

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Year B

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Text: Acts 9:1-22

Title: “New Beginnings: A Change of Heart”

This time of year marks a new beginning especially for those with children, especially for any students or teachers or school administrators or church staff and volunteers. It’s a new beginning for us as a congregation, as well, as we add a second weekly opportunity to worship together. Over the next 4 weeks, therefore, we’ll be exploring new beginnings in our worship and today we’ll begin with the story of Paul, a man who experienced Jesus in such a powerful way that it completely changed his life. Here is the second part of his conversation story...

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

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus,<sup>20</sup> and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”<sup>21</sup> All who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?”<sup>22</sup> Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

Life is a series of new beginnings. From birth to death, changes come that invite us to a new start. As we shared in the call to worship: a baby born; a new class to attend or teach; someone met, loved and married; a new job; graduation; a retirement; a death of someone loved. And yet it's not just life's natural transitions that bring the possibility of new beginnings. What happens if there comes a time of yearning for God in a way not experienced before? What happens if a way of life is no longer satisfying? What happens when we know there is more to life than the way we might be living it but aren't really sure what this yearning means?

The Bible is filled with stories of those who met God in unexpected ways that led them to new beginnings they never anticipated. The experience of Saul of Tarsus is one such person. His is the quintessential conversion story. Even people not of the church often know the story of Saul who became Paul after his conversion. It's the story of an enemy of the church who watched over the robes of those who stoned the first Christian martyr named Stephen. And as Saul watched the man die as Stephen prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them”, he was undaunted and approved of the killing. Sounds like some of the terrorist scenes we've heard about in recent years. In fact, Saul was so zealous in his attempts to wipe out this new sect, that he became a posse leader, a terrorist of sorts, who would do whatever it took to rid the world of this heresy of those who claim to follow Jesus on the Way.

Although people were being healed, the dead raised and resources shared in the community of those who followed the Way, which was the earliest of names for the church, Saul was undeterred in his hatred toward the followers of Christ. “Still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” sounds like the angry rhetoric we hear from those bent on ridding the world of whatever group of people they are convinced are of the devil. This is serious business, and Saul was a serious leader as one of the posse leaders, so much so that he secured permission from the authorities—the Sanhedrin—to round up all those followers of Jesus in Damascus and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial and punishment.

He was on his way, leading the charge, hiking the nearly 140 miles from Jerusalem to Damascus, known today as the capital of Syria and the refugees streaming out of the country to escape the war there. It was a journey that would take days. On the way, this one who thought he was on the side of God as he went after Christians had an encounter with the living Christ. A flash of light drove him to his knees. A voice heard:

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

“Who are you, Lord?”

“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you are to do.”

Now the one who was so fierce and powerful in his persecution of followers of Jesus finds that he is blind as a bat and helpless. He has now learned that what he thought was the work of God in this persecution of people on The Way was actually quite the opposite, that in the threats and the killing of people who followed Jesus, he was actually working against Christ. As Jesus says in the Gospel According to Matthew: “As you’ve done it to the least of these you have done it to me.” Saul, the formidable opponent and leader finds that he now must be led. He is as a child who must depend on the good graces and mercy of others. It’s as if he has experienced one of Jesus’ teachings, “Unless you become like child you will never enter the kingdom of God.”

As Saul is led by the hand I wonder if he had the sense that he was entering the kingdom of God,? Or did it take the three days of fasting to convince him that the ways of God in Jesus are not about the kind of forceful violence that he was leading and advocating? Did it take being weak to lead him to a new beginning in understanding that God in Jesus stands with the persecuted, the vulnerable, the forsaken? Saul needed time to ponder, to pray.

Ananias on the other hand, hears a different word from God. He is told to find the house of Judah where Saul is awaiting him. Of course, he isn’t anxious to go. Like other saints before him, when Jesus tells him to go and lay hands on Saul and pray in order to heal him of his blindness, Ananias understandably wants nothing to do with the assignment. Like Moses who rebuff’s God’s call to free the slaves in Egypt with the excuse that he can’t speak well or like Jeremiah who said he was too young, Ananias wants nothing to do with God’s assignment to be used as a healing agent. Who in their right mind would want to go to a known terrorist and pray over him even if God told them to do so?

Yet, Ananias had a change of heart when he was told that God had plans for Saul, great plans, plans that involved sharing the good news of Christ coming to demonstrate God’s love for the world with the world beyond the boundaries of Judaism, beyond the boundaries of class. Ananias set his objections aside in order to obey what he believed the Lord was telling him to do. His change of heart can be heard in his address to Saul when he calls him “Brother.”

As he laid his hands on him, this traditional way of praying for the sick--using human touch to demonstrate care, this unknown holy man of God, Ananias, brought healing to the weakened Saul of Tarsus. Saul received his sight again, was able to eat again. Yet, it wasn’t just physical sight he received. Something happened to his heart, his spirit. For Saul, this was a completely new beginning, a new beginning marked by his baptism. He was converted from terrorist to evangelist, from persecutor of Christ to proclaimer of Christ. As a result of this new beginning, God used him to share the Gospel message that God has come in Christ to reveal God’s profound love for the world.

So what can we take from this oft-repeated conversion story? First, this isn’t your conversion story or mine. It’s Saul’s. Conversion need not be the same for every person. God used a dramatic, amazing method of gaining Saul’s conversion but that doesn’t mean God uses the same approach with everyone.

I have spent my entire life in the church, for example, and I can identify several experiences of conversion in which I felt my heart changed, but life with God has been a

continued on-going experience nurtured in the community of the church. For many of us, conversion happens over and over again as we encounter the living Christ. Saul's conversion experience is not to be the model for everyone. It's extraordinary. So if you can't point to a specific moment, a specific experience, a specific place in which you were "saved", converted, you're not alone. Maybe God has used or is using a different approach with you in seeking conversion. Maybe you can look back and wonder about those moments in which you experienced a change of heart when it comes to God. Or maybe such a new beginning lies in your future.

The second thing to take from this story is how little faith we sometimes have in God, in the power of God to affect change in someone. I think of those I might consider an enemy of God's, persecutors of the church, those who diminish people of faith—radical Islamic terrorists who are making such a destructive noise in the world. I am inclined to think they are beyond hope, beyond reach, but Saul's conversion reminds us that no one is beyond God's reach. No one is beyond God's power to change. No one is beyond the hope of a new beginning sprung from a change of heart.

In the Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus teaches the disciples,

“Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>24</sup> Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”<sup>25</sup> When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, “Then who can be saved?”<sup>26</sup> But Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.”

Sometimes our confidence in God's power to change people is so weak. I sometimes wonder if we are more willing to judge people as lost and beyond help than we are to hold an undying hope that God has the power to change hearts, even those of enemies.

Are you in need of a new beginning? Are you in need of a changed heart? I can't tell you how God may affect such changes. God uses different approaches for different people. I can say that such changes usually happen in community. Saul's took place with people of faith around him. Jesus disciples' took place in their small group. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, described an experience of a changed heart in his journal. He wrote:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

New beginnings take place in relationship with other people through the power of God. They are not solo events.

If you are looking for a new beginning, consider becoming part of a group of people who

are seeking God's direction, God's presence, God's grace, mercy and power. Sunday mornings there are three groups for adults open to you. Children and youth have those opportunities also in addition to JAM beginning Sept. 23. They are all listed in the bulletin insert. There will be more opportunities in the future also as small groups begin to take shape under Rev. Reisinger's leadership. If you are interested in such a group, there's a place to indicate that on the communication cards.

If you aren't looking for a new beginning, it just might come to you unexpectedly. God has a record of affecting such changes. It may not come as a blinding light and an audible voice. Maybe it will come through a conversation as it did with Ananias who, apparently, had such a relationship with the Spirit of God that he recognized when he was being asked to do something on God's behalf. Maybe your change of heart will come, as it did for John Wesley, hearing someone read or speak about God's loving grace seeking your heart. Be open to it. God may be asking you to be part of some great transformation. Who knows?

Since God has the power to transform the likes of Saul who was a fierce enemy of followers of Jesus, God has the power to affect a new beginning for anyone. It's all done out of God's profound love for human beings like us. It's all done with the intent to give us all life that really is life and not some shallower version of existence. May that experience of God's gift be yours and mine as we live our lives together today and tomorrow. May our hearts be changed by the power of a new beginning sown in the soil of God's love known in Jesus Christ.