

WHEN CHANGE IS ROOTED IN CONTINUITY

Acts 9:1-20

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on June 23, 2019, the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a summer sermon series on the Acts of the Apostles, entitled "When...."

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Today I am going to start a summer series which in many ways has already started: a series on the Acts of the Apostles, or as we more commonly know the book – simply as Acts. I will be highlighting events and characters from this book in the preaching I do through Labor Day Weekend.

A very simple introduction:

- About two thirds of the Bible is what we call the Old Testament, which is essentially the story of God's relationship with his people – Israel – from the call of Abraham and Sarah to the prophetic yearning for a Messiah. It covers roughly two thousand years of history.
- The New Testament is shorter – and in the first part – called the Gospels – covers the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth – whom Christians recognize as the Messiah hoped for in the Old Testament.

- The second and larger part of the New Testament is the story of how the hope and idealism and beauty of Jesus' life and teachings get translated on the ground in the real world after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. That translation occurred not only in the world of Judaism in which Christianity was originally formed, but throughout the Greco-Roman world led primarily by a person named Paul.

The book known as "The Acts of the Apostles" are an early account of people committed to Jesus as the Messiah trying to live out their faith and develop it in the world around them. It is a task that remains before us, which is what makes the book worthwhile for a series of summer sermons.

I hope when you are not travelling – either with one of my "friends" or on your own, I hope you will join us; and as always, thank you for being here.

Let us pray: *O teach me, Lord, that I may teach the precious things Thou dost impart; and wing my words, that they may reach the hidden depths of many a heart. In the name of Jesus Christ, the Risen One. Amen.*"

I.

When I studied history in high school and then as an undergraduate in college, I remember learning about the issue of *continuity* and *change*.

- Is the history of a nation marked by *continuity*, or has sudden, far reaching *change* been its hallmark?
- When change occurs, as it does in most societies and nations, how much does it *grow out of* – rather than *break with* – the past?

Likewise, for an individual, can changes we make or go through – spiritual, psychological, moral – be traced to *who we have always been*, or do they represent *breaks* with the past, "new beginnings," "a new identity," "a new self"?

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When we enter the world of Protestant religion, we often assume that major times we experience the presence of God or make a deeper commitment to our faith involve a *break* with the past, more *change* than *continuity*.

"You must be born again," we hear Jesus say in the Gospel of John; and for us today, as for hearers then, we know physical re-birth to be an impossibility;¹ thus, when applied to religious experience, this metaphor must represent a degree of change beyond our comprehension.

Likewise, one of the Biblical phrases that comes into our secular language is the phrase "a Damascus Road experience." To say that a person has a "Damascus Road experience" is to say that the person has experienced a complete turnaround, a change of heart or mind, a whole new direction or decision on a certain matter that often comes from a sudden, dramatic revelation.

¹ John 3:1-10.

As you likely know, this is what happens to the Apostle Paul, narrated three times by Luke in the Book of Acts,² and once by Paul himself in a letter he wrote to the church at Galatia.³ In Luke's narration, which Lauren read:

- *Paul – who at the time is known as Saul – is on the road to Damascus.*
- *He is breathing threats and murder against any men or women who belong to “the Way,” a name given to the early Christian movement, and he is seeking to round them up that he might bring them bound to Jerusalem for discipline and sometimes even death⁴ at the hands of religious authorities who are the objects of the reformer's efforts.*
- *Suddenly a light from heaven flashes around Saul.*
- *He falls to the ground.*
- *He hears a voice calling to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”*
- *He asks: “Who are you, Lord?”*
- *The voice says: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”*
- *For three days Saul remains blinded and takes no food.*
- *But then a man named Ananias comes to him out of the blue and says: “The Lord Jesus has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”*
- *Something like scales fall from Saul's eyes.*
- *His sight returns.*
- *Ananias baptizes him, marking the change he has just undergone.*
- *Saul takes food.*
- *And then he begins to preach “in the synagogues” as the initial step in a larger commission on which God is sending him to bring “the name of Christ [from its origins in Judaism to] Gentiles and kings and...the people of Israel.”*

As is the case with many who have “a Damascus Road experience,” Saul's change of heart and mind and focus is so far-reaching that his name is eventually changed from Saul to Paul.⁵ It is as if he has come from the womb a second time.

II.

As one whose changes in life have been gradual rather than sudden, quiet rather than dramatic, I have always been attracted to this story because Paul's experience is so different from my own. As a pastor, I have been keenly aware of how true to life this story is for so many people who are members of the churches I have served and at the same time how out of character it is for others. So I have always seen this passage as instructive.⁶

² Acts 9:1-19, 22:4-16; 26:9-10.

³ Galatians 1:11-17.

⁴ We are introduced to Saul/Paul at the end of the stoning of Stephen, where Luke tells us “witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul” and “Saul approved of their killing him.” (Acts 7:58 and 8:1).

⁵ Acts 13:9.

⁶ One of the earliest, most influential articles I have ever read is “Call Rather than Conversion,” which is a chapter in Krister Stendahl's *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976). Stendahl was Dean of Harvard Divinity School and this book is based on the Thomas White Currie Lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 1963 and the Ayer Lectures at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School in 1964. In the early 2000s, I asked Amy Jill Levine if this chapter is still considered valid and she indicated that it remains a classic. I take comfort in that.

What attracts me about it these days is that as dramatic as Paul's experience is and as radical as his turn-around, I realize that many aspects of Paul's experience – while dramatic to be sure – contain elements of drama that people who had gone before him across the 2000 years of Judaism which preceded him had experienced as well. In other words, much of what Paul goes through on the Road to Damascus has happened to others about whom he would have known and whom he would have revered. There is thus *continuity* behind the *change* Paul experiences.

Just a sampling of precursors to Paul's experience:

- When Paul *falls to the ground* in the presence of light, it is reminiscent of the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel, both of whom fall to the ground when they are called by God.⁷
- When Paul is addressed *twice* "Saul, Saul," it is reminiscent of God or God's representatives calling "Abraham, Abraham"⁸ as Abraham walks up the mountain to bind his son Isaac; of God calling "Jacob, Jacob" on the Banks of the Tigris⁹; of God calling "Moses, Moses" at the Burning Bush¹⁰; and of God calling "Samuel, Samuel" in the Temple in Jerusalem.¹¹
- When Paul is commanded to "*get up* and enter the city and there told what you are to do," it calls to his memory and ours the commission to Abraham to "Go from [his] father's house to the land [God] I will show [him];"¹² as well as the commission to the comical prophet Jonah to "get up" from the land on which the great fish has deposited him and "go to Nineveh, that great city" to which Jonah has done everything possible to avoid going.
- Finally, when Paul is temporarily *blinded*, it reminds us of the disciples who walk the road to Emmaus with the risen Christ but whose eyes are "kept from recognizing him" until he breaks bread in their presence.¹³

While the direction of Paul's life – and the focus of his deeply held service to God – takes a 180 degree turn on the road to Damascus, it is rooted in the faith and life, the language and literature, the vocabulary and vernacular that had shaped and formed him in his upbringing in Judaism.¹⁴ There was *continuity* out of which his *change* grew.

This is why what we do and say, learn and sing, in worship, in service, in Christian Formation, in life together in the church is so important. It provides us with the language and vernacular that shapes us and from which whatever changes we are called to make arise.

⁷ Ezekiel 1:8; Daniel 10:9.

⁸ Genesis 22:11

⁹ Genesis 46:2.

¹⁰ Exodus 3:4.

¹¹ I Samuel 3:4, 10.

¹² Genesis 12:1.

¹³ Luke 24:16, 31.

¹⁴ That service led Paul to condone violence in the past (i.e. the stoning of Stephen and the rounding up of members of "the Way" with murderous threats"); and it would ironically led him to experience violence and suffering, as recounted in II Corinthians 11:23-29.

Think about the way the worship life of the church – its music and words – shapes you:

- “Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart; Nought be all else to me save that Thou art.”¹⁵
- “Be still my soul; the Lord is on Thy side.”¹⁶
- “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”¹⁷
- “I believe in the God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead, and buried....”¹⁸
- “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”¹⁹
- “Lift every voice and sing.”²⁰
- “Go with them, Lord, and guide their way, through this and every coming day, that in your Spirit, strong and true, their lives may be their gift to you.”²¹

Continuity at the heart of change.

III.

I started by saying that as a high school and undergraduate I studied history. I did so and I loved it. But from seminary forward I became captivated by Biblical studies, and then from the early 1990s onward, I went on a “literature tear.” I began reading popular novels like those of John Grisham, then moved on to more “highbrow” contemporary literature, then got on to short stories (all the way back to Chekhov), and then started studying and writing contemporary poetry. But moving to our city about the time the unity of 9/11 wore off and our politics became so fractious and divisive, I felt the need to throw myself back into history, and thus, imbibing words sometimes less eloquent but no less important, my reading of late has been focused on the history of our nation.

Why?

Because I want to understand *who* we are.

Why?

Because I want to know my place as a *Christian*, as a *citizen*, as a *pastor* serving in this city in our time?

¹⁵ *Glory to God* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2013), #450. Hereafter cited as GG.

¹⁶ GG #810.

¹⁷ Micah 6:8.

¹⁸ *The Apostles Creed*.

¹⁹ Matthew 6:13, from The Lord’s Prayer.

²⁰ GG 339.

²¹ A response we sing following each Children’s Sermon at Westminster.

Why?

Because I want to know how much of what we are experiencing and expressing in the *present* is rooted in the *past* and how much of it is genuinely *new*, for weal or for woe.

Why?

Because I want to know *what to do* in light of present blessings, present curses that are upon us as a people.

My friends, when we have something that jars us into a different place as individuals or as a church, a family, a nation, at least if we know what of our present change grows out of our past and what does not, we might deal more wisely with the choices and challenges we have in the present. And dealing with choices and challenges – whether as individuals or as societies – is a big part of what it means to be a person of faith, a follower of Jesus Christ. As the people of Israel stood poised to enter the Land God had promised them over four hundred years earlier, Moses said to them: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse....therefore, choose life.”²² We are all of us more able and likely to “choose life” if we know from whence we have come from, where we have been, and where God is leading us, through blinding light or quiet nudge.

Amen.

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²² Genesis 30:15-20.