

I

“When were you saved?”

As a kid growing up in the South, I was asked that question more than once. Sometimes I was asked by friends, and other times by complete strangers.

“When were you saved?” Each time I was asked that question, it was clear to me that the person asking it was expecting me to answer by pointing to a specific event in my life and to describe my moment of conversion.

II

I think we are drawn to those kinds of conversion stories precisely because they're dramatic in the best sense of that word. There's a setup and building tension – this is what my life was like. There's a climax – this was the moment of crisis, and this is what happened. And there's resolution – this is what my life is like now.

But I wonder, is conversion always so formulaic? Is conversion a one and done thing? And is it only people outside the faith who experience conversion?

Or does the Holy Spirit also work in more subtle ways?

Those kinds of questions are at the heart of our reading from the Acts of the Apostles today.

III

This spring and summer, we've been reading and preaching our way through the Acts of the Apostles, or simply Acts for short. In the first chapter of Acts, as the resurrected Jesus was ascending into

heaven, he made his disciples a promise. He said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

As we've been reading, we've seen that promise beginning to come to fruition. The disciples have indeed received power as the Holy Spirit has come upon them, and the good news about Jesus is beginning to move beyond Jerusalem. Last week, we read in chapter 8 about the Spirit at work to the south of Jerusalem along the Gaza road as Philip and the Ethiopian Secretary of the Treasury rode along in a chariot.

Today, our story moves to the northeast of Jerusalem, on the road leading to Damascus, where we meet a man named Saul. Before we get to the story, there's something you need to know about Saul. He is the number one enemy of the disciples. In fact, in the seventh chapter of Acts, when a mob comes together to beat one of the disciples to death, Saul holds their jackets for them and looks on approvingly as they do it.

So unlike the Ethiopian Secretary of the Treasury from last week, Saul isn't curious about the gospel and hungry to learn more; he's actively opposed to the gospel and doing everything in his power to crush it.

So with that background in mind, listen now for a Word from God from Acts 9:1-19.

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

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

In many English bibles, this story appears under the subhead, "The Conversion of Saul." It's a dramatic conversion story, complete with Saul being knocked to the ground and blinded by a sudden flash of light, and the voice of Jesus himself calling "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

And if you know the rest of this story, you know that Saul will become known as Paul, and he will become the most prolific church planter and theologian of the first century, and he will write about half of what we have come to know as the New Testament. Without Saul's conversion on the Damascus Road, who knows what might have become of the fledgling movement called the church?

But I submit that Saul was not the only one who experienced a conversion by the power of the Holy Spirit there in Damascus.

We know precious little about Ananias, other than that he was a follower of Jesus who lived in Damascus, a little

over 100 miles northeast of Jerusalem. Even in those early days, we can assume that he knew that publicly identifying oneself as a follower of Jesus carried with it some amount of risk. We can assume that he'd heard about the troubles down in Jerusalem, about how some of the religious leaders there had been arresting the disciples, and how some of them had even been killed. We can assume that Ananias may have heard that Saul, the number one enemy of the disciples, was on his way to Damascus, arrest warrants in hand.

We can also assume that Ananias was a man of deep, biblical faith, for when he heard the Lord call his name, he answered same way his ancestors Abraham and Moses and Isaiah answered before him – “Here I am, Lord.”

But when the Lord told him to get up and go and lay his hands on Saul, the sworn enemy of the disciples, Ananias replied, in Ryan's Revised Greek Translation, “Are you crazy, Lord?! Don't you know what Saul has been doing to your people? Don't you know he's got signed arrest warrants? Surely, you must be joking. Ha ha, that's a good one. Go to Saul and lay hands on him. More like run away from Saul before he lays his hands on me.”

But the Lord said to Ananias, ‘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.’

And then the text then simply says, “So Ananias went.”

But I don't know about you, but I wouldn't have blamed Ananias one bit if he had just stayed put right where he was. Somebody else can go over to Straight Street and see about this Saul fellow. He's made it clear that he's enemy number one. It's far safer to just stay right here, thank you very much.

But the text simply says, “So Ananias went.”

And that's why I say that Saul wasn't the only one converted that day. Because the power of the Holy Spirit came over Ananias, too. The power of the Holy Spirit came over him and moved him off of his seat, moved him out of his hiding place, moved him not away from his sworn enemy, but toward him. The power of the Holy Spirit came over Ananias so that by the time he got across town to Straight Street, he was no longer filled with fear. He no longer viewed Saul as an enemy or a threat, as someone to be avoided at all costs. The power of the Holy Spirit came over Ananias so that he was able to walk right into that house, lay his hands gently on the man who everyone told him was his sworn enemy, and call him by the name “Brother.”

Saul was converted from his bombastic breathing of threats and murder against the church into its most important evangelist.

And it strikes me that the same Spirit who knocked Saul to his backside and blinded him could have just as easily removed those scales from his eyes. The Spirit could have completed Saul's conversion without any human help.

But God's Holy Spirit worked in and through Ananias, too, so much so that Ananias was converted from his fear and reticence into one filled with the confidence and peace that passes all understanding.

But ultimately, the bible isn't about Saul, or Ananias, or the Israelites or the Gentiles. Ultimately, the bible is about God, and about us, and about this relationship that exists between us.

IV

So what about you, my friend? Have you had a dramatic moment of conversion? Can you point to the exact time and place where you were bowled over by the power of the Holy Spirit, when you just knew that your life would never be the same?

Or has your conversion been a little more subtle?

Either way, know this my friend – God has a mission, a plan, for the blessing of all the families of the earth. That's what God is up to in the world - the blessing of all the families of the earth – it's right there in Genesis 12:4.

God didn't put Saul and Ananias together in a room just for kicks –both of them had a vital role to play in building the kingdom of God.

And so do you.

My friend, here's what I believe deep in my heart. God's intention is the blessing of all the families of the earth – those who are in the church, and those who are outside of it – those who are the allies of the church, and yes, even those who are its

enemies. God's mission, God's intent, is the blessing of all the families of the earth.

And for reasons that pass all understanding, over and over again, God's Holy Spirit chooses to work through you and me, ordinary, messy, broken people to fulfill God's ultimate purpose of blessing.

I don't know the specifics of your particular role. Saul became Paul and became a household name, and Ananias faded into the background again. But both were vital for advancing the mission of God, and so are you.

And you might say, "I'm too old to be useful to God." That's what your ancestors Abraham and Sarah said, too, when they were old and childless, but God made of them a great nation.

And you might say, "But I'm too young." That's what your ancestor Jeremiah said, too, but during some of the very darkest days, God made him into a mighty profit of Judah.

And you might say, "But God couldn't possibly use me." That's what your ancestor Moses, a convicted murder on the run said, too, but God used him to lead God's people out of Egypt.

And you might say, "But I'm too frightened." That's what Esther said, too, but God said to her, "Who knows but that you have come to a royal position for just such a time as this?"

Over and over again, God works in and through ordinary, messy, broken people to create extraordinarily beautiful things. Over and over again, God works in

and through ordinary, messy people like Saul and Ananias and you and me, so much so that the blind are made to see again. The lame are made to walk again. And sworn enemies become siblings in Christ.

V

And so that thought gives me comfort this day, my friends. For as we live out our discipleship together here at First Presbyterian Church, these are certainly complicated, hard, and tense times through which we are living.

It would certainly be easier if we were to just sit tight, to hide ourselves, to not make too much noise and do our best to avoid the notice of those who would oppose us, to steer clear of those who do not agree that God's intention is that all the families of the earth should be blessed.

No one would blame us if we just stayed put.

But the thing is, as we've seen as we've been reading through Acts, the Spirit keeps moving from the center out to the edges. The Spirit keeps moving from Jerusalem and out to Judea and to Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

The Spirit of the Lord keeps moving out there onto the sidewalk and into the streets and into the classrooms and into the courtrooms and into the boardrooms and into the living rooms into the waiting rooms and into all of the places where the families of the earth live and move and have our being.

The Spirit of the Lord said to Saul, "Get up."

And the Spirit of the Lord said to Ananias, "Get up."

And the Spirit of the Lord says to us, the church of Jesus Christ, "Get up."

Get up.

Not for nothing, in the biblical Greek, the phrase "Get up," has much in common linguistically with "Rise up," as in "to rise up again from the dead."

For that is who we are – Easter people, who have been claimed in the waters of baptism. People who have been saved by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. People who have been converted by the power of the Holy Spirit to get up, converted to rise up, converted to bring sight to those who cannot see, to bring healing to those who cannot move, to who move toward our enemies in love, rather than away from them in fear, to bring a gentle touch and call them our siblings, to proclaim good news to the poor and release to the captive and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

God has converted us into an Easter people, a resurrection people, a people who get up, who move away from and toward justice and love.

That's who God is converting us to be, even now.

Thanks be to God. Amen.