

Leaving Where We've Been  
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La Verne Church of the Brethren  
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#### MESSAGE:

This particular text that Alexander read for us is often referred to as the conversion of Saul. The moment when Saul, a devout religious man intent on persecuting the blasphemous crowd following Jesus, was brought to his knees by a blinding "flash from heaven" that was Jesus himself. It is an extraordinary and dramatic story. One that Christians over the centuries have judged their own conversion stories against. But I want to invite you to wander down a different road today.

When I first began my Training in Ministry program with the Church of the Brethren denomination, I remember this text was used to help us get-to-know each other. I don't recall the particulars of the practice. But I do remember that people began to share their conversion stories. I didn't have a dramatic conversion story to share. And I began to worry and wonder if my experience would be deemed unworthy in this setting.

One after another, people shared the dramatic details of a life-threatening or life-altering experience that compelled them to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior; a near fatal car accident, an altar call from a beloved youth minister, the moment they came up from their baptismal waters and felt irrevocably changed.

And then one person shared a story about being brought to church as a child. They spoke about getting involved in the programs of their church, making lifelong friends and how certain scriptures and sacred stories held by the community shaped their faith and their life. When I listened to this person's conversion story, I heard my own and I knew I too could claim conversion.

For some people, conversion is a single, dramatic event; an event so vivid in their memory that they can still recall all the details of where they were, what they were wearing, what the weather was like and how they felt.

And for others it's a lot of moments.

When the opportunity to share came around to me, I offered what was true then and is still true today. My conversion story is ongoing, and it does not happen in isolation. I was brought into this congregation as an infant, nurtured as a child, patiently tolerated as a rowdy teenager, and called to consider a vocation in ministry as an adult. Over the past 50 plus years I have been taught what it means to be faithful by people who told me about God's love and showed me the face of Jesus through compassionate service, wide welcome, courageous advocacy and an unwavering commitment to peace and justice. So, in actuality, mine is an extraordinary conversion story of God breaking through

to me in the countless ordinary acts of others. You are those people. God used your generosity, love, courage and faith to nurture mine.

Saul's experience was much more dramatic than mine. More dramatic than just about anyone else I've ever met actually! Remember - when we meet Saul on the road to Damascus he is filled with righteous hatred, "still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples". Scripture says, "He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus" giving him the power to arrest these people and take them back to Jerusalem as prisoners. So, with marching orders in hand, Saul hits the road believing he is on the side of God. He believes his way is the right way and he is desperate to bring people into right thinking, or have them persecuted otherwise.

On this road to retribution, already blinded with rage, Saul is suddenly knocked to the ground by "a flash of light from heaven" so bright it leaves him unable to see. Saul is rendered utterly vulnerable. His fellow travelers - who are "speechless" by the encounter but remain standing - help him up and guide him around for three days! In this moment, on the road to Damacus, Jesus absolutely has Saul's attention. And he doesn't say to Saul, "Now you must accept me as your personal Lord and Savior". It might have been easier for Saul if he had. Instead, Jesus asks something of Saul that is much more complicated, challenging and risky. Jesus calls Saul to change. He calls Saul to diverge from his own ways and travel down a completely different road in order to discover and share something new and different.

Talk about a DRAMATIC story. It is! But, I think what we often miss in Saul's story is that it doesn't happen in isolation either. There is another character in this story, Ananais, who we haven't heard from before. Ananais seems to be following Jesus but from a safe distance but he gets a visit from Jesus too. And like what Jesus asks of Saul, it is no less complicated, challenging or risky. Jesus calls Ananias and says, here's what I want you to do, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul". In this moment, Jesus absolutely has Ananais' attention. And Ananias argues with him about the danger of this ask, "Are you crazy! Have you heard what this guy is doing, why he is coming to Damascus? And you want me to help him???" But you know in the long run, Ananias is faithful and he does what Jesus asks him to do.

When Ananais finally finds Saul, any trepidation he feels about seeking out this dangerous man is replaced with grace. Ananias greets Saul warmly, calls him Brother and welcomes him into the family, even though Saul had never acted in a brotherly way to him or his community. Ananias genuinely draws him close and lays healing hands on Saul, restoring his sight. This is an extraordinary story of God breaking through in the ordinary act of another. In this transaction, Saul came to see that the person he had murderous contempt for was the very person who brought him healing. And Ananias came to believe that Saul, the very person who was seeking his persecution, could be changed and utilized by Jesus to transform the world. In this experience between the two of them, prejudices were broken down, courageous actions were taken and both Saul and Ananias were changed.

Given what happened in the Capitol building on January 6, and what we worried about all week that might happen on January 20, there is an important message from Jesus coming to us through this scripture. And let me warn you - it's a big ask:

"Friends," Jesus calls to us, "Here's what I need you to do. I need you to go to these insurrectionists, the ones who are screaming murderous threats and believe that they are defending Jesus. Go and tell them that Jesus sent you with a message for them. Draw them in close, make of them a family, offer healing that they might see. Tell them that they are needed to be part of the work to finally bring about racial justice, equality and peace to this weary, worn out world. Tell them that together you will follow Jesus down the road of transformation."

I know, I know. It's a big ask. But, no one said following Jesus would be easy! Least of all Jesus. As followers of Christ we are going to be asked to do hard things over and over again. In his message to us last Sunday, Dr Eric Bishop shared a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr: "All that is needed for darkness to thrive is for good people to do nothing". For those of us who think of ourselves as the good ones, Ananias' part of the story is the part we CAN'T miss.

Now, if you're like me your knee jerk response to Jesus' big ask might be, "Are you crazy! Do you hear what they are yelling? Don't you see how dangerous they are? And you want me to go to them???" No. Thanks. I'd much rather hole up in my own house, safe and comforted by my righteous indignation. Ask me for ANYTHING else. This one is just impossible."

But, you know - This is the Gospel. Jesus said, love your enemies, not, this is going to be easy. Jesus is always calling us to something bigger. And like Ananias, the only faithful answer is, "Okay Jesus. Where do you need me?" It will not be easy. This is a well-worn road we have been traveling. The path is uneven and heavily grooved from, as President Joe Biden said in his inauguration speech, "400 years of constant struggle between the American ideal that we're all created equal and the harsh, ugly reality that racism, nativism, fear, and demonization have long torn us apart."

Good people! This is one of our conversion moments. We are called by our faith to go and do this hard thing. We are being asked to leave our predispositions, biases and self-interests by the side of the road and say yes to playing our part in the healing of our Nation. We are being called to see Jesus in everyone we meet.

The good news is that we do not do this work in isolation. We need each other. The story of Saul's conversion teaches us that God can and does break through to you, to me, and even to the insurrectionists of our world. God will use all of us to bring about transformation. This is the story of conversion that our Nation needs right now. It's a story that requires good people to do something. And you are the good people that are being called to do it.

Amen.