

Conversion of St. Paul
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St. Paul's Cleveland Heights
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+In the Name of God: who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

With this in mind, I was traveling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, when at midday along the road, your Excellency, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. Acts 26:12

Good morning! Let me begin by saying how delighted I am to be here with you at St. Paul's – especially on this day – the day of your Annual Meeting and the day when we are celebrating the person for whom this parish was named when it was founded almost 180 years ago. I very much look forward to the ministry we will share in and from this amazing church.

We are taking a little break from the Epiphany season this morning to observe the Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle. It was his feast day yesterday – January 25 – and I'm glad to be able to celebrate his day today. Other than Jesus himself, there is no person more important in the history of the Church than St. Paul.

Who was Paul? Paul was a second-generation follower of Jesus. Members of this second generation had not actually met Jesus in the flesh. They did not interact with him while he was alive on earth, nor did they hear him preach or listen to him tell his parables.

These second generation Christians were very different from Jesus' first followers and everyone else who heard and interacted with Jesus in person. And here's the distinctive thing about that second generation: even as they took up the witness of the first generation, they were largely not concerned with what Jesus said and did.

Their interest was focused, instead, on what the God of Israel had done through the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and on the fact that this act of God – this raising Jesus from the dead after he had been crucified – confirmed Jesus' proclamation that the reign of God was breaking in.

Second-generation Jesus-groups were to be found in Palestine, as well as among the Jewish communities scattered all around the Mediterranean. They believed that the kingdom of heaven was coming, and they firmly believed that Jesus was Israel's Messiah. Not only did they believe that the kingdom was coming – they believed that this would happen very soon. I recite all this background to provide context for the story of Paul's conversion.

As I said a few moments ago, Paul was one of these second generation Christians. He was a Jew. His religious formation was as a Pharisee – his strict style of living in terms of the Torah led him to believe that “as to righteousness under the Law,” he was, in his own words, “blameless.”

In terms of the values embodied by the ideology of the Pharisees, his own beliefs moved him to become a zealous “persecutor of the church.”

Paul talks about this phase of his life early on in his letter to the churches in Galatia. He wrote to the Galatians, “. . . you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it, and I advanced beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.” So Paul was a Jew who was a leader in persecuting the early Judean Christians.

But then things changed – and changed forever. . . for Paul, for those early Christians in Judea, and for the course of human history. At a certain point Paul came to believe that God called him to proclaim the Gospel instead of persecuting those who believed in the Gospel. There are several versions of what happened.

The earliest account comes from Paul himself. It’s the account we have in the second reading today, from his letter to the Galatians where he writes: “But when God, who had set me apart before I was born, and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me.”

Paul wants the Galatians – and anyone else who would later read his letter – to know that his call was a direct call from Jesus – that there were no intermediaries – and that the impact of his encounter with Jesus was profound. Paul does not say specifically what happened to him. Paul just says that he had been “set apart” and “called.”

For the details of what happened on the road to Damascus – the light from heaven – the voice speaking to Paul in the Hebrew language – we have to go to the Acts of the Apostles where the story is told no fewer than three times – once in Chapter 9, where the narrator tells the story in the third person with something of a dramatic flair; once in Chapter 22, in the speech Paul delivers to the crowds when he is arrested in Jerusalem; and once in a final version, the version we have in today’s first reading, where the narrator puts the story in Paul’s own mouth as he defends himself before King Agrippa.

There are minor variations among the three stories, but they are essentially all the same: Paul was on his way to Damascus. He had warrants from the Sanhedrin for the arrests of the Christian leaders there. He had gotten just so far on the road when he had some kind of intense experience. Was it some kind of altered state of consciousness? Was it a seizure, as some have suggested, based on the written description of what happened to him?

Or was it what Paul always claimed it was – a revelation of the Risen Christ, on the road in the middle of the day – in broad daylight – right there before God and everybody?

Certainly, Paul believed that’s what it was – and he acted on that belief for the rest of his days. His subsequent life and letters reflect the vitality and power of the encounter with Jesus. Paul was inspired by his experience on the road to Damascus to accomplish extraordinary things, things that he believed to be God’s will for his life.

The scene is so powerful and so vivid that it is easy for it to become the only window through which we view Paul's conversion. It is easy, as well, for it to become the only template for a Christian's spiritual path, leaving those of us who have never had brilliant lights blind us, or have never heard Christ's voice speak directly to us, wondering if we've really been called after all – if the little nudges and seeming coincidences that have guided us to faith aren't happenstance rather than a real call from God. A serious Christian must have had a Damascus Road experience, it is often said in some church. Anything less than that, less than the full treatment with an identifiable date, time and place is. . . well . . . less than.

The truth is, though, that we know what happened on the road, as dramatic and important as it proved to be, was only the beginning of the conversion of Paul. It wasn't the end of the story of Paul's coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

It was the beginning – the *catalyst* that set Paul on the *road* of conversion, a journey that involved a number of stages and steps as he sought to integrate the incredible once-in-a-lifetime event into the matrix of his religious perceptions and prejudices, into the complex configuration of his powerful personality. Paul's conversion was a life-long process that consisted of many other revelations and encounters with the living Spirit of the Risen Christ before it was all over.

The conversion that we celebrate this morning was not a one-off thing – not a one-and-done. Instead, the Conversion of St. Paul was a lifetime of faithful decisions and choices he made, as he continually offered his life to the one he knew to be his Lord and Savior.

And what I want to say as clearly as I can is this: there is no requirement that any of us have the same Damascus Road experience Paul had. If you have heard voices, seen visions, and dreamed dreams – God bless you. That is how God chose to come to you because of the uniqueness of your personality or temperament, or because God tried every other way and couldn't get through.

If you have not heard voices or dreamed dreams or seen visions but still find yourself a disciple of Jesus – God bless you, too. It means that God came to you in a different way because of the uniqueness of your personality or temperament or because God found it easier to sneak up on you rather than to ambush you on whatever your Damascus Road might be.

But for every single one of us there is this requirement – that we take the decisions and choices we make throughout our lives seriously, that we make them with care, and that we continually offer our lives to the one who is our Lord and Savior, Jesus of Nazareth.

Which leads me to one last thing about Paul – something that applies to us as well, here in this church that bears his name.

One of the most potent influences in the process of Paul's conversion grew out of his efforts to create and sustain communities of faith. In a very real sense, Paul's faith was hammered out in Christian community. His understandings of what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth were formed and shaped by the tensions and conflicts and joys he experienced with

the brand-spanking new communities of faith that popped up around the Mediterranean through his leadership.

Another way to say this is that Paul's vision of the Christian life and faith was forged as he tried to help people in those early communities understand what God was up to in calling them into being in the first place, in having them pray and study and break bread together, and in responding to the needs around them with God's compassion and love.

A long time ago, the church named this day, the "Conversion of Saint Paul." I guess I understand why. It's dramatic. It suggests an enormous and sudden change. If you posted on Facebook or X about it, it would get lots of attention. Everyone likes a spectacle, after all. But when it comes right down to it, I wish they had called today, "The Vocation of Saint Paul" because it's his call, and it's our call, that we celebrate today – the call every single one of us has received.

There was an article in the Sunday New York Times on January 5 about a Lutheran pastor in Brooklyn who has become known for turning around churches whose physical buildings and congregations are on the verge of collapse. The title of the article was "The Church Fixer." The pastor's name is Katrina Foster.

She's been able to do what she's done – with the help of the Holy Spirit – by following in Jesus' footsteps. This is how Pastor Foster put it: "Jesus organized people, resources, and power," so the churches could be light in the world's darkness. And then she said, "God is always calling us to do something."

I can't wait to find out what God is calling St. Paul's to do during the time I'm with you. I don't know what it is yet, but I know it's something extraordinary!

Amen.