

“MOST LIKELY TO . . . III – COMPLETELY CHANGE”

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

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Acts 9:1-20

Luke 8:1-3

One day this week, I was scrolling through Facebook and came upon pictures from last Saturday’s night Elkton High School alumni banquet. It was held up at that new event center on 213 called “Rosewood Farms.” It looked like everyone there had a great time, and as I scrolled through the pictures, I realized that some of the classes had their pictures taken together as a group. Truth be told, many of the attendees were older, so they’ve been together for a long time.

I confess that I’ve never been to the alumni banquet. And I’ve only been to two of my class reunions. One was the five year reunion, and I had a horrible time. The cliques were still cliquy, most people were married, and some were on their second marriages already, many of them had children, and many of them were well into their careers. I wasn’t part of a clique, I wasn’t married, didn’t have children, and still didn’t have a “career” per se.

Twenty-five years later, I was back here in Elkton – that was 2003 – and I went to the class reunion. It was a totally different story then. Nobody cared about the cliques from the 70’s, everybody had been through something in life, and we were all just glad to be together. It was nice to see everybody, because I hadn’t kept in touch with many people from either high school or college. My friends by then were largely from seminary.

So it was quite a surprise to see how some people turned out. In fact, as the sermon title says, some people had completely changed. One person, who had barely gotten out of high school, turned out to be a wonderfully successful teacher! Another person, who was quite the jokester in our class, turned out to become a nun! None of us would have ever guessed that would happen, but apparently God had something else in mind.

And I’ll bet there have been not a few people surprised that I turned out to be a pastor!

Sometimes the way people change is hard to believe!

Well, that certainly is the case with some of the characters in today’s scripture lessons – the Apostle Paul and Mary Magdalene. From where they started to where they ended up – totally and completely changed.

In fact, Paul's story is one of the, if not, the most dramatic change story in all the Bible. You remember his story? Paul was always a religious man – trouble was, for a long time, he used his religion and religious fervor like a hammer. He went around persecuting Christians because, in his estimation, they had wandered away from true faith. They weren't following the rules, doing things the way they'd always been done. They were spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ and growing the church with a passion – and Paul was determined to stop them.

He actually became known for that. One of the first times he appears in scripture, is when he's present at the stoning of Stephen. He is bound and determined to stop this movement any way he can. His heart is hardened and there's no stopping him.

Until, one day, when he was traveling on the road to Damascus, God stopped him in his tracks. At that time, he was known as Saul, and he had gone to the high priests for letters to the synagogues in Damascus so that he could take captive those who belonged to the Way (those who followed Jesus).

While his mind was consumed with what was to come, suddenly a brilliant light flashed around him, so stunning that it knocked him to the ground. And then the Lord spoke to him, asking him why he was persecuting him. No doubt trembling, Saul replied, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Then he told him what to do – that he should go into the city and there he would learn what to do.

Meanwhile, the scripture says, those traveling with Saul were stunned and speechless – no doubt! And Saul, when he got up from the ground, could not see. But they led him to Damascus, where for three days he remained blind, until God spoke to a man named Ananais, and told him to lay his hands on Saul's eyes so that he would be healed. Poor Ananais tried to remind the Lord how evil Saul was, but Jesus let him know he had plans for this man, to go ahead and do it. And so he did.

From that moment on, Saul became Paul and was indeed, completely changed. The zeal with which he had persecuted Jesus' followers was replaced by a zeal to preach Jesus and him alone. People were stunned by the sudden reversal, but stunned in such a way that they confessed Jesus as the Lord of their lives as well.

It's an incredible conversion story, isn't it? From unbelievably evil to incredibly faithful, from a passion for killing to a passion for abundant life. A life totally and completely changed in an astounding way – by a blinding light and the voice of God calling him home.

I don't know about you, but I find it to be also an intimidating conversion story. My story is nothing like Paul's – how about yours?

One of the commentators I read this week said this: "It is important to remember that what happened to Saul was noteworthy precisely because it was *not* typical of the way most people become converts." (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*, p. 404)

Phew! I don't know about you, but I'm glad to hear that. Many of us, maybe most of us, have had far less flashy conversions – God has worked quietly on our hearts and minds, or worked through situations in our lives to draw us to give our lives to him.

Such was the case with Mary Magdalene. We mostly know the more famous version of Mary Magdalene – the one who ministered by Jesus' side, the one who stayed with him through thick and thin, who was with him to the end and beyond, who discovered his empty grave, and was the first one to proclaim his resurrection. We mostly know the changed Mary Magdalene.

But before she was completely changed, Mary Magdalene lived under the burden of being controlled by demons – lots of them. Her life was literally hell. It was torture, until God healed her, exorcised those demons, and made of her a completely new person.

The healing from those demons was Mary Magdalene's "blinding light" experience, if you will.

Friends, I know that some in this church have had "blinding light" experiences like Paul did. Big, huge moments when God knocked them down to build them into persons of Christ. But I'm fairly certain that for most of us, those "blinding light" moments were more quiet, more personal. We may not even have realized they were "blinding light" moments, moments of change for us, until we looked back and reflected on them, and thought "aha! That was God at work in me."

You know, God works in each person's life in a unique way – drawing them unto Christ in a way that is just right for them. There are some whose conversion, whose "aha, blinding light" moment happened in the midst of the beauty of creation, where they realized that all of it is from the hand of God, and if God loves and cares for the creation as much as that, how much more does God care for them – and it changed them.

Others have experienced conversion and change through music or some other art form. I will never forget reading a book called *The Spiritual Lives of Great Composers* and learning about George Friedric Handel's profound spiritual experience, his "blinding light" moments if you will, as he wrote "The Hallelujah Chorus" from "Messiah."

He had been through a rough time. He was 56 years old, was experiencing struggle on all sides, was almost in financial ruin, and his music was being criticized. One day, a friend gave him a manuscript of the life of Christ that someone had written, and on August 22nd of that year, Handel sat down and began to put it to music. The author of this book says that, "He grew so absorbed in the work that he barely left his room, hardly stopping to eat. Within six days Part One was complete. In nine days more he had finished Part Two, and in another six, Part Three. The orchestration was complete in another two days. In all, 260 pages of manuscript were filled in the remarkably short time of 24 days."

For those more than three weeks, Handel never left his house. So engrossed in his work was he, that he hardly even took time to eat. His servants would bring a tray of food only to return later to find it uneaten. Until one day, the day he had just finished composing The Hallelujah Chorus, a servant knocked, entered the room with his tray of food, and found Handel with tears streaming down his face, as he said, "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself." (Patrick Kavanaugh, *The Spiritual Lives of Great Composers*, p. 5)

Friends, that was Handel's "blinding light" conversion moment – when he knew that he knew that he knew – the majesty of God and the abundance of a life in Christ.

For Handel, his moment of change came in a time in his life that was filled with incredible productivity but also incredible struggle. You know, many people have had their "blinding light" moments in times of struggle. Why? Perhaps because their souls are so bereft of hope that they are ready to hear God's voice.

Surely that was the case with a man called Charles Colson. Most of you know who that is, when I say his name. Some of you don't. Charles Colson was an associate of President Richard Nixon, found guilty in the Watergate conspiracy of the early 1970's, the crime that led to Nixon's resignation from the presidency.

Charles Colson was a hard driving man, who would stop at nothing to get his way in Washington. He was fiercely loyal to his boss, Richard Nixon, so he would anything to get him elected and hopefully, re-elected – which led to the crime that would take them all down.

Colson tells the story of his change in a book entitled *Born Again*. It went like this. He was close friends with a man named Tom Phillips, who was then president of the Raytheon Corporation. Tom was a devout, devout Christian and one night, after Colson was released from prison, he invited him over to his house for conversation. It was a heart to heart conversation, and not an easy one. Phillips confronted Colson on why he had done what he had done, and he didn't buy his answers. He didn't want to hear about his loyalty to his boss. He knew it was wrong and he wanted Colson to acknowledge it as well.

But he did it by telling Colson his own story. He talked about climbing the ladder to success obsessively, at the cost of everything else in his life. He talked about gaining that success, and then, feeling empty in spite of having it. Finally, he said, he realized what was missing, and that was God.

When he said that, Colson wrote, it made him squirm in his seat. He wasn't comfortable with this God-talk. But Phillips continued, saying "It may be hard to understand, but I didn't seem to have anything that mattered. It was all on the surface. All the material things in life are meaningless if a man hasn't discovered what's underneath them."

Then, one night, Phillips heard about a Billy Graham crusade going on in New York, and he decided to go, hoping that he would find some answers, which he did. He realized that he had never turned his life over to Christ, and that night, he did. He went on to talk about the peace that came over him, and the joy that took over his heart, and how he began to experience life in a whole new way – and as he did, tears filled his eyes.

Then he looked at Chuck Colson, and again confronted him on the way he was living and the choices he had made, saying, in essence, "You're like I was, your life is out of focus, a big piece is missing." Then he handed him a copy of C. S. Lewis' book *Mere Christianity* and invited him to take it home and read it.

Colson writes that they finished their meeting with Tom praying, and he writes, "As Tom prayed, something began to flow into me – a kind of energy. Then came a wave of emotion which nearly brought tears. I fought them back. It sounded as if Tom were speaking directly and personally to God, almost as if He were sitting beside us."

Afterwards, he walked out to his car, got in, put his head in his hands and just starting sobbing and sobbing and sobbing. He wrote this about that moment: "With my face cupped in my hands, head leaning forward against the wheel, I forgot about machismo, about pretenses, about fears of being weak. And as I did, I began to experience a wonderful feeling of being released. Then came the strange sensation that water was not only running down my cheeks, but surging through

my whole body as well, cleansing and cooling as it went. They weren't tears of sadness and remorse; nor of joy – but somehow – tears of relief.

Then right there in his car he asked Jesus to take him, to come into his heart and life, and he says “for the first time in my life I was not alone at all.” (*Famous Conversions*, Charles Colson, pp. 258-265)

That was his “blinding light” moment, nothing like Paul's at all, yet everything like Paul's as well.

Dear friends, into everyone's life God at some time, shines a “blinding light.” It might be in a big, flashy way like he did with Paul, but more often than not, it will be in a far quieter, more personal way. The Lord wants more than anything to be in our hearts and lives, and he calls us through these experiences, and through them, he brings about a complete change in us and through us.

I pray that we will all be open to those moments when God comes shining through, and when he does, that we will open our hearts and let him in – fully and completely.

Let us pray.

O Lord our God, we give you thanks for your love which never lets us go. We have felt your presence in big, shining moments in our lives, but we've also felt it through your still, small voice that whispers in our ears and touches our hearts. Your love and care overwhelms us and enables us to change to be more the persons you have created us to be. Lord God, thank you. Many of us here have long ago invited you into our hearts – today we remember that and recommit our lives to you. But some in this room have never opened their hearts fully and asked you in – speak to them now Lord – shine your light on them Lord, that they may open the door to their hearts. Hear us, each one now, in this time of silence, as we open our hearts to you.

Thank you Lord, for your love which never lets us go, which always quenches the thirsting of our souls. Thank you Lord. Amen.