

Today is the final Sunday after Epiphany. Since the Reformation Era, Lutherans have observed the Feast of the Transfiguration on the last Sunday after Epiphany, and this has especially been the custom in American Lutheran churches. This date, however, January 25th, is the ancient feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. It is a companion to what we observed last week on January 18, the Confession of St. Peter.

As we heard last Sunday, it is abundantly clear from our Lord's own words, and from apostolic teaching in the New Testament, that Christ Himself is the cornerstone, the rock upon which the church is built with the confession that St. Peter is the first to make. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And it is especially these two, Peter and Paul, together with James and John and the other apostles from the Twelve Disciples who are the foundation, the pillars, which stand directly upon Christ the chief cornerstone. The church is supported by, held up, by their testimony and confession of what they have seen, heard, and touched.

But it is not simply because of the antiquity of these two feasts that we observe Paul's conversion today. Nor is it the significance of Paul as one of the chief pillars of the church, nor the great event of Paul's conversion to the faith he once opposed and his zealous, unceasing devotion the Lord's direction to carry His Gospel and confess His name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. That all is true. A Christianity without the life and ministry of Paul is as unimaginable as an Old Testament Israel without the life and ministry of Moses. Of the 27 books of the New Testament, 13 were written by Paul himself, and another three come from those closely associated with him.

There is no denying the great significance of what our Lord accomplished through Paul of Tarsus, any more than any serious student of church and world history can discount the influence of Martin Luther and the recovery of the pure Gospel in the Reformation. God has accomplished particular things through specific people that He used in a unique way. Thus we hold up and give thanks for those holy figures who were called and made holy by Christ, and who were used by Him to bless the church. St. Mary alone is the birthgiver of God in human flesh. St. John the Baptist was the first among all men to identify Jesus of Nazareth as the long-promised Messiah. Peter, James, and John were the closest friends of our Lord, witnessing things no other human eye beheld: the raising of Jairus' daughter, the glorious Transfiguration, and our Lord's agony in Gethsemane. John stood at the very foot of our Lord's cross, beholding blood and water. Their brother disciples and the holy women beheld the resurrected Lord, touched His body risen again in flesh and bone, ate and drank with Him, and thus gave testimony to the fact that He had risen from the dead. The apostles, and greatest among them, St. Paul, carried this testimony and the Lord's saving Gospel to the ends of the earth.

But what makes this feast day a fitting way to end the Time of Christmas, what began with Advent, and now begin to look toward next Sunday, the preparations for our Lenten journey to Holy Week and Easter, is what we see in Paul's conversion that must be true for every Christian, what we confess in the Small Catechism for this week, the final part of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, the daily dying to sin and rising anew in Christ Jesus. Or as we might put it: I go to the Divine Service a Saul, and I come from it a Paul.

We see in this great apostle, this missionary without any peer, not only a unique figure in the history of the Lord Jesus' gracious working for His church, through whose pen we have the gift of His word and teaching, but also an example for every Christian, the pattern of our life.

For most of us here, our calling to faith in Christ was in baptism as newborn babes, or very young children. Others of us here can resonate a bit with St. Paul, coming to faith in Christ as grown, mature adults, experiencing that complete reversal of life, going from unbelief to faith, from darkness to light, from opposition to devotion.

But what the coming Lenten season calls us to remember, what we confess in the Small Catechism, is what St. Paul teaches in Romans chapter 6, **“We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”** The whole Christian life is one of repentance, of turning from sin and towards Christ. Not just the tradition of the season of Lent, but our Lord Himself in His Word calls us to see if we have become lukewarm, careless in our lives as Christians, not too concerned with godliness, and not too bothered by wickedness; to soberly examine our lives according to the Ten Commandments and recognize where sin has gained a toehold, a beachhead; to recognize where earnest piety has given way to mindless habit, thoughtless routine, and by Christ’s Word, have the scales fall from our eyes, confess that we have sinned against Him, recognize that He has paid the price for our sins by His blood, that our Father in heaven does not hold our sins and failures against us, and so rise again to new life.

Christ did this for the great persecutor Saul, changed him, put him to great use as Paul. He can and will certainly do for you. Begin to think and plan now, these next weeks, how you might put this Lent to fruitful use for you. You know where Christ is and is at work: in His Word and Sacraments. You know the works to which He calls His Christians, prayer, self-denial, and sacrificial giving for the good of others. Consider and make a plan.

Above all, be deliberate in the increased use of the Means of Grace. Every occasion of hearing God’s Word, receiving His absolution, partaking of the blessed Sacrament, is another Damascus Road moment. There you the sinner meet the Lord who makes Himself known to you. Not to obliterate or condemn, but to call to repentance and faith, that He might put you to work for the good of His kingdom. As with Paul, that particular chosen vessel of Christ, He has works prepared from eternity for you to do, not to merit His love but to manifest it to others. And as you feebly struggle until the day you shine in resurrected glory, with Paul and every sinner declared the righteous child and possession of God, you flee throughout this battle to the Holy Sacrament of the Altar. There you are fortified and comforted in the race. There you bring your wants and weakness, your sins and hurts, and you are given divine life and strength, forgiveness and peace. Go to the Divine Service a Saul, and come from it a Paul.