

Church of All Nations

Acts 9:1-12

May 4, 2025

Our story today is the conversion of the Jewish leader Saul to who we now call The Apostle Paul. Many scholars have called this moment the second most historically significant event in the New Testament, second only to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I guess if you are looking for a third surely Pentecost must rank up there.

Clear away some misconceptions about this passage.

Three to be precise.

1/ There was no name change as there was with, for example, Abram or Simon. Paul is just the Greek version of Saul. And since most of his ministry was not in Israel, Paul is the name we know him by 2/. No knocking off horse - that comes from paintings. That the kind of thing that happens as Christmas; things we would have sworn are part of the story actually are not. He was just kicked to the ground.

3/ Conversion is not a very helpful word in this context - Is this conversion of Paul – did not turn away from Judaism, still believes in the same God, was not an atheist now a believer.

This account of Saul's, what shall we say? Call perhaps; is one of four versions we have in the scriptures. We have one written by Paul himself, and three by Luke in the book of Acts. They all differ in a number of details, but you would expect that because, when you experience something as earth-shatteringly unexpected as personally meeting someone who was supposed to be dead, you don't tend to remember the details, just the results.

We first meet Saul in scripture in Acts 7, when Stephen is about to be stoned to death -

“Meanwhile the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul...and Saul was there giving approval to his [Stephen's] death.”

Today we read of the “call” or commissioning of the figure who dominates the early years of the emerging Christian church.

Saul/Paul the firebreathing, rampampaging persecutor of the fledgling Jesus movement

Disturbing to think that today he might have been called a hate preacher, inciting violence against those he saw as undermining his own faith. He was one of those zealous young men who are so dedicated to their own cause that they can see no value in anything else and must destroy anything which does not totally agree with their world view.

But there was a huge change about to happen in Saul and in just a couple of chapters the Lord was about to – knock him to the ground and send him spinning on his backside and cause him to be “blinded by the light” as part of his call story. Brought to his knees, physically, spiritually, in every way he is led like a little child into the city he came to ravage. Paul has got a cracker of a story and that may be why it is told 4 times in our New Testament, three times in the book we call the Acts of the Apostles.

The first thing that happened was that Saul was deeply disempowered. Encountering Christ made him weak, blind and helpless. The first step in Saul's Christian journey was that he became hugely vulnerable.

This is a lesson we must not miss. Vulnerability and humility are often the very first steps in a genuine journey towards the true God. To put it another way, or say the very least, the good news of Christ doesn't always cheer people up, and never puffs them up! Saul was more or less paralyzed for three days. This vulnerability and dependence is not incidental. For one thing it makes you encounter yourself in a new way. And, just as importantly, relationships with other people are reframed when we ourselves become vulnerable.

The readings today, with stories of the appearance of the resurrected Jesus, put real meat on the bones of our resurrection faith.

Notice that the believers did not call themselves by a word describing what they held in the way of opinions, nor did they name themselves after a leader, They called themselves not even "christians"-- that was a name given to us later in Antioch, in Turkey.

They were now at first called "The Way." This was in those days when these early followers of the resurrected Jesus did not have the benefits of buildings or creeds, or institutional structure or clerics, or clerical garments and vestments, or tax deductibility or a Christian radio or television station ... well anything really. All they had, poor deprived wretches, was "The Way".