

The Conversion of Saul

9 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and 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. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul 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. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹The 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, ¹²and he has seen in a vision^[a] a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." ¹⁵But 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; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul^[b] 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." ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul Preaches in Damascus

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Psalm 30

Thanksgiving for Recovery from Grave Illness

A Psalm. A Song at the dedication of the temple. Of David.

¹I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up,
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.

²O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.

³O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.^[a]

⁴Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.

⁵For his anger is but for a moment;
his favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

⁶As for me, I said in my prosperity,
"I shall never be moved."

⁷By your favor, O LORD,
you had established me as a strong mountain;
you hid your face;
I was dismayed.

⁸To you, O LORD, I cried,
and to the LORD I made supplication:

⁹"What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the Pit?"

Will the dust praise you?

Will it tell of your faithfulness?

¹⁰Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me!

O LORD, be my helper!"

¹¹You have turned my mourning into dancing;

you have taken off my sackcloth

and clothed me with joy,

¹²so that my soul^(b) may praise you and not be silent.

O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

May 5, 2019

The Mystical Transformation of God's Love

Acts 9: 1-20, Psalm 30

Kerra Becker English

Her name was Grace. Her misnomer was also Grace. She was the meanest lady in the church, and I must say that it wasn't due to lack of competition. She never got married. She grumbled at everyone. You could tell that she detested being quite short. She lived alone and made it clear that alone was what she wanted to be. But I was a naïve young pastor. And I was told in seminary and I was especially told by folks in that church that one of my job requirements was to visit people. And at the very least – Grace was people.

I was warned ahead of time that she didn't like women pastors. Well, to me it wasn't clear that she "liked" anyone, so there wasn't all that much to lose by going to see her. Those weren't easy visits. She complained. I listened. When she seemed done, I said a short prayer, and left, quickly, looking for some way to reward myself for what I had just experienced – usually by way of stopping at the Meadows for ice cream on my way home.

In that church, where most of the congregation surpassed my age by decades rather than years, the ladies in the congregation were thrilled to throw a baby shower for Chuck and I when they found out that we were expecting our first child. That tells you how long ago this was. That baby is 20 now. But I do remember, that in the stack of presents there was a rather large box, and I was a bit surprised to open the card and see that it was from her. Then I had to open the box, in front of everyone. What would be in it? Well, inside was about the biggest hand-crocheted baby blanket I have ever seen. She spent hours, a lot of hours, doing something, for me. All of you

knitters and crocheters out there know a bit what it's like to be making something for someone else. That person may not be in your thoughts the whole time the object is coming to life in your hands, but whenever you pick up that project, thoughts do gravitate toward that person. Grace spent hours working on that blanket to give to our baby. It was a glimpse of what seemed to be hiding behind her gruff exterior. There was some kindness in there. Or at the very least some obligation.

I don't think it was that day, but with my perspective on who she really was slightly altered, later on I had the chance to say something to her, maybe it was about the blanket, maybe it was about something else, the weather even, and she did something I completely didn't expect, AT. ALL. She smiled at me. Believe me when I say that it, no joke, transformed her whole face. I recognized something in that moment, something I forgot until I woke up with her, of all people, on my mind as I have been pondering another transformation. Grace, God's grace, has the power to make us completely new – even if we only catch a glimpse of it for just a few seconds.

His name was Saul. And that name invoked fear in the hearts of Jesus' early followers. *Meanwhile*, the story transitions. *Meanwhile*, Saul was breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. This is quite a few steps beyond being the mean lady at church. Saul was hoping to get the approval he needed from the high priests to round up followers of the Way, those heretics, in the synagogues of Damascus. Being able to drag them back to Jerusalem for punishment seemed the proper thing for him to do. They were a threat. They were a nuisance. They were the problem and he was planning to be the solution to that problem.

With official documents authorizing his intent to round up the perpetrators in hand, he headed toward Damascus with sinister intent. But on the way, he is stopped, dead in his tracks by

a blinding light and a voice that questions his motives, “Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you Lord?” is all that Saul can think of in that moment to ask. But the clarity comes, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Then Jesus has some instructions for Saul as to where he’s going to go INSTEAD of rounding up his followers in Damascus.

Saul has a rather intense experience of the divine mystery on the way to Damascus. It is bewildering, reorienting, unsettling. As renowned scholar of comparative religion Huston Smith has said, “Awe is not fun.” It certainly could not have been fun for Saul. It blinded him. One might say that he was already blind from the kind of atrocities he seemed able to commit in God’s name. But for three days, even with his eyes wide open, he couldn’t see a thing. He couldn’t eat or drink either. Or chose not to. Or was simply too stunned to take in any sustenance.

His name was Ananias. Ananias was a disciple of the Lord, at the ready to listen to any counsel he would receive in his prayers, but maybe not this counsel. The Lord wants him to do what? I love that Ananias is willing to talk back to God. He tells God, as if God doesn’t know, this man Saul, is evil, and he’s in Damascus on the authority of the chief priests to round people up and have them taken from their homes and places of worship to be beaten or worse. I almost imagine God answering, “Well duh.” God knows EXACTLY who Saul is, and God intends to call him anyway. “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” It’s as though the Lord and Ananias have this little secret between them. Saul will be God’s instrument, but it will bring upon him a lifetime of challenge and growth to be faithful to that purpose. But now go, God says to Ananias, go and meet up with him because I’m calling you to remove the scales from Saul’s eyes. Ananias may be reluctant, but he listens to his own divine message and tells brother Saul that he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. When the scales fall from Saul’s

eyes, he is baptized, he eats something, and then goes to preach exactly the message he's been railing against until now, "Jesus is the Son of God."

Sing praises to the Lord, O faithful ones. Give thanks to his holy name. His anger is for but a moment. His favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

Grace, I have found, isn't the absence of grumpiness; it's grumpiness transformed by every loop of yarn dedicated to another. Perhaps Grace crocheted and crocheted until that blanket could be a gift of love. Maybe that's why it was so big! And why her smile is something I can remember these many years later.

Saul's divine encounter completely reoriented the life of someone who had given his heart to hate. Choosing Saul in spite of his hateful past likely caused him the deep suffering of terrible regret, the kind of suffering that can only be matched by the depth of love that Christ wished to convey to the whole world. Even the worst of the worst, God shows us can be enlightened, even on the way to the most hateful act of their lives so far.

Ananias had enough of a pre-formed bond with God to talk back, to question, to wonder out loud if God was making sound choices. And Ananias was faithful enough to listen, even when what he was being asked to do seemed preposterous. God can handle our human dismay at the foolish things God asks us to do – like love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. God knows that the ask can be weird sometimes. And yet, there will be those times we are inspired to make that phone call or send that letter to the person where we "can't even." Amazing the things those calls and letters sometimes do.

Sing praises to the Lord, O faithful ones. The grumpiness, the hate, the back talk, none of these things are enough to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And nothing can change us more, transform us more, grow us more than the love of God can. Saul becoming Paul through his Damascus road experience is a biblically mystical story that we know. In fact, we sometimes measure our own encounters with the divine against it – when we really can't. It's not that God couldn't do that again – but it may not be the encounter we really need. There may be times we feel a bit more like Ananias, tapped by God to do a difficult thing, and out of faithfulness we answer in kind. Sing praise to the Lord when that happens, for that can bring about a mystical encounter as well. However, I never in a million years thought I'd write a sermon that started out with grumpy old Grace being an example of mystical knowledge, but here we are. Even in the small things, the tender acts of everyday love, God shows up and might even bring a precious smile across our lips.

O Lord, my God, I will give thanks to you forever. Amen.