . . . Jesus.”

And when he finished, there was total, stunned silence. When Tony looked over his shoulder, he saw a bunch of teenage boys with tears streaming down their faces, and some had their heads bowed. In Tony's words, “A revival broke out.” He said: “We had done many things that week to try to reach the boys with the gospel message, but nothing had worked. We even brought in baseball players whose batting averages had gone up since they started praying, but it had no effect. It wasn't until a spastic kid named Billy simply declared his love for Christ that everything changed.” (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 106)

To this day, Tony says, he runs into men who attended camp while he was there, who tell him that they came to know Christ there, not through any of the activities, but through the words of a boy named Billy. Billy had a story, Billy was a witness, and people came to Christ.

My friends, you have a story, you are a witness. You may feel like an unlikely candidate for God to use to draw someone else to Him, but God doesn't see you that way. Know your story, and may you share it freely – sometimes with words, but always with your life. May it be so. Amen.