

Meanwhile, Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and 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.

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him,

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.

Saul 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. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” The 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, and 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.”

But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.”

But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

So 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.”

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

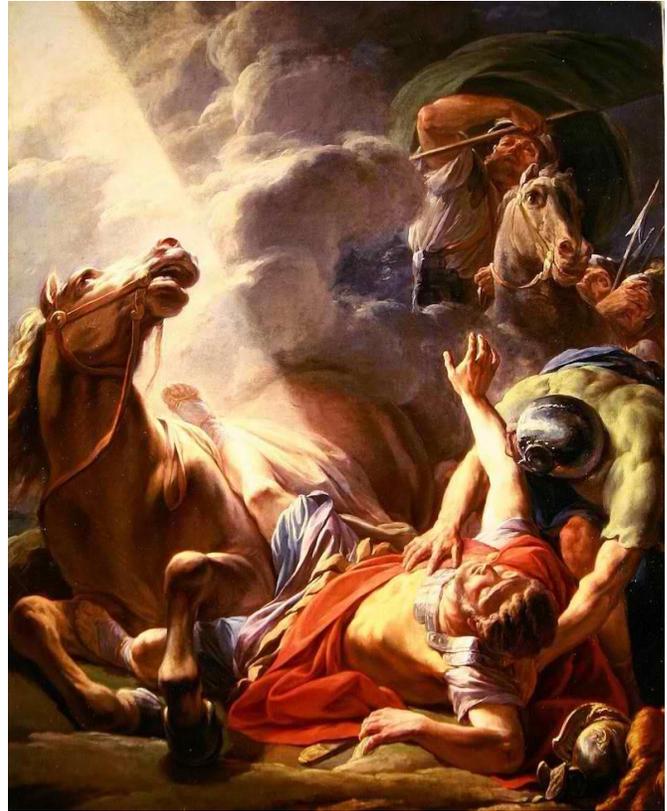
All who heard him were amazed and said,

“Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?”

Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

How did you come to faith? Think about this for a second.... How did you become a Christian; how did you come to believe in Jesus as Lord, accept him as God with us, Messiah and Savior? (In whatever way you did....)

This is the question for us today as we are given a dramatic example of one way it happened for one person among many in history. Contrary to many opinions about this story, it is not a litmus test, it does not set a standard for us to similarly achieve, it is not a template for our lives - except for what happens afterwards.



The dramatic story of Saul's Damascus Road experience may well be the most important story of the book of Acts. Without it; without Saul becoming Paul, the Gospel may not have spread to the gentiles, that is, non-Jews, meaning most all of us. Because of the importance of this singular event, much has been made of Saul's dramatic conversion, and some have indeed elevated this event to a standard against which everyone's faith journey might be compared. Yet while the story of Saul's conversion is exceptionally significant, using this story as a one-size-fits all standard is an injustice to the purpose of Luke's writing.

There is no evidence that Luke sought to make Saul's experience normative. There is no reason for anyone to come away from this story with a 'faith inferiority complex.'

In fact, the story Saul's conversion is just one of a string of stories in succession in the book of Acts of how different people came to faith in Christ in varied ways.

From Simon the sorcerer to the Ethiopian Eunuch, to Saul/Paul, to Cornelius the Roman Centurion (for next week), Luke's guiding theme traces how the gospel spread to an ever-widening and more diverse audience than was previously imaginable; to rich and poor, learned and unlettered, Jew, Greek, men and women; all who hear and believe are saved.

Saul's dramatic conversion experience was miraculous and exceptional, but it was not normal or expected to set a pattern for others. (And for you to know, I am not the only person who reads the story of Acts this way.)

In fact, some have argued that Saul/Paul's story wasn't a story of a conversion at all, but rather of a dramatic call, with the emphasis on a new assignment at hand instead of a dramatic change in the message itself. The story of Saul on the Damascus Road is as much about how it is that we are individually continually called by God as it is a historic tale for the ages.

So the title of this sermon... 'the three C's' of discipleship, is about the different ways we hear God's word to us; through conversion, call or commitment- in the present tense. It is never a once and done thing. Conversion is how we usually describe the event Saul experienced (with more to say about it soon.) Call is a clear and undeniable sense of purpose, direction and support in hearing God's message and following through in one's life journey. And commitment is a conscious assent to the purposes and mission of God in a given place, time and situation; giving of oneself to the necessary task at hand- while not necessarily ceding all of one's heart and mind to the mysteries behind it.

Looking a little closer at Saul's dramatic Damascus Road experience, we find out that some things didn't happen exactly in the way we think they did.

Our bulletin cover art shows what I mean. The story in Acts (as it appears in three different versions) does not include a horse, though the painter Caravaggio thought it would be a nice addition. Similarly, Saul is not given a new name by God here and now (it takes a few more chapters to happen.) And it was not by Saul's own doing at all that he came to faith.

He was blinded by the light and nurtured into faithfulness by another, Ananias, who was following his own call. Saul's conversion was in no way a singular personal achievement and it's not something he ever boasted about, (though he did boast of many things- especially his sufferings for the sake of the Gospel.) This



vision just happened to him, out of the blue, unpredictably. And the meaning he found in it came to him from someone else, Ananias.

Still it's important for us to circle back and retrace the scenes in this passage for us to hear the message. There are five scenes to describe. First, Saul is on a seek and destroy operation against the church.

He takes the initiative to go on a mission to a far-off city to round up those who have heard of Jesus and believe in him. Why, we don't know- but that he is an enemy of the church is certain.

Scene two is a swift interruption of his plans. A light from heaven flashes and a voice is heard, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Something unusual happens here, reminiscent of other overtures to individuals in the Bible. Just as Abraham, Jacob and Moses were called by God with their name called twice, so is Saul. This time, though, it is the Lord Jesus who delivers the message. How much Saul understands of this at the time is unknown. The message simply carries instructions of what to do next. Saul is still left in the dark as to what the blinding light and voice really mean.

Scene three centers on Ananias (obviously a different one from the Ananias- Sapphira infamy). He receives a vision to go to Straight Street, find a man named Saul and lay hands on him. Surprised at this because he has heard of Saul's evil, he protests. The Lord answers that this Saul is the Lord's "chosen instrument" and servant to bring the Word to the Gentiles.

Scene four is Ananias doing what he is told. He finds Saul, lays his hands on his eyes, scales fall, and in Jesus' name the persecutor regains his sight. The enemy becomes a brother, is baptized and soon begins to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God in the synagogues, committing the very 'crime' he had set out to eradicate.

Scene five shows the astonishment of the crowds who saw this once mortal enemy now turned ally. They ask: 'what happened to this man, and why?' Meanwhile Saul renews his zealous ways. Instead of persecuting Christians, now he's confounding the Jews who don't believe.

If this is a model for a conversion story, an account of a case of 'once I was lost but now I'm found', then it comes with some caveats. A close reading of this story shows greater continuity

between the 'before' and 'after' of Saul than you might expect. His zeal is not lessened, it is redirected. There is also not a change of 'religion' that we often associate with the word *conversion*. Serving the same God, the phrase 'conversion' is historically anachronistic. In his day and time, the question was not 'what religion are you?', but rather 'what God do you serve?' Since Saul was being asked, through Jesus, to serve the same God he had always served, with the same Law and prophets, he has a new message but with an old mission.

But perhaps I'm splitting hairs with all of this. On this side of history we can draw the conclusions we like. As we see in the story itself, Saul's transformation was a big shock to the community that he had set out to persecute. Calling what happened to him a conversion, from their perspective, simply seems appropriate.

That Saul/Paul became a disciple of Jesus is not up for debate; as to how it happened, exactly, is of secondary importance.

A similar process happens when we talk about the nature of a 'call' too. The final emphasis is all about the assignment and not so much how one got there in the first place. As Presbyterians and Reformed Christians, we have a nuanced sense of what a 'call' is. Reinforcing the importance of our rational minds over our impassioned emotions, we aren't so comfortable with asking people exactly "when and where it was that they were saved." Rather, the sense of call has more to do with a tugging at the heart, a confluence of convictions, events and people who combine to build a bridge to belonging to a community of faith, called together by God. My own story is like this.

I tested the waters before diving in. I felt a tug from God and the church while growing up; then again in college, went to seminary to see how it might fit (and if I could pass Greek and Hebrew), then taught for some years before finally finishing the Presbyterian process and actively sought a call. Then, it was the 'three-way' call that needed to take place to 'seal the deal', to confirm that with God's blessing the congregation and candidate were a proper match for ministry.

This process may be a far cry from what the Apostle Paul had to do to prove himself as legitimate in the eyes of the other disciples, but it is our process, and we're sticking to it.

A 'sense' of call is what makes the church work; it's also what makes the church make sense (if you'll pardon the play on words.) As a gathering of those who trust and believe in the Lord's saving grace, we endeavor to work together, step by step, acknowledging God's call to each other, respecting and honoring one another in the journey. This sense of a common calling not only allows us to work together collegially but also affirms the gifts we bring to the table, whatever they may be.

Significant figures in our Reformed faith tradition did not have 'conversion' experiences but felt a call. Martin Luther felt moved to a new understanding of discipleship through his study of Paul's letter to Christians in Rome.

John Calvin never fully described his 'sudden' experience of faith, but steadily traced the movement of his faith and understanding in his detailed and exquisite Institutes of the Christian Religion. John Knox followed in the footsteps of his mentor, George Wishart, who had been burned at the stake, and following in his footsteps (and expecting the same fate), he led the church to increased and lasting change in 16th century Scotland and beyond.

With all of this, I need to say once more that the emphasis of all of this is always on the assignment, not how the inspiration is delivered. Thus said, the word commitment takes on new importance. Commitment doesn't necessarily infer or require complete belief or intellectual assent.

Joining in the mission, being on the team, is what counts. Faith is what happens along the way, or honestly (and here's the tricky part), if it doesn't happen and you're still in the game- it counts just the same. I've known lots of people, church folks too- who have their doubts about Jesus' full divinity, the virgin birth, or the bodily resurrection, but that doesn't stop them from being called to serve and engaging fully. Jesus didn't give us a test to pass to be his followers, except to serve in his name, and there is great comfort in that. Even more than understanding or intellectual assent, Jesus asks us to follow with our feet and help with our hands.

Commitment is more about involvement than indoctrination.

As the poet Rilke once said, it's not about having all the answers, but rather 'living the questions' that counts...

'How did you come to faith' might be the question for us to begin with, but 'what are you doing with the faith given you' is the question we live our lives to answer.

Whichever way of the three C's of discipleship you have received, conversion, call or commitment, be sure that the God of love will surely 'see' you through. Amen.