



The Feast of the Conversion of Paul: January 27, 2019 St. Paul's, Vancouver

Acts 26:9-21

Paul said to King Agrippa, "Indeed, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is what I did in Jerusalem; with authority received from the chief priests, I not only locked up many of the saints in prison, but I also cast my vote against them when they were being condemned to death. By punishing them often in all the synagogues I tried to force them to blaspheme; and since I was so furiously enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities.

"With this in mind, I was traveling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, when at midday along the road, your Excellency, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.' I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord answered, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles-- to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

"After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me."

In the early 1600's the Renaissance artist Caravaggio was given two commissions to paint the story of the Conversion of St. Paul, the story of Paul's turning from Christian persecutor to

the one who testified to the Gentiles that through Christ they too belonged to God. The two paintings, created only a year apart, give us two different depictions of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus.

Caravaggio's first painting is turbulent. In it, Paul has just fallen from his horse and is sprawled on the ground holding his hands over his face to block out an intense white light coming from about him. In the upper right hand corner we see where the light is coming from. There in the arms of an angel, Jesus leans down towards Paul, Jesus' arms stretched out in a pleading and an exhorting gesture. Further intensifying the scene, a soldier standing behind Paul is trying to regain control of Paul's riderless horse as it strains to gallop away.

The second picture, painted by Caravaggio only a year later is very different. The only human figures in the painting are Paul on the ground near his horse, and an attendant calmly holding the horse's bridle. There is no soldier, no angel, no Jesus in the sky. There is no unruly horse, no turbulence at all. The focus instead is on Paul, himself. This Paul is not trying to shield himself from an intense and blinding light. Rather he lies in a warm, diffuse light with his eyes closed, his arms outstretched in what looks like ecstasy, his arms outstretched ready to embrace the something or someone who has captivated him

I have never had a conversion experience as dramatic or as weighty as the one described in the Book of Acts as having happened to Paul. I have never been blinded by light, or heard voices as I tried to determine which road to go down or which road not to take. My life has instead been shaped by little nudges in one direction or another, faint glimmers and brief radiances rather than clear shots of light that sent me into a new direction.

Despite this, I can readily identify with Caravaggio's first depiction of the Conversion of Paul as I think about any time one of my little nudges or faint glimmers or brief radiances gathers momentum and wants to lead me into a new direction, one that will mean I will have to take a detour from the road I had expected and intended to travel. And in that moment, it comes: holy turbulence, as the equine engine within me comes to a halt and as I fall to the ground. It's there on the ground that I feel the presence of the holy one who comes to me as blinding light that I want to shield myself from in that I dread having to go in the new direction that has appeared before me, however life-giving it may be.

Maybe you know how this feels—what it's like to discover that your nothing-big-ever-happens-to-me life, your I-don't-have-conversion-experiences life has somehow, perhaps bit by bit, thrown you down upon a new ground where you know your life will be changing.

Think, for instance, how in your life you've come to realize that you couldn't continue along the road of the job you had, along the road of a relationship you were in, along the road of negative habits that had become engrained in your way of living, along the road of a direction, however inadequate, you had banked on traveling. And think about the turbulence this caused you as you realized that your soul's health meant that you would have to change direction, leaving some cherished things behind to set out on a path you did not fully understand.

But, of course, this isn't the only way to think of these moments of redirection—that, is as turbulent, upsetting events. We have the other depiction of the conversion of St. Paul that

expresses another perspective. Caravaggio's second painting—the one with Saul on his back bathed in a warm light with his arms stretched out toward the something or someone who has captivated him, and I would add, who has made him whole.

This is the other piece of the experience—the piece that has the power to turn our turbulence into something else: the internal recognition that to be knocked off a route that does not lead to the fullness of life that God intends for us means being given back to ourselves and being enfolded into the arms of God.

Paul touches on this as he, himself, describes his conversion in his letter to the Galatians. Paul says that the God who met him on the road to Damascus, the one whose blinding light knocked him to the ground, was the same God who set him apart before he was born and who called him by grace in the event we call his conversion. In other words, the Damascus Road experience did not transform Paul from a persecutor to a believer, from a devil to an angel. No, what really happened was that the experience stirred in him an identity and a vocation that had been given to him from the beginning, from the womb. In his conversion Paul was being given back to himself as he was being enfolded into the arms of God.

And to you here today, where are you experiencing the turbulence that comes when a new direction appears before you, one that you intuitively know God may be calling you to travel? Where are you experiencing the turbulence that comes from letting go of what has been familiar and going in a direction that is unknown and unpredictable?

What helps you go from trying to shield yourself from this new path to holding out your arms to it? To seeing this new path as returning to yourself, as God's enfolding you into God's arms?

While the story of the conversion of St. Paul in all its drama may not match what you and I experience day to day, month to month and year to year, what the story does tell us is that God is living and active in each of our lives, forever disrupting the false and destructive paths, the lesser road, we may choose for ourselves and guiding us along the paths that express our true identity and destiny in God.

For our part, what we need to do is to acknowledge our natural, human tendency to resist change, to let our barriers down and, over time, to give ourselves over to a God who wants life for us, nothing less than life for us.

One of the members of the Society of St. John the Evangelist put it this way:

“To discover God is not to discover an idea, but to discover oneself
It is to awaken to that part of one's existence which has been hidden from sight.
And which one has refused to recognize.
The discovery may be very painful:
It is like going through a kind of death.
But, it is the one thing that makes life worth living.”

Works Cited or Consulted (see the paintings on the next page)

