

Acts 9:1-20

Some Bible stories are so familiar that it's easy for me to think I already know what they are about before I pray, make space for God to open my eyes, and read them again. So for me, a big part of learning what scripture "means" is relearning all that it can mean. And in some cases I have to unlearn details that have gotten cluttered up in my mind but aren't actually on the page. Like today's passage. In my mind, Saul gets thrown off his horse when he's blinded by the light. So when I re-read it for our Bible study last year, I had to read over it a couple of times. I was thinking, wait, where is his horse? The answer is, it's not there! But because I have heard that detail so frequently, my brain tried to fill it in all by itself. I already had the picture set.

A lot of Bibles even try to help you know what the story is by printing its description at the beginning of the passage. I don't know if that's true of the Pew Bibles—can someone check one and tell me if there is a heading at the top of Acts 9:1 and what it reads? [LISTEN.] Thank you. A lot of Bibles will call this passage "the conversion of Saul." That's how I always read it. This is the big moment in Saul's life when Jesus appears to him and he starts following him. It's dramatic. It's life-changing. It's *conversion*.

But there is a limitation to those headings. When someone gives you the "name of the story," they're telling you what they think is the most important part. So as soon as I see that heading, I'm thinking, "Okay, this is Paul's conversion story." But let's look again. What *else* is going on here? Well, yes, Jesus encounters Saul in a dramatic, personal way. We're told a light from heaven flashes around him and he falls to the ground—not off a horse, just to the ground—and he hears a voice. He recognizes it as the LORD, but does not yet recognize the LORD's identity, until the voice tells him, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." And that is the moment when his life changes. Or is it?

In the church I grew up in, this was *the* conversion story. When you gave your life to Jesus, you were expected to know the date, the time, the very moment that happened. But the book of Acts describes many stories of conversion, and each one is unique, because Jesus meets us in all kinds of ways. For example, immediately before this story, we see a different view of conversion. Now, I find it interesting that my Bible titles the passage from 8:26-40 “Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch.” But it could have just as accurately been called “The conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch.” This passage also involves a follower of the Way encountering a person who has so far been seen as outside the circle of Jesus followers. But there is no flashing light for the Ethiopian. Instead, he asks Philip (who is guided by the Holy Spirit) to help him interpret a passage of scripture. This way of coming to know Jesus involves conversation. It is more intellectual. But, like Saul, the Eunuch’s world is changed when he comes to understand the truth about Jesus. He sees no flashing lights, hears no dramatic voices. But he comes to know Jesus just as surely, is baptized, and goes away rejoicing.

The drama of Saul’s story is pointing to something more. It is so dramatic because it is so special and unusual—not the way every Christian comes to know Jesus (though some do). Saul is not *just* converted to following Jesus here. Listen to what comes next: Right after Jesus reveals himself, he tells Saul, “Get up and enter the city and you will be told what to do.” Without going too far off track here, this encounter is both Saul’s conversion and a commission, in the tradition of prophets of the Hebrew Bible. This story is told 3 times in Acts to demonstrate the set-apart nature of Saul’s call.

Saul is always seen as the star of this story, for good reason. But when we only look at him, we miss the other conversion story here: Ananias’.

Yes, we are told that Ananias is already a follower of the Way living in Damascus. He, too, receives a vision from the LORD, with accompanying directions to visit the house where Saul is staying. Here’s the problem: Ananias knows about Saul. When God tells him to go to

Saul and lay hands on him, Ananias responds, “Uhhh. God, you know who this guy is, right?” Earlier in Acts, Saul looked on at the stoning of Stephen with approval. Ananias knows he is doing evil to God’s saints, arresting them. He doesn’t want to go and visit this guy. He’ll be locked up! God must be crazy!

This is where I feel sympathy with Ananias. One of the hardest parts of coming to follow Jesus for me was accepting he has other followers who I cannot believe are on the same path. Jesus, how can this person be on the Way? Look at the damage they’re doing! Look who they’re hurting! I can’t believe you would call them, too.

But look at God’s response to Ananias. No explanation, no argument, just, “Go.” Then he says Saul is “my chosen instrument.” *Mine*. God’s. God is reminding Ananias of an important detail here. We may not like the people who come to that place of conversion—who can finally hear the invitation to follow Jesus—an invitation that is there for each and every one of us at all times, but we so often do not have eyes to see. But when we say yes, no matter how we screw it up, no matter how small-minded and blind we continue to be, God still chooses every one of us right back. I have the same Savior who called both Pete Buttigeig *and* Franklin Graham to follow him. What am I supposed to do with that?

Ananias has a choice here. We always have the option to say “no” to God. There are endless justifications, too, especially when saying “yes” means doing something scary. Doing something nuts. Doing something that, if we did not worship a God of miracles, a God who changes hearts beyond any human understanding, would make zero sense. And God isn’t entrusting this task to one of the apostles. Ananias plays no role in the story beyond this. He could be any one of us. He could be you. [PAUSE.] And he says yes. He does not turn away from Jesus. He turns toward him, even in the midst of his own failure to understand.

The Greek word for “conversion” literally means “turning.” In Christian faith, we often talk of a “conversion experience,” that point at which we

decide to turn away from our own aimlessness and toward Jesus. But the truth is, conversion is not limited to one moment in the past. If we think of our faith that way, it dies; it becomes an artifact of the past rather than our ongoing journey in the life of the Spirit, listening for Jesus' call and responding. Yes, there is for each of us an initial turning point that marks our commitment to Christ. It may not come suddenly in a blaze of blinding light, but there is a difference between the way we are called to live after saying "yes" to Jesus, whether that "yes" comes fast or slow. And if there isn't a difference, well, that's another sermon. But we are always in a space of turning—either toward or away from him. Ananias hears God, and once again, in the face of that which he cannot comprehend, he says yes to God again. He continues to convert to Jesus.

Now let's return to Saul, who is not yet Paul. In fact, he cannot *become* Paul and do all the work God is calling him to until Ananias *converts* once again to Jesus, trusting in God's call. Keep in mind, Saul is blind this entire time. All he knows is he is to go to Damascus and await instruction. From Ananias' vision, we know that Saul, too, has had a vision of Ananias coming and laying hands on him. But without Ananias' yes, without a disciple of Jesus to stand beside Saul, lay hands on him, allow the Holy Spirit to heal enter him, he remains blind. The scales cannot fall from Saul's eyes until Ananias recognizes the cost of discipleship—obeying God and trusting that the Spirit of Jesus is at work in the hearts of even those who have persecuted him. When God says "Go," he goes, even when it does not make sense at the time. Even when he is afraid. Even when he struggles to believe.

I will admit this sermon is convicting for me, but maybe it will speak to someone else, too. What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus in a time when the Church is so polarized—within the United Methodist denomination, as well as across all the other lines we draw—conservative vs. liberal, fundamentalist vs. progressive, Republican vs. Democrat vs. Independent vs. I just can't deal with any of it anymore? What does it mean to look past the lines we draw and remember why we're Christians in the first place—because of Jesus. Because of the one

who changed our lives in ways we could not imagine before we said yes to him, even as we constantly screw up on the Way? What does it mean to believe that those who are screwing it up in all kinds of different ways, yet have also said yes to him, are on the same Way that we are? But in order for us to be able to proclaim as one body, “He is the Son of God,” we cannot turn away from one another, even when we have grown to fear and loathe one another? That we must recognize that all of us are disciples on this way, and we are all responsible for one another’s growth in faith? That we have to trust in Jesus’ work within each of us, across all our differences? That it is only through this mutual way of being with one another that we can live his message of love and inclusion outward, to all the world?

In the lectionary for today, this passage is paired with John 21. Like many of Jesus’ post-Easter appearances, John 21:4 tells us that the disciples do not recognize him right away. Okay, I get that; we’ve seen that in other places. His resurrected body apparently looks different from the one he walked in before the crucifixion, though we’re never told exactly how. But then you read on to John 21:14, and we’re reminded, “This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.” Now, hang on! I’ll admit I’m not great with names and faces. But you would think that by the third time they had seen their Lord and Savior appear in front of them, new body or no, they would be able to recognize him. Yet they only know him after he directs them and they listen to him. What does that mean?

Maybe it means that whenever we think we know ahead of time how Jesus is going to appear, he goes and shows up differently. Just to keep us on our toes. Just so we can’t be too comfortable in saying, “Oh, yes, I know what Jesus looks like. I know what it means to follow him.” Because once we believe we already know how he looks, we stop looking for him. The vision of who we imagine him to be takes the place of the living Christ whose Spirit always surprises us, always forces us to open wider, love more boldly, trust in him more. Our faith dies, and with it our hope for renewal.

This is the last time I get to preach as part of my field education. I have done a lot of prayer and reflection over this past year, a lot of discernment. Being part of this community has been such a blessing and huge period of growth for me. It has changed me for the better to be part of such a loving Christian community—such inspiring examples of grace. I want to express my gratitude to each and every one of you for serving as an example of what the love of Jesus looks like lived in the flesh. And the message I hear from the Spirit today is, keep turning. Let us never turn away from Jesus or one another, even when that is challenging, even when we cannot yet see how God is at work in the hearts of our apparent enemies. Thank you. Amen.