

The Risen Christ, Along our Roads

When have you had a “Damascus Road Experience?”

This story from Acts about Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus is one of the most widely known stories in the entire Bible. Just say the words “Damascus road” to anyone who grew up going to church and most people will know what you are talking about. That’s how dramatic and memorable the story is. And, that is how important it is in the history of our Christian faith. Are our Damascus Road stories anywhere near that dramatic, or important?

This morning I want to suggest what I believe are some of the most key features, some of the most dramatic and important features, of our story from Acts 9. Some of them might surprise you.

First, at the beginning of the story Saul was what we could call “moving away from God.” Even though he thought he was moving toward God. In other words, he thought he was doing what God wanted him to do. And in fact, he thought he was doing it very well!

In his letter to the Galatians, which of course was written after his experience on the Damascus road, Paul is reflecting on that experience, and he says this [Galatians 1:13-14]:

¹³ You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. ¹⁴ I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.

What Paul is saying is that by “*violently persecuting*” the church and trying to “*destroy*” it, he thought he was doing what God wanted him to do. And he uses the word “*zealous*” to describe himself. This is a word with great biblical significance. In the Old Testament, to have zeal or to be zealous means to be convicted and committed, to be bold and unafraid—to be doing what God wants you to do with every fiber of your being.

But Saul was mistaken. He was wrong. In reality, Saul had been moving away from God. And God—or rather, the Risen Christ—came to him, and turned him around. Here is what Paul writes next [Galatians 1:15-16]:

¹⁵ But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles . . .

In other words, God had other plans for Paul.

When was a time that God (or the Risen Christ) came to you, and gently if not dramatically turned you around? When was a time you discovered that God had other plans for you? It needn’t be dramatic. You needn’t necessarily have fallen to the ground and been struck with blindness. But it’s certain to have been memorable. And probably, uncomfortable. It’s uncomfortable to believe that we are moving toward God or with God, or doing what God wants us to do, and then to find out we are actually moving away from God! But it happens. It happens to most of us—if not all of us.

Second, Paul received a completely new sense of identity as a result of his experience on the Damascus Road. The writer of Acts (namely Luke) symbolizes this new identity by using

Paul's Hebrew name, Saul, in the first part of Acts, but then changing to his Greek name, Paul, beginning in Chapter 13, where we find this story:

⁴ *So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit . . . they met a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet, named Bar-Jesus . . .* ⁹ ***But Saul, also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him*** ¹⁰ *and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?"*

Notice that in some significant ways Paul is still the same person, before and after his conversion experience. He still has the same "zeal," the same no-holds-barred conviction, the same strong and in some ways even violent language, but now he is "zealous" in a completely different way. And he wasn't formally or officially (or technically) given a different, new name. Nevertheless, the change in him is obvious to those around him, and to all future readers of the New Testament, in which he is ever after referred to as "Paul." Except when Paul is retelling his own story later in Acts, which he does twice: in Acts 22:7:

⁷ *I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'*

And again in Acts 26:14:

¹⁴ *When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'*

Think of it this way. There was the old Saul, and there was the new Paul. The same person. The same name, even. Yet completely different.

When in your life has your sense of identity changed, in such a way that God or the Risen Christ just might have had a hand in it? When might you (or those around you) have been able to notice a difference between the old you and the new you, however dramatic or subtle that difference may be?

Third, we often talk about such experiences as Paul had using the word "*conversion*." And in fact, if you Google the words "famous conversions," you will find a lot of fascinating and inspiring stories (including this one from Acts 9 in the Bible). But in the stricter sense of the word "*conversion*," it might be best to reserve it for one of two situations. Either, when someone who is a non-believer in God or Christ becomes a believer. Or, when someone literally converts from one religion to another. Yet, neither was the case for Paul in his "*conversion*" on the Damascus Road. There never was a time when Paul had not been a believer. He started believing at a young age, and "grew up" to be a highly educated and committed Pharisee (among the most committed believers there are). But because of his experience, Paul's very understanding of who God is and how God reveals himself changed. Most notably and dramatically, Paul came to see that God had himself come down to earth, in the man known as Jesus of Nazareth, who had taught and healed and performed wondrous signs, but then had been arrested, tried and crucified; and finally, had risen from the grave. The reason Paul knew this to be true, beyond the shadow of any doubt, is that this very "man" had appeared to him—to him!—on the Road to Damascus. Because of which Paul now believed—now knew, beyond any doubt—that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the Christ. He was the Son of God!

Paul still thought of himself as a Jew. He hadn't changed religions, or left his old one. He hadn't *converted*, in this sense of the word. But he had been given a brand new *conviction*. About God, about Christ, about the Holy Spirit, and perhaps most significantly, about himself. About how big and glorious God is; about how merciful and loving Christ is; about how

available and powerful the Holy Spirit is. And regarding himself, about what his very purpose for life now was.

When was a time that you found or were given a new conviction about an “old faith?” When was your understanding of God expanded beyond what you hadn’t even known were limits of your own stubborn making? When do you do you now believe that you personally met Jesus the Christ? When did you experience the in-pouring or in-breathing or empowerment of the Holy Spirit? When did your understanding of your own purpose in life change—perhaps even dramatically?

If these things are hard for you to identify, leaving you perhaps wondering if they have ever happened to you, keep looking. And is you still can’t find such a time, don’t worry. God isn’t through with us yet. No matter how old we are. No matter how stubborn we are. No matter how stuck we think you are.

As we learn over and over in the Bible, and as we learned just this morning from the story of Saul/Paul’s “conversion” on the Road to Damascus, nothing is too great for God! Amen.