

Lightning Bolts for the Rest of Us
Acts 9:1-19
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Beginning in September, we have spent this past year exploring the Bible from cover to cover in a series we have entitled “Stories We Can’t Live Without.” Today’s story, the conversion of the Apostle Paul, formerly known here as Saul, on the road to Damascus is definitely one of those life-changing, history-altering, “grab-ya-by-the-shoulders and get your attention” kind of stories. In fact, this story so vividly captures the imagination that the road to Damascus scene has frequently been the subject of artists throughout history. On the cover of your bulletin today is Michelangelo’s depiction of the dramatic moment in which Saul is knocked off his horse by the bolt of lightning.

Even today the metaphor of a “road to Damascus” experience is commonly used by the media and in social discourse to describe a powerful moment in which a conversion to a new way of thinking or acting is experienced. Just this last week I heard a political pundit reflecting on one of the candidates for president having a road to “road to Damascus” experience recently.

This morning we begin with the very first “Road to Damascus” conversion, the story of Saul. We’ve been introduced to Saul briefly a couple of chapters prior to this morning’s reading. At the end of Acts chapter 7, a crowd of religious leaders who are angry want to stone a new disciple, Stephen; and they drag Stephen out into the street, literally to the feet of Saul in order to carry out his punishment. We don’t know if Saul ever picked up a stone or not, but it is clear that Saul is an enthusiastic accomplice to the persecution of Christians. He is, that is, until he travels the Road to Damascus.

Acts 9:1-19
Prayer

I have to confess that I have always wanted to be like Saul...not in the “stoning and persecuting of Christians” kind of way (although I’ve met a few Christians in my day

that I wanted to throttle), *but* in the “hey, I had this dramatic, lightning bolt from Heaven, ‘Road to Damascus’ experience, kind of way.”

As some of you know, I grew up in a devout Christian family that embraced a different flavor of the church. My family was and is Pentecostal, part of a wider stream of the church that embraces both charismatic and evangelical traditions. One of the distinctions that is sometimes made between these traditions and, in general, the more common experience of mainline Protestant and Catholic traditions, is that the moment of conversion to Christian faith is usually a distinct experience described as the moment a person “got saved.” In contrast, some of our traditions, particularly ones in which infants are baptized, tend to describe one’s entire life as a spiritual journey in which decisions to continue or grow in faith are part of the life-long process.

But, growing up in this “when I got saved” culture, I often heard people share their testimonies whether it was in meetings or rallies or worship services. Of course the testimonies that I remembered as a child the most vividly were the most dramatic testimonies of life-changing conversion experiences. Often times they were told by someone whose life had been adrift in a sea of drugs, sex and rock & roll and suddenly, WHAM, Jesus came down like a bolt of lightning and met them and their life was changed forever. Now, I didn’t then nor do I today, doubt the sincerity of those kinds of conversion experiences, but the fact of the matter was that it was never going to be my experience.

Growing up in my rather plain-vanilla, suburban, working-class home I wasn’t going to have that kind of Road to Damascus experience. But I longed for it. Sometimes I thought maybe if I can just lose myself in drugs, sex and rock & roll then I would have that story to share! It didn’t work out that way for me. Wanting to have that kind of experience, I sought after something during my childhood in which I tried to find the presence of God in a way that would be more dramatic, that would somehow change my life in a different way. The result: as a child, I “got saved” about twenty-five times. Twice at Billy Graham crusades, every summer at church camp, and about once a year in a worship service in my local church.

As I look back on those experiences, I realize that what I was longing for then, and frankly what I long for now, is a deep encounter with the presence of the living God; an encounter which seems hard to find and difficult to compare to these sort of lightning bolt experiences. I wonder if there are some others here this morning, like me, who long to have that kind of encounter—that kind of experience in the presence of the living God that is so profound, so powerful that our lives seemed to be changed forever.

Perhaps, in order to get a wider view of the ways in which God works in our lives, we might change scenes in our story of Saul, knocked off his horse, to the home of Ananias. We are introduced to him as a disciple, so we know that he is already a person of faith. His conversion is not going to be one of an initial experience of faith; in fact, by contrast to Saul who does not recognize the voice calling to him and asks, “who are you?,” Ananias is familiar with the voice that calls to him and says, “Here I am.” He knows Jesus’ voice.

His conversion, his bolt of lightning experience is not going to be an introduction to faith. Instead, for Ananias, his experience is going to be one of radically deepening his faith in order to believe that God is powerful enough not only to change himself but to change his enemy, the one who is persecuting him. Each man, in their own way, is having a conversion experience.

As I spent time this past week examining the scripture, there were so many differences between Saul and Ananias; yet I began to see there were also some similarities. There were two things in particular that were necessary for each man in order for them to have this encounter with God, an encounter that would transform them.

The first was this: both men hear the voice of God in a moment of prayer. We are told that Paul is now in the home of Judas and he is praying. In his prayer he sees a vision, he hears that voice again called to him letting him know that Ananias will come to him and help him work his way through this conversion experience. He is able to hear God’s voice because he is in prayer, devoid of the distractions of sight he has even foregone food and drink so that he can focus on that moment—being in tune

with God's voice. Ananias, too, hears the voice of God in a vision, another way of describing communication through a life of contemplative prayer. In that life, he is more able to hear God's voice calling to him.

Secondly, for each of their conversion experiences to come to fruition, they are going to live it out in the midst of a Christian community. Jesus came to each of them individually, and yet their experiences played out in the larger body of Christ. Paul needs Ananias to come to him to lay hands upon him in order for him to receive his sight; his sight not just of his eyes but his sight of a new life of faith. Immediately he is baptized within the community of faith and that little bit of a verse that ends this chapter and begins chapter 10 I added because it says that Paul remains with the disciples for many days being nurtured in his faith. That was an important part of his conversion. Ananias, too, strangely needs Paul. He needs to go and lay hands on him to see for himself the dramatic impact that the change in Paul's life can take, and to live out that experience of faithful living in a Christian community, both of them living out their faith in prayer and in community.

This past Sunday in our nine-o'clock service we confirmed our freshmen as new members of the church, and in doing so we surrounded them by prayer and we brought people forward to lay hands on them and, in community, marked that milestone in their Christian faith. At the eleven-o'clock service we ordained and installed new Deacons and Elders to be leadership for this congregation and again we did so by surrounding them with prayer and by physically surrounding them with the presence of brothers and sisters in Christ who will continue to nurture and inspire and encourage them in their life of faith.

For all of us, regardless of where we find ourselves in any particular moment in our life of faith, we are reminded that every week as we gather here for worship we are living out a kind of exercise, or a kind of practice which provides for us the framework or foundation on which we will more ably hear God's voice calling to us and more faithfully be able to live out that calling in Christian community. These exercises that we do together every week as we gather for worship—praying together, singing together, hearing God's word, expressing our faith together—these are the

kinds of exercises that build up for us over time the kind of foundation in which God can more ably communicate with us.

It reminds me of the parallel understanding we have when we think about physical exercise for our physical bodies. As some of you know, in a couple of weeks I am going to be getting married here in this sanctuary and a couple of months ago I began to realize that given our long, harsh, winter I had put on a few pounds of winter fat. I thought to myself, "I ought to get rid of these pounds of winter fat before I get married since there will be friends and family gathering and it would be nice to look a little more fit and trim." I have to tell you that as I began the process of getting myself psyched to begin, I thought it would be wonderful if I could go into the gym and have just one amazing, hard core, marathon, "Rocky Balboa musical-montage" kind of workout from which I could emerge having been transformed from a sedate sloth into a "Greek god". Oh wouldn't that be nice! But the fact of the matter is that it doesn't work that way. We can't have a singular monumental transformational moment of change for our physical bodies. It just doesn't happen. We have to go regularly, and as we do, inevitably there will be some workouts that are kind of "ho-hum" that don't seem very inspiring and there will of course be other times when we might emerge as I've done from the gym feeling a little more fit and trim and energetic and young. It's like that too for us in worship as we gather together. Because frankly, there might be Sundays when you feel like you're going through the motions, when you might leave here feeling a little "ho-hum". But then again, there are Sundays when you leave here having been inspired and challenged, when you find yourself for days or even weeks chewing on a bit of the message or humming the refrain from a song. But it is only because we engage in the regular exercise and discipline of prayer and devotion and worship in a community of faith together that allows those moments to happen to begin with.

In the year that I spent working as a mission volunteer in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the hostilities between Catholic and Protestant paramilitaries were still very active. After having been in Belfast for a couple of months, I was walking home from the market one day with a sack of groceries tucked under my arm, and suddenly an explosion rocked our neighborhood and leveled an entire city block into a pile of rubble and bricks. We discovered later that two members of the Irish Republican

Army had delivered a package into one of the markets along my street and that package exploded and everyone inside perished.

In the days and weeks that followed, we spent time with the teenagers in that community that we were called to serve through the church. As we helped them begin to process their grief and their shock and then their anger we heard from them the same question over and over again. They were asking themselves, “How is it possible that somebody could wake up one morning and somehow their brain has snapped or something has happened and they’ve lost their conscience entirely? How is it possible that someone could walk into a shop and commit such a heinous act? What happens to somebody that allows them to do such a thing?” As we began to process that question, we began to realize together that there wasn’t a singular cataclysmic moment that led someone to commit such an act. Instead, it was a lifetime—a lifetime filled with small, seemingly inconsequential steps along the road; decisions that were made; relationships that were formed; education that was gained; experiences that were sought out. It was all these little experiences which led somebody down a road. In the very end, the decision to deliver a package was just one more small step along that road. Not a dramatic step, but in some ways an inevitable step, given the direction they had been going for a long time.

Then we began to flip that around and to think about it in terms of our life of Christian faith. Because if that’s true, wouldn’t it also be true that the things that happen in our everyday lives, all of those things that seem inconsequential to us in our life of faith, the relationships we form, the decisions we make, the experiences that we seek out – aren’t all of those things too leading us down a path? A path which that may lead to decisions to live out what might appear to be radical faithfulness to Jesus Christ, but in fact is just an inevitable next step along the road, because it’s been the road that we’ve been traveling for some time. Might it also be true that when we practice our faith regularly, through prayer and devotion and worship and fellowship and service, if we make those things a regular part of our life are we not then, much more likely to be able to hear the voice of God calling us and to be surrounded by a community of faith that helps us to live out God’s call?

Because it seems to me that even the most profound experiences of God, even the most powerful moments of faithful living probably come simply as next steps along the road of faith; the road in which we are embraced by a loving God and surrounded by brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ. These may not seem like “road to Damascus” kinds of experiences, but they will be moments in the story of our Christian faith that will forever change us and allow God through us to change the world...and that’s a story we can’t live without. Amen.