

Easter 3C (5/5/2019)

Acts 9:1-20

Psalm 3

Revelation 5:11-14

John 21:1-19

Faith always anticipates that God will change us. For the sake of life, God confronts our death-dealing patterns, reorients our perspective, and grants us a new and just purpose. Destabilizing as it may be, this kind of conversion sweeps us up into the abundant life that God intends both for us and for the world.

It's easy to cast Saul as the villain in the famous story of his conversion. At the beginning of the ninth chapter of Acts, he is "still breathing threats and murder" against followers of Jesus, and he's marching to Damascus with the express purpose of detaining more. His mission is the epitome of religious persecution. Yet, while history views Saul's violent repression in a negative light, his offenses are practically inseparable from his redemption. We know the end of the story: **Saul is destined to become Paul; the oppressor is destined to become the faithful apostle; the villain is destined to become the hero.**

This is all crystal clear in hindsight. But, let's revisit the story of Saul's conversion from Saul's perspective prior to the dramatic events that take place on the road to Damascus. Saul certainly doesn't view himself as a villain, but a hero already. His acts of violence are not motivated by prejudice, but by a sacred cause. Followers of "the Way," that is, adherents to Jesus' way of life within the Jewish community, represent a threat to time-honored tradition. Their spiritual expression dishonors God. So **in his own mind, Saul is not a persecutor, but a defender of the true faith.**

To quote one interpreter, “Saul is the classic example of the devout person who is so determined to do good that they are blinded... to the destructive consequences of their purity campaign. ... He is so convinced of the error of others that he cannot see the new thing God is doing....”¹ As the old adage goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. **In spite of the pain he inflicts, Saul is supremely confident in his judgment of what’s true and righteous and necessary.**

That is, until he meets with a vision of the risen Jesus on the road. “Saul, why do you persecute me?” Jesus calls out. Not *Why do you persecute my disciples?* but *Why do you persecute me?* **Saul’s violence harms not only a vulnerable minority population, but the Lord himself. His misplaced zeal grieves the very God he intends to serve.**

Apprehended by the living Christ, Saul is thrust into a state of uncertainty. Knocked from his high horse (metaphorically speaking), he is suddenly required to reevaluate his perspective and purpose. And, with the courageous accompaniment of Ananias and others, he eventually regains his vision and strength, renounces his violence, and takes up his baptismal mission to proclaim Jesus’ peace.

We may rightfully call it a conversion, but it’s not a conversion from one religion to another per se. Although he comes to affirm the messianic identity of

¹ Amy G. Oden, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4043.

Jesus, Saul nevertheless maintains his Judaism.² His conversion has broader implications than his individual confession of faith. **It's a conversion from perpetrator to penitent, from warrior to peacemaker, from religious boundary keeper to proponent of new possibilities. Saul's repentance and rehabilitation is nothing less than a resurrection.**

Imagine, however, how disorienting it all is for Saul. He is absolutely certain of his path until an unexpected encounter completely reverses his direction. "What would it be like," asks biblical scholar Patricia Tull, "to pursue one course so zealously, only to learn that, sincere as you may have been, you were wrong? To learn that you must stop and do something else, now, without finishing the project?"³

Tull connects Saul's story to another story of individual and collective conversion for the sake of life: [Excerpt from *Inhabiting Eden*, 7-8]

Dear friends, how have you been converted? When have you been compelled to change your mind? What caused you to see reality in a new way?⁴ And, how is the living Christ apprehending you now? After all, **faith always anticipates that God will change us.**⁵ **For the sake of life, God confronts our death-dealing patterns, reorients our perspective, and grants us a new and just purpose. Destabilizing as it may be, this kind of conversion sweeps us up into the abundant life that God intends both for us and for the world.**

² Michal Beth Dinkler, *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament*, 341-2.

³ *Inhabiting Eden: Christians, the Bible, and the Ecological Crisis*, 12.

⁴ Stephen D. Jones, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, 405.

⁵ *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*.