

“PAUL’S STORY AND OURS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Texts for the Sermon: Acts 22:1-21

Introduction.

We have before us one of the most famous conversion stories in the history of Christianity. It is so important it is told three times in the book of Acts.

One scholar said after the death and resurrection of Jesus there is no greater event in human history than the conversion to Christianity of Saul of Tarsus. Another called him the second founder of Christianity. Paul turned Christianity from a little Jewish sect into a world religion.

“The story of Paul’s conversion from a devout Jew, violently persecuting believers in Jesus, to a devout Christian, fearlessly spreading the Gospel against all opposition,” is unparalleled in church history (MD Harris).

In fact, our conversion is tied to Paul’s conversion.

1 Timothy 1:15b–16 I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

If you are a Christian you have a story, a testimony of God’s patience, mercy, grace and salvation. And our story is not so different from Paul’s. There is a before, a during, and an after. After a brief introduction, Paul will outline those three aspects of his conversion for us.

Acts 22:1-2, Hear my defense.

Remember Paul was falsely accused of bringing a Gentile into the Temple and of profaning the Temple when in fact he was seeking to show his respect. He was about to be killed when the Romans intervened and he was arrested. He is bound in chains, bloodied and bruised, no doubt in much pain, standing in front of an angry mob out to kill him.

Despite their treatment of him and their previous rejection of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul addresses them with honor and respect, *brothers and fathers*. He is one of them. He has in no way renounced his people, his nation.

What grace that he does not return evil for evil, that he doesn’t rebuke them for their ill-treatment. Paul is in control of his emotions and rises above theirs.

He addresses them in their own tongue which got their attention. They had made assumptions and judgments about Paul, that he was an outsider and hostile to their race, culture and language.

How many assumptions and judgments do we make when we don't know each other?

All of us around Serve saw this dramatically when the group for Anaheim arrived. They were mostly Hispanic, not Dutch, and not small town rural kids. They made all kinds of negative assumptions when they got here and about how they would be treated and received. What a beautiful thing to watch the assumptions peel away, their guard come down, and their preconceived ideas totally changed. By the time they left, they loved us, our church, and our community. We were not anything like their first worst thoughts.

Acts 22:3-5, Who I was.

Paul clearly establishes his credentials and credibility through his birth, upbringing, training.

First, of all he is not that Egyptian the Roman Tribune thought he was. He is a Jew, a Hebrew of Hebrews, of the seed of Abraham. He was part of the diaspora, the scattered Jews in other countries. He was a free man from a free city, no slave. He was raised in Jerusalem, well known to many in the city, and educated under the greatest teacher and scholar, Gamaliel.

His was no average training, he had received the best from the best, the Harvard of his day. In other words, he was very well instructed in the Law. Paul was not some ignorant country bumkin. He has no disrespect for the Law. He is not an enemy to the Jews or the Temple, so he cannot be charged with trying to overthrow Jews culture and traditions.

Furthermore, he was zealous for God. He was a true worshipper of God. He was a strict keeper and follower of the Law and demanded the same of others.

Finally, to drive it home even further, he was hostile to this new Way, the teachings of Christ. In fact, he was more so than everyone else, more than the chief priests and elders.

It is as if Paul is saying to the Jews, I can relate to you, I understand why you are threatening me with violence, I used to do the very same thing.

Notice Paul doesn't go to extremes, embellishing his sin or discounting it. He is balanced. When telling your story don't be ashamed to speak about your sin and what you have been saved from, without boasting. Part of telling your story is making clear you are sinner that really needs a Savior. Your past is part of your story given to you by God for His glory and others' benefit. Consider how God didn't save Paul until after he sinned in the way he did, for our sake.

Acts 22:6-16, How I became what I now am.

Paul here recounts the important details of his conversion.

Paul did not slowly or casually join this new religion, and give his allegiance to Christ. He was filled with rage against it and violently opposed to it, he had no positive inclinations toward it at all. He did everything he could to pull people away from this Way. They were the enemies, the deserters of God and the Law.

This is clearly a supernatural, miraculous event, something only God could do. He was on his way when suddenly something happened, shocking, unexpected, out of nowhere.

Blinding light, like lightning, from heaven, outshining the noonday sun, this is the light of God. It violently knocked him off his horse onto the ground in terror. Paul the great Pharisee is humbled to the ground.

Then another miracle, a voice from heaven that only he understood, his companions don't see and hear what Paul sees and hears. Paul is subdued by Christ and surrenders to Christ.

"What shall I do, Lord?" "What do you want of me? I will do whatever you say." Notice how quickly he goes from being proud to being humble.

Is that not the essence of Christianity? Surrendering our wills to God's will. No longer saying, my will be done, but thy will be done. Up until now Paul had been driving the boat, running the show, dictating what should be done.

Have you heard the voice of the Lord calling you to salvation? Have you stopped going the wrong way and started going the right way? Have you asked the two essential questions of Jesus, who are you and what do you want me to do? Savior and Lord.

Who would you rather be in this moment, blind Paul who saw and heard Jesus, or his friends with sight who led him but know nothing of Jesus?

There are two kinds of people in this story. Paul, who saw and heard and believed and Paul's companions who had some sense of something going on, some sense of spiritual realities, but never come to know them or embrace them. Don't be those guys. Ask Jesus to come to you.

When you tell your story make it clear you once were blind until God opened your eyes. Keep your story God-centered. It isn't about you or how good or smart you are.

He had to be led by the hand to Damascus. God will humble us and show us our need and our dependence before He shows us His mercy. And once we are saved life still has challenges.

Then something significant happens. Jesus doesn't answer Paul's second question. Jesus tells him to go to Damascus and wait there and a man will come and tell you what to do.

Why is that significant? Why doesn't Jesus tell him what to do? Jesus is highlighting and underlining the value, significance and importance of His church, the body of Christ on earth. Jesus is honoring the ministry of the church. There is a warning to us here, that we are not to

neglect or despise the ministry of the church, nor the ministry of Christ speaking to us through fallen, sinful men. The first thing Paul saw was Jesus the head of the church, the next thing Paul saw was Ananias, the body of Christ, the church.

Christ sends a man, Ananias, to Paul to teach him, instruct him and open his blind eyes. The brilliant Pharisee, Paul, humbles himself to be a learner from one such as Ananias.

Jesus could have done it himself, Jesus could have sent sinless angels, but He humbles us by sending us men as ministers, and calls us to humble ourselves, to submit ourselves to the teaching and correction of others. In your story tell of the importance of the body of Christ.

Notice again how Paul underscores for the sake of these Jews, that this Ananias was devout as to the Law, another good Jew, well spoken of by all the Jews. He didn't plant divisive or heretical seeds. Paul is not some maverick, some renegade, not some heretic.

Another miracle, his sight is suddenly restored when Ananias comes and meets him in Damascus. The miracle of Ananias restoring Paul's sight shows again the hand of God, that he was sent by God to do God's bidding.

This is clearly not Paul's doing, but God's doing. All the initiative is from Jesus. We see the nature of conversion. Paul did not find God, Paul did not decide to accept Jesus into his heart. Paul was pursued by God who had chosen him even from before the beginning of time, to appoint him to do God's will.

Salvation belongs to God. Salvation is by the grace of God. It is God who opens our blind eyes to see the Righteous One, the Christ. When Paul tells his story he makes this clear. All he contributed to his conversion was a rebellious, blasphemous, hard heart of a sinner. He deserved judgment, God gave him mercy. Again, keep your story God-centered.

Then Ananias announces the purpose and plan of God, that Paul would be a witness for God's Son to everyone. Paul experienced the power of Christ, the power of the Gospel, the strong deliverance from sin, death, evil, and now is a witness to all these things.

For this reason he was saved and for this reason you and I were saved to be witnesses.

Acts 22:17-21, How God wants to use him.

Paul now begins the third part or third point of his story. He told of his life before conversion, he told of his conversion, and now he begins to tell of his life after conversion, and the ministry God gave him to do.

This no doubt would have been the longest part of his sermon had he not been cut off by the Jews. He intends to clarify and explain why they should not be so angry with him.

Paul shows this was not his decision to turn from the Jews to minister to the Gentiles. It is the explicit commandment of God. This was certainly contrary to any expectation Paul had. He came to Jerusalem with the intention of sharing the grace of God with his own people.

In a direct oracle of God given to him in the Temple in Jerusalem God sent Paul to the Gentiles. This should have given the Jews some pause in attacking Paul.

Paul pushes back a bit. He offers the suggestion that his ministry might be received by the Jews when they consider how violently he opposed Christianity, to the point of approving the killing of Stephen. Seeing how dramatically he has changed, certainly they would take notice and believe his testimony.

Paul thought his background with give him such street cred (credibility) with the Jews in Jerusalem that he could be a powerful witness.

But Jesus, says no to Paul. Jesus knows all things and all hearts and Paul is wrong. Jesus counters with another purpose, the Gentiles.

God always saves us for a purpose, as part of His plan. His plan doesn't always match up with our plan. That creates a conflict and can lead to some serious self-evaluation.

Remember in your prayers when you ask for something and God doesn't give it, it is because He is all wise and good, and He has something better to give. We need to be honest in our story, God doesn't always do what we want, and God puts expectations on us to follow Him.

Furthermore, there is an encouragement here to all of us, that when we are doing the Lord's work, there is not always success or victory in the ways we think, but it is not cause to give up or quit, but to seek and follow God's will in some other place.

It is a sad testimony against the Jews that the clear voice of God Himself, and the clear evidence of His power in so many miracles, didn't move their stubborn, hard hearts.

When you tell your story, not everyone will be convinced or believe. In fact, sometimes you might tell your story and it will get you in trouble, especially if the implications of your story and life contradict someone else's story or convicts their conscience.

Paul made it so clear this wasn't his idea but Gods, it was not an act of ill-will, he was just obeying the God of our fathers. But as soon as Paul mentioned the "g" word, the Jews blew up again and canceled his sermon.

Conclusion and application.

This past week was a mountain top experience for the students and leaders who came for Serve. It was powerful and life-changing. The temptation with mountain tops is to stay there, but the purpose of them is to go back down into our valleys and share the story of the grace of God we experienced.

Our conversion is one such mountain top experience of the saving grace of God to be shared. Those who were saved later in life can remember what they once were apart from Christ. Those who were saved early in life can imagine what they could have been apart from the grace of God. All of us need to remember how amazing God's grace is.

Every Christian has a story, a testimony, similar to Paul's story, a before, during and after. Every Christian should welcome opportunities to share their story.

The Serve kids and leaders did this in small ways each evening and especially the last evening.

The new members and students making profession of faith will do this with the elders in a couple of weeks, with a couple of elders starting off by sharing theirs. But making our profession of faith shouldn't be the only time we do that, just the first time of many.

I remember when it happened for me, 50 years ago last month after my sophomore year of high school. In that moment God triumphantly prevailed over my will. It was not so much a choice, but rather a pouring out of grace on a most unworthy sinner. And that is what it still is to this day. I am His not because of my works or decision, but because of His own purpose and grace. I am not ashamed to confess Jesus as my Savior and Lord.

As we bear witness to Jesus we should emphasize what Paul emphasized, that the transforming work in our lives starts with the sovereignty and grace of God. It is first of all His work, His grace. And we should daily be amazed by His grace and bear witness to it.

Paul's testimony shows us no matter how bad our sins were or are, they are not so bad that God's grace can't overcome them and cover over them and save us from them.

God has changed the hearts of the most hardened sinners, and He can change yours as well.

Paul saw himself as a trophy of God's grace. God is more loving and gracious than we imagine, He can and will rescue and save the worst of sinners.

We all must have an experience with the living Christ, when we see Him for who He is, when He becomes real to us and all our senses. It will seldom be as dramatic at Paul's, but it will be as real.

Have you had a personal encounter with Jesus Christ? Have you seen your own sin and need, and realized your need for His forgiveness, and been amazed by His grace? Have you repented, been humbled, and started following His will rather than your will? Do you see His continuing grace in your life day to day? Can you talk about it?

I Peter 3:15-16 In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.