



Proper 3B, Year 1 – January 25, 2009

Acts 9: 1-22

A Homily preached by the Rev'd James J. Popham

Tonight's reading from the Acts of the Apostles tells the familiar story of Paul on the road to Damascus – a story not only familiar, but one so important that it will be repeated twice more in Acts. And, indeed, Paul himself was important. One of my psychology professors even suggested that Paul's influence was so great that Christianity should be called Paulanity. One might be tempted to speculate that had Paul resisted "conversion" on the road to Damascus, Christianity as we know it would be something very different from what it is today. But such a temptation springs from a myopic view of the story. And we should resist it.

Because the story really is not about Paul. It's about God. So let's recast this story of Paul on the road to Damascus from God's perspective. God has chosen Paul to spread the Gospel, the good news of Christ's salvation of the world to Jews and Gentiles alike. But God has a problem. Paul hasn't heard God's call.

Now it's not as if Paul is a bad guy. He is no atheist. He is a believer in the one Hebrew God of scripture. He hardly is agnostic or irreligious. He is very religious. And the sincerity of his religious beliefs is beyond question. He is educated, not only in the teachings and traditions of Judaism, but, perhaps, in worldly affairs as well, hailing as he does from Tarsus, a cultural and intellectual center, and the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia. He may even be a Roman citizen. Like every good Jew and particularly as a Pharisee, he anticipates the arrival of the Messiah. Yet, God calls, and Paul does not hear. In fact, rather than proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, Paul persecutes those Jews who have recognized that Jesus is, indeed, the Messiah that Paul awaits. Out of the depths of his sincerely held religious beliefs, Paul in his zeal, is heading to Damascus with authority to round up "Christian" Jews, those Jews who followed "the Way" of Jesus Christ, and haul them back to the high priests in Jerusalem. To Paul, they are a subversive and dangerous element in the synagogue and a taint to the Jewish religious community. No one could say Paul was not faithful to his beliefs and well-intended. He is quite confident that he is doing God's will.

What is God to do? Better speak to Paul directly, clearly, and emphatically. Having thrown Paul to the ground and blinded him with intense light, Jesus asks Paul "Why are you persecuting me? And to his credit, I suppose, Paul is not defensive. He does not proclaim his good intentions or rest on the certainty of his religious beliefs. He simply asks, "Who are you?" And the answer, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." And Jesus sends Paul on to Damascus.

Now Paul is blind, both physically and spiritually. His understanding of Jesus remains incomplete, and he literally does not know where to take his next step. His friends had to lead him by the hand. Meanwhile, God has instructed a sceptical Ananias to administer to Paul, to heal his blindness and restore his sight, telling Ananias that God has chosen Paul for a great mission of evangelism. Then Paul is baptized. And Paul immediately begins proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah in the synagogue. Now we might just stop and say well and good. God has seen to Paul's conversion. Paul will embrace his call to proclaim Jesus as Messiah and source of salvation. Largely due to Paul's tireless evangelism throughout the world, Christianity will take hold among the Gentiles as well as the Jews, and the rest, as we say, is history. And for that we must be grateful to God. God stepped in to make His call to Paul irresistible. And Paul would oblige and use his considerable gifts not to persecute, but to promote Christianity in a way no one else could.

or would. Paul, as God intended, became God's instrument to proclaim the salvation of the world through Jesus Christ to "Gentiles and kings" and Jews alike.

But what do we have to learn from this powerful tale of reorientation and transformation, of "conversion?" First, let's remember that Paul was an educated man, from a prominent, prosperous, cosmopolitan city. Moreover, he was a faithful, devout, religious Jew. A Pharisee, learned in the scripture and teachings of his faith. His sincerity and good intentions were impeccable. And he certainly lacked no fervour in living into his faith. But he was wrong. For whatever reason, and even arguably sound reasons, when it came to Jesus, Paul missed the boat.

But God knew Paul had just the gifts one would need to be a fervent advocate to Jew and Gentile alike that Jesus was the Messiah. God did not throw up his hands and abandon Paul even when Paul persecuted those who understood Jesus to be the Messiah.

And when confronted with the truth in undeniable terms, Paul reacted as the righteous man he was. He was not defensive. "Oh, Lord, how was I to know you were the Messiah? I had only good intentions? Why didn't you get to me sooner? It's not my fault.

No, however smug Paul may have been in his self-righteousness, he in his true righteousness was humbled and humble. Paul followed instructions. He went to the city. He fasted and prayed. He trusted. And in the person of Ananias and those early Christians in Damascus, Paul's physical and spiritual blindness was healed. And he submitted to being baptized. God may have knocked Paul off his feet. But it was through God's people and the early church that God's transformation of Paul was fully realized.

Do we sometimes see a flash God's light around us, perhaps, even in ways that challenge our sincere, educated, long held beliefs? Do we always respond with Paul's humility when confronted with ideas or notions that might at first blush appear disagreeable or even diametrically opposed to our understanding of our faith? Or are we like Paul on the road to Damascus, insistent on persecuting and rooting out those who just do not fit into our scheme of things.

Now I am not suggesting that we burn our Bibles, abandon our rich Anglican tradition, and cross our fingers during the creed. But even in the creed we find a lot of space between Christmas and the Crucifixion, space to consider and question and interpret the meaning of Jesus' life between his birth and death. And our Anglican tradition encourages the engagement of our education, our experience, and our minds. I have often thought if you ask twelve Anglicans their opinion on any issue, you will get at least thirteen points of view. And as long as we can approach challenging notions with Paul's humility and righteous spirit, we will hear God's call to us, even without a blinding flash.

We might also remember to see that in those companions God places on our path with us and in the church, God's hand healing and guiding us, just as Paul was healed and guided by his friends on the road and by Ananias and the early Christians in Damascus.

Finally, let us recall with confidence that however far we, or our companions, or even the church may stray, that God will find a way to offer us the opportunity to see clearly what God's truth is and even what God is calling us to do. So, while we celebrate the conversion of Paul this evening – and a dramatic and momentous conversion it was – we are celebrating Paul's righteousness, a righteousness that stopped short of self righteousness and enabled Paul to accept his blindness to Jesus with humility and openness to God's truth. Even more significantly, we are celebrating God's faithfulness and persistence in showing us the truth, the way, and the light.

Amen.

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