Sermon | Easter 3C

TEXT: John 21:1-19; Acts 9:1-22

10 April 2016

A Tale of Two Conversions: Saul of Tarsus and Simon Peter

*In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.*

Christ is risen! [**He is risen indeed! Alleluia**!]

Dear saints, if you’re like me, you might not remember your conversion to the Christian faith. In other words, if you’re like me, you might not remember a time when you didn’t believe in God, when you didn’t call God ‘Father’ or Jesus ‘Savior,’ because you’ve simply been a Christian your whole life. You were baptized as a baby, brought up in the Church. And so you don’t remember your conversion.

But some people definitely remember their conversion, can definitely think back to a time before they ever believed in God, trusted in God. And then they can remember and recall when they first heard it, the saving Gospel. They remember how it transformed them, worked faith. Some people remember the day of their Baptism. Because all this, their conversion to the Christian faith happened later in life, in adulthood.

Now sometimes, when people have had a conversion later in life, we say that they had a “Damascus Road experience.” And the reason we call their adult conversion a “Damascus road experience” is because the beginning of St. Paul’s conversion happened on the Damascus road.

If anyone can remember his conversion to the faith, it was Paul. And actually, before he was ever was Paul, he was Saul—Saul of Tarsus. And who Saul of Tarsus? The image I have in my mind is of a stern, rigid, hard-hearted man. He was a works-righteous legalist. And what does that mean? He devoted his life to a strict adherence to God’s Law. And he really believed that he kept that Law.

I want you to hear a very interesting autobiographical statement that the Apostle Paul makes about his former life, back when he was Saul of Tarsus. This is what he says, Philippians 3:

*If anyone thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more*. In other words, if anyone had a reason to boast in his works, be satisfied with his accomplishments and achievements, it was me. And then he shows how he had all the right boxes ticked off. Circumcised on the eight day—check. Of the house of Israel—check. Tribe of Benjamin—check. Hebrew of Hebrews—check, check. As to the Law, a Pharisee. That’s like saying as to baseball, I was in the Major League; a Pharisee was as high as you could go when it came to the Law. And Saul had that box checked off. That was a big one. And then he says, as to righteousness under the Law, blameless. You see that? He trusted in his own righteousness. Which means the he trusted in himself. [Philippians 3:4-6]

So that when he first heard the Gospel of Christ Jesus, which implies that we despair of ourselves and believe in Jesus alone, it made him furious. That’s a bit of an understatement. It sent him into a murderous rage. He wanted to stamp out the Christian message wherever it was proclaimed. And so Saul of Tarsus became the most vehement persecutor of the Church. St. Stephen, the first martyr—we’re told in Acts 7, when Stephen was stoned to death, his garments were laid at the feet of a young man named Saul. He became a professional murderer of Christians.

And that’s where we meet him today. As he sets out on the Damascus road, he has letters in hand from the high priest giving him permission to capture any followers of “the Way,” that was the first name of the Christian Church, “the Way.” But of course, Saul doesn’t make it to Damascus. Jesus appears to him on the Damascus road and says, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” “Who are you, Lord?” “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

It was the biggest uh-oh moment of his life. Actually what we would call a Law moment. There and then on the Damascus road, everything Saul had to boast about—his great righteousness under the Law—was gone. Saul was brought to nothing. He was blinded. That blindness was a sign of what he really was spiritually: nothing but a blind, spiritual beggar. Later, Paul would say, “*For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing.*” (Rom. 7:18) But out of his grace and mercy, the Lord sends him to the house of Ananias, where he is given food and drink, hears the Gospel. He is baptized, restored, converted to the faith. Saul to Paul. And then he starts preaching that Jesus is the Son of God.

Some people have had a Damascus road experience. St. Paul’s conversion reminds me of a person who is close to me. The difference between him and Saul, is that, whereas Saul thought he was righteous under the Law, this person thought he was damned under the Law, and spent most of his adult life thinking he was going to hell, because the god that he was taught to believe was nothing but an angry judge. And if you did not render to that god perfect obedience, if you did not serve that god with every ounce of your strength and ability, he would condemn you to eternal fire. He knew that’s what he deserved.

Could you imagine living your life in that fear? And the guilty conscience that would hang around your neck every day of you life—to think God was judging you for your sins, condemning you to hell—and to never know or experience the God of grace and mercy and forgiveness. And then to hear it: to hear that Gospel for the first time, and believe it, to have your fear melt away for joy, to have your conscience unshackled from the threats and accusations of the Law: it would be as liberating as being freed from prison, where you had been kept shackled for years, walking into freedom, the light of day, light you had never seen with your eyes, suddenly shining on you. Like the scales that fell off Paul’s eyes. That’s the power of the Gospel to change and transform lives.

This person first heard the Gospel from my grandmother. Went to my grandmother and asked, “What is grace?” Had no idea what grace even was. She said in so many words, grace means that it’s not about you. It’s not about you, and it’s not up to you, what you’ve done or haven’t done for God. Grace is all about God and what he has done for you. That’s what makes all the difference! That he loves you, that he sent his Son for you, dying for you and paying for your sins, rising for you and destroying your death. It’s about his work for you. And he gives all of it to you—all the merits of Christ are yours as a gift, a gift that is unearned, undeserved, and received by faith. Grace is what saves you. And it’s not about you. It’s for you. ” Now I’m sure my grandma didn’t say all of that, but she said it.

Again, some people have never heard of such a God of grace, but only know of the God of works-righteousness, the god of demands, the god of moralism and legalism who says that it’s up to you to earn your salvation. That you have sins to pay for, and you’d better get cracking, because your salvation is up to you. And so we pray that God would bring his Gospel to such burdened souls and work a conversion like he worked for Saul of Tarsus.

Now I said not everyone remembers their conversion. But there is another type of conversion that’s different from this once-in-a-lifetime Damascus road conversion. It’s a daily conversion, a daily conversion that happens for you and for me, a daily conversion God works through his word of Absolution. And while you might not remember your Damascus-road conversion to the Christian faith, your Baptism, your daily conversion happens every day, in fact, it’s happening right now.

And we see it in the story of Peter. Now we talked about Paul. But who was Peter? Peter was a man who compulsively jumped into things. He jumped into the water to get Jesus in this morning’s Gospel. And if you remember in the Passion, he jumps in to promising Jesus, “Even if all the others fall away from you, I will never fall away from you.” And then, a little he promptly denies his Lord three times over a charcoal fire. Then the cock crowed, and Peter knew what he had done, and he was grieved.

Jesus had come to the disciples Easter evening. He stood in their midst and said, “Peace be with you,” showing his hands and side. That was last week. And I said, that was the Absolution. Jesus forgiving his disciples for abandoning him. They were forgiven. Peter was forgiven. But you know how sometimes, you do something, confess it, and receive forgiveness for it. But darn it, if you don’t still remember it. Stuck in your memory, bothering you, burdening you. Some sins are like that.

That was Peter with his denial. And now we see him today. And where is he? Around another charcoal fire, the Lord whom he denied staring him in the face, and asking him—how many questions? Three questions, just like the bystanders. Bringing his mind right back to his denial. Peter was grieved, when the Lord asked him three times, “Do you love me?” because he remembered his sin. And it grieved him.

Dear saints, we all struggle with sin in our lives. We all struggle with burdened consciences. We struggle with guilty hearts. We struggle with sin in the flesh. And that’s because of who we are, our whole lives through: *simil justus et peccator,* at the same time, saint and sinner. On the one hand, you believe in Jesus and so you are a Christian. On the other hand, you can say with St. Paul, “The good that I would, I do not do; the evil I wouldn’t do, that is what I keep on doing. O wretched man that I am!”

We need daily conversion. We need daily to die to sin, daily to rise, to a lively faith and confidence in our Savior. And is only possible by hearing, again and again and again, our Savior’s voice in the Absolution. And that’s the real reason Jesus took Peter to the charcoal fire, so he could say it to him there, right where Peter denied him. “Peter, follow me. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.” It was the Absolution, spoken individually to him. And it restored him just like Saul of Tarsus, to faith in Christ.

[Here it might be appropriate to extol the benefits of Private Confession and Absolution but that’ll have to wait for another sermon.]

And so each and every one of us, whether we are Saul of Tarsus and have yet to have our Damascus road experience and be converted, baptized, or whether we are St. Peter, and have been with him for years, and have heard his forgiveness a thousand times—no matter who you are, you are here because you need this. And he died for you, he rose for you, he ascended to the right hand of God for you, to give it to you, every day of your life, his forgiveness for the sake our your conversion to him. You are forgiven.

Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed. Alleluia.**