

Oh, the Changes in Me: From Making a Life to Learning to Live.

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Rev. Dr.

First Reading: Acts 9:1-6 [7-20]

Saul (later called Paul) was an ardent persecutor of all who followed the Way of Christ. This reading recounts the story of his transformation beginning with an encounter with Jesus Christ on the way to Damascus.

¹Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” ⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. ¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹The 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, ¹²and 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.” ¹³But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” ¹⁵But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and rulers and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” ¹⁷So 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.” ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days Saul was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”]

Overview - Do You Love Me? Follow Me

When we encounter Jesus, we are changed and will never be the same. Jesus can be revealed in a blinding light on the road, in an abundance of fish, in breakfast on the beach. God uses all sorts of surprising things—bread, wine, water, words of forgiveness—to convert us. Like baptism, this conversion is both a once-in-a-lifetime, life-changing event and a daily process—a change that comes again and again, like Jesus' question to Peter: "Do you love me?" Again and again, Jesus calls us to follow him. For Saul, the journey doesn't end with the blinding light on the road. For Peter, the journey doesn't end with breakfast on the beach. Conversion sets each of them, and each of us, on a path that continues for the rest of our life on earth—and leads into life eternal.

Visual Image / Artwork

The painting [Damascus Road](#), by Ellen Moore Osborne, depicts the conversion of Paul through bold strokes and sharp interplay between shadows and light. The painting conveys the often painful reality of transformation but also portrays the promise of a new day on the horizon. What does this painting evoke in you? Where have you experienced intense transformation, growth, or a sudden change in perspective?

Podcast

Sometimes God's calls on our lives are sudden and dramatic, as in the story of Paul in today's reading from Acts. Sometimes it feels more like a long blustering journey with lots of twists, turns, and setbacks, like in the case of Peter. For many of us, it might be difficult to know who God is calling us to be. In [an episode of “Becoming Wise,”](#) Father James Martin speaks with Krista Tippett about the ways God calls us by inviting people to listen to their innermost desires. He says, "the most fundamental vocation is to become the person whom God created. And it's both the person you already are and the person that God calls you to be."

E-formation

Easter lasts for fifty days: this coming Sunday is the third Sunday of Easter, and we hear another story of Jesus' appearance after his resurrection. To encounter Jesus here and now, come to worship, to hear the word, to eat with him, and to connect with his body of believers.

[**Acts 9:1-6 \[7-20\]**](#)

Luke, ever the masterful story-teller, writing in the 80s after the death of Paul, sets the stage for Paul's role in spreading the word to the Gentile world by providing an affecting narrative of the appearance of the risen Lord to Saul, which is absent from Paul's own autobiographical statements (see Gal. 1:15-16). Scholars question the claim (vv. 2 and 14) that the high priest had authority of extradition over the Jews in the diaspora. According to this narrative, there were Christians in Damascus already in the 40s. Christians have access to God by invoking the name of Jesus. The shorter excerpt is the appearance of Christ to Saul, and the longer excerpt adds the details of Saul's blindness, the gift of the Holy Spirit, Saul's baptism, and his faith in Jesus as Son of God. Thus Luke uses the narrative to typify conversion to faith in Christ.

Third Sunday of Easter

Easter continues. Each year, the gospel on the third Sunday of Easter is a resurrection appearance. This Sunday, Christ appears to Saul on the road as a blinding light, to John the seer as an enthroned Lamb, and to five disciples as a man serving breakfast. Which is your favorite?

[Acts 9:1-6 \[7-20\]](#)

Saul, forgiven for his previous actions, is called and then baptized to be a follower of Jesus, the Son of God. The early church referred to baptism as enlightenment, for all believers were blind but now can see. Like Saul, we too are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Images in the Readings

Fish became a significant Christian symbol in its early centuries, perhaps in memory of disciples having been fishermen, but perhaps because of a Jewish metaphoric tradition that described fish as the main course served at the messianic banquet. Eating fish may have symbolized faith in the demise of the ancient evil sea monster. The acronym for "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior," spelled the Greek noun for fish, *ichthus*. Some early Christian art depicting the Last Supper shows a great fish on the plate in front of Jesus, as does the frontispiece for Holy Communion by He Qi in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 89. Although we do not know where Jerome got this data, the great biblical interpreter wrote that God had created 153 varieties of fish; thus the reference in John 21:11 means that all of creation comes to serve God.

Later trinitarian doctrine made the language of Jesus as **Son** of God privileged divine speech. But earlier Christian writing (e.g. Acts 9:20) understood that Jesus' sonship was his messianic status, which insured salvation to all believers: using categories important in a patriarchal society, we all were to become sons of God who inherit what

the Father could bestow. Even Luke's narrative details can function as symbols: Saul is **blind** for three days. There is considerable discussion now about the church's traditional use of blindness as a symbol for being spiritually unaware. Some blind Christians welcome the imagery, others criticize its use.

Connections with the Liturgy

The Sunday Assembly (p. 124) suggests that especially during the weeks of Easter “This is the feast” be sung as the initial canticle of praise. The stanzas of this canticle (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* p.101) are a direct quotation from today’s second reading. We join with every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea to praise God with these beloved words.

Some thoughts from the text for “From Making a Life to Learning to Live”

- 1) Saul/Paul was living his life just fine. He was successful, had what he felt was meaningful work and was advancing toward his life purpose of enforcing the law against radicals in the community. Considering all that, why do you think he may have been vulnerable to experiencing God’s brilliant light? What defense mechanisms do you employ to keep God from intruding into your well formed and comfortable life? Even with that sometimes God breaks through and the “light dawns on us.” Can you recall what was occurring in your life when some of those moments took place – when your defense mechanisms/walls/rationalizations were weakened enough for God’s light to break through to you?

- 2) During Paul’s experience the author describes him as having fallen to the ground, become blind, didn’t eat/drink anything for 3 days, helped by his friends and all the while is confronted by Jesus’ question of him and yet God’s guidance of him. What has it been like for you to be confronted by what you actually stand for and say, how you actually are living out your values, how you actually may have been on a different path than one that God desires for you? How long did you experience yourself in reflection (Paul was 3 days before he re-gained some insight) before it brought about a lasting change for you? Have you ever had an instantaneous ‘conversion’ in your thinking or have most experiences like that come about gradually?

- 3) Gail Sheehy is famous for her books on life passages (starting in the 1980s with various updates/versions). In those, she describes various life crises most people will face as they go through their years. How have you seen God specifically guiding you at times to become more of what God made you to be? What “blind spots” did you have? How have you passed on your wisdom to others? If you have learned so much, what will it take for you to pass on more? What are some of the greatest insights you have gained about life, love, God, the world, yourself?

- 4) Paul was making a good life for himself and then everything changed and he lived much more fully and in a different way. How has the Spirit ‘en-lightened’ you over your years and how do you define and live your life more fully now than you ever have before? If not, why not? How are these little ‘conversions’ reflections of the ultimate ‘transformation’ that the Resurrection Promise brings to us?