

## **“Get Up and . . . Go”**

5 May 2019: 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571  
Preaching Text: Acts 9:1-20

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**“Conversion for me was not a Damascus Road experience.  
I slowly moved into an intellectual acceptance of what my intuition had always known”  
(—Madeleine L'Engle).**

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Near the end of the fourth century CE Saint Augustine writes about his own conversion to Christianity in the *Confessions*. In his account, Augustine hears the words “*tolle, lege, tolle, lege*” which means “take up and read, take up and read.” So, according to Augustine, there in a Milan garden, he picks up a Bible, opened it, and read the first passage he saw. After reading Romans 13:13-14, he writes “All shadows of doubt were dispelled.” Here is the text:

**Not in riots or in drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts (Romans 13:13-14).**

As it happens, perhaps the most legendary conversion story besides Augustine’s is the account we have before us today. Hear the day’s lesson from Acts 9:1-6:

**1** Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest **2** 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. **3** Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. **4** He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” **5** He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. **6** But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do” (Acts 9:1-6).

**7** The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. **8** 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. **9** For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

**10** Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” **11** 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, **12** 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.” **13** But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; **14** and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” **15** 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; **16** 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" (9:7-20).**

Previously, Acts 8:3 reports that "Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison." In today's lesson we read about Saul's great makeover: from persecutor to evangelist. In the first century, Jews often held two names: a Semitic one ("saul") and a Roman/Greek name (Paul). The Empire granted Jews extradition rights to their own constituents beyond Palestine. Those "who belonged to the Way" were Jewish Christians, often also synagogue worshippers. By bullying these Christians, Paul persecuted Christ himself.

A question today is: Do we all need a light from heaven to convert us? Must we too "fall to the ground" and "hear a voice saying to something to us?" In Acts 2 God converted 3000 persons and the apostles baptized them. In Samaria as Philip preached "the crowds having heard, believed and were baptized, both men and women" (Acts 8:12). The Ethiopian (Acts 8), Cornelius (10), and Lydia (16), each has a unique conversion story. So, why is it that believers today are sometimes spiritually browbeat for coming to Christ in a way not exactly like a disapproving neighbor's happenstance or a co-worker's deeply moving religious experience? Do we have to undergo conversion in the same precise way that others do?

Years ago, my pharmacist friend, Bodie Weaver, shared a perceived problem he had. In his community many people were suddenly being "born again." Some suggested he better get on the band wagon or God would leave him behind. Bodie summed up his problem like this:

**I have rarely, if ever, felt far from God. My parents brought me to church when I was still in three-cornered britches. As a forty-something year-old man, there are only a hand-full of Sundays that I did not attend church and Sunday school when I could have. I have taught the Junior High Sunday School class for ten years. Some people around here now make me feel as if my faith is second-rate because I have not had their 'burning bush' experience.**

I knew what Bodie meant because I have heard others say similar things. Some people do not seem to fit into the three-step prearranged evangelical mode of preaching and faith. We can summarize this model as follows:

- 1. You are a rotten sinner and you have a problem with God!**
- 2. Christ is the answer to your misery!**
- 3. Repent and be saved!**

Notwithstanding how many conversion instances fit this scenario, they don't fit all. In the New Testament there are plenty of sinners and tax-collectors. As in our day there is plenty of sin and evil. As in our day there are a lot of people ready to participate in these activities of sin and evil. Sin at its most basic level means "separation from God." Today, like twenty-one centuries ago, the state of sin can explain a lot of what passes for human misery.

Yet, not all people feel like the broken people that scripture commonly addresses. Modern Christians can also feel like the so-called Rich Young Ruler who asked Jesus' "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus then replied to him: "You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.'" The young man replied, "I have kept all these since my youth" (Luke 18:18-21). At times we meet people who do not have resumes that include adultery, murder, theft, false witness, or the disrespect of parents. What would Jesus say to such a person?

When people tell about their faith journeys, most share a narrative that begins something like this: "I was raised in the church and never knew a time when I was not a Christian." There is something comforting about having such an early faith identity. There is nothing wrong with such a faith statement unless you compare it with Acts 9; then our story seems to lack dramatic theatre. To some, it seems woefully inadequate.

If the truth be known, we have some discomfort with the story of the conversion of Saul, so we become defensive and say, "Although I never had a Damascus Road experience, I still believe God has been at work in my life." This reflects a feeling of what some might call a "faith inferiority complex."

May we remember that what happened to Saul was noteworthy. It was noteworthy precisely because it was atypical of the way a good number of people became converts. Luke goes out of his way to let us know the consequence of this conversion of Saul/Paul by giving us three distinctive accounts of it (Acts 9:1-20; Acts 22:3-21; Acts 26:2-23). Since Luke was a concise writer, this repetition stands out (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2, 2009).

Accordingly, although the way God converted us may be important for most Christians, what is even more vital is—what our conversion grew to be. For my money, although it is good for God to save from bad stuff; it is better that God saved us for good stuff!

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