

WALKING THE DAMASCUS ROAD

Easter 3 – Cycle C: Acts 9:1-20

The civil war in Syria has made Damascus a household name these days, even for people who have never heard of the conversion of Saint Paul. Right now, Damascus is not a safe place; but for Saul of Tarsus some 2,000 years ago, it was a place of refuge – a place of convalescence where he could recover from the crisis he had on the road from Jerusalem; and a place away – a time out, if you will – from his campaign against Christians, people of the Way, as they were called. And really for Paul, Damascus was a place of transformation. Saul the zealot, in the quiet company of the Christian community in Damascus, a community which included two people remembered by name – Judas and Ananias and several others, Luke tells us – here, with these faithful ones, in a house on Straight Street, he became the Apostle Paul, disciple and servant of the Lord Jesus.

I love this story because I have known people like Saul, people whose lives have taken a 180° turn. One acquaintance in particular inspired fear in people because he was so fiercely critical of others, using sarcasm and wit to cut down anyone he considered weak or unworthy of his and others' respect. I don't know exactly what happened to his head and heart, but I do know that he and his wife went on a sabbatical for a year or two, left their home community of London, Ontario, and lived in a completely French-speaking community in Quebec. While they were away, their first child was born. When they returned, my friend was no longer bitter and cynical; he was no longer strident and offensive. On the contrary, he had become a gentle, warm, and loving man who smiled and laughed with almost every sentence he uttered. He praised others and would encourage their efforts. It was a miraculous transformation; everyone who knew him remarked on the change. Over time, he became a beloved teacher at Huron College in London, and a dedicated volunteer in writing and revising music for worship for the Canadian church. After he died a few years ago, his many friends commissioned a stained glass window in his memory for his home church in Toronto. Somehow, somewhere, sometime, he walked a Damascus Road and was changed.

And truthfully, he is just one among many, many people I have known who have seemed to come to a full stop in life and started over, never to return to their old patterns and customs. As my friend Donna Seamone used to say, tongue-in-cheek, "It's enough to make a believer out of you!"

The change certainly made a believer out of Paul – quite literally! – and believers out of the many who knew him before and after the incident reported in today's First Reading. His was a dramatic change of heart, and people had no trouble seeing the presence and power of the Spirit of the Risen Christ in his story. And Luke, the master storyteller, relates the events of Paul's conversion in such a way that we can make connections with our own experiences of transformation. There is a mystical component to the account: Luke writes that "the men who were travelling with [Saul] stood speechless because they [too] heard Jesus' voice, but saw no one." There is Paul's immediate blindness, and then his complete recovery from blindness in three days. In mentioning the period of three days, Luke suggests that Saul's experience is a kind of Easter, a death-and-resurrection experience. There is Saul's response of prayer and fasting: on the surface, Luke's report that he neither ate nor drank anything for three days communicates the extent of the trauma he experienced; but prayer and fasting is also a ritual of the faithful, still common today, although, as with so many rituals, our present-day variations on prayer and fasting are much less extreme than in former times. There are visions: Saul is not the only person in the account to have a vision. Ananias is also visited by Jesus in a dream that is so powerful that Ananias goes against all his instincts of fear and anger and visits Saul, counselling him in the faith. And then there is the response of the Christian community itself, providing hospitality to their enemy and continuing to counsel him in the faith. The miracle of regaining his sight, and the signs of baptism and the laying on of hands: Luke's mention of all of these things telegraph that this is a significant faith experience, and that it is has a universality about it that is very much within the canon of signs and wonders Jesus' post-resurrection followers had come to expect. In a sense, this is a little Pentecost; and Luke is saying to his or her readers that what happened to the disciples in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit came among them and transformed them from fearful-and-imprisoned to courageous-and-sent out continues – even among the most unlikely candidates for such an experience, an arch-enemy of the early church in Saul's case.

And then, of course, we know the after-story of Paul's conversion. He went on as a missionary to establish and nurture Christian communities in Asia Minor, Europe, Greece and Malta, and in the City of Jerusalem; and his influence was certainly felt in Rome.

Why do we tell this story, especially during the Season of Easter? The answer, I believe, is that it provides a post-script, a very important post-script to the accounts we read from the gospels throughout the seven Sundays of Easter. Jesus comes to the disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem; he visits them by the Sea of Tiberius and makes breakfast for them; he walks with Cleopas and his partner on the road to Emmaus. The stories, as beloved as they are, are very much then-and-there. The story of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus is more easily a here-and-now story, because it bears witness to the power and presence of Christ in the world and more importantly in the church, post-Resurrection and post-Ascension. It bears witness to the power and presence of the Spirit of the Risen Christ within us and among us – confronting us, as Paul was confronted; healing us, as Paul was healed; nurturing us, as Paul was nurtured; and commissioning us as Paul was commissioned to both *bring* the good news and *be* the good news of the gospel into the world.

We may not think of ourselves as a kind of Saul figure – someone working intentionally against the mission of the church. But the truth is that there is a little Saul in each one of us. As much as we would like to think of ourselves as a church in mission or a church in mission for others, our witness is reserved to say the least. Since 1989, our congregation has had a mandate to do something to provide low-cost, affordable housing for people in our community who don't have a place to call home. We have had several attempts at building buildings and providing solutions, but no successes. In a sense, we are on the road again, the Damascus Road. And we can expect that Jesus will come to us again and again until our reserve transforms into action.

Oz Cole-Arnal's crusade against poverty and injustice in our society is Kitchener-Waterloo's worst-kept secret: I used to tease him about how many times a year he was quoted in The Waterloo Region Record or had his picture on the front page. But Oz is not a social activist just because his father was steel worker in Pittsburg when all the mills were shut down: Oz has walked the Damascus Road and been confronted by the gospel of Jesus Christ: he has learned that justice and liberation are the marks of the gospel; and his proclamation is for *us* as much as it is for those in government and big business who seek to preserve the status quo. Oz is inviting *us* onto the Damascus Road in the hope that the gospel might convert us from accepting the unacceptable to becoming people for others.

In the midst of the horrible winds and cold of Thursday night, Janet Waito sent me an email saying that she could not help thinking of all those people who were outside that night because Out of the Cold closed at the end of March. As it happens, Out of the Cold was open, and remains open until the end of April – thank be to God! But there are certainly nights like last Thursday when Out of the Cold is not in operation, and Janet's concern is well taken. The churches are on the front line with Out of the Cold: walking the Damascus Road means that we must look at the inadequacies in our schedule and consider a fix. The kingdom of God doesn't have people coming within an inch of their life in the cold and freezing wind of Thursday night while their sisters and brothers in Christ are sheltered, warm, safe, and comfortable. Is supplementary shelter something the congregation of Christ Lutheran Church could provide?

The good news of the our gospels during the Season of Easter is that Christ comes to us to proclaim the risen life. The good news of the Road to Damascus is that Christ still comes to us, but this time to change us; to transform us from disciples (learners) to apostles (those who are sent out) both to proclaim and to be the good news of his gospel. Perhaps we have become blind. Perhaps we have become too content with the way things are. Perhaps Christ longs to place his hands on our heads, heal us of our blindness, and baptize us with the fire and energy and conviction of the Apostle Paul.