

JANUARY 25, 2009
CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL
“SIDE-SWIPE BY GOD”

Let us pray: Gracious God, we thank you for your call to Saul the Pharisee, the persecutor of your church, that led him to become Paul the Apostle, the bearer of your good news to the Gentiles—meaning the likes of us who are not Jewish by birth or belief. It’s in Jesus’ name, son of David and Savior of all—Jew and Gentile—that I pray. Amen.

We began our Week of Prayer for Christian Unity last Sunday on a day we observed as “The Confession of St. Peter.” We remembered Simon the crusty fisherman’s bold response to Jesus’ question “*But who do you say that I am?*” as he answered his Master: “*You are Messiah—the anointed one—Son of the living God.*” To which Jesus responded with his nicknaming of Simon which was

really a kind of ironic pun: “*Simon, you are Petros*” —a name meaning “Rock” or “Rocky” —*and on this rock I will build my church.*” It’s a kind of joke because we know that “Sandy” might’ve been a better nickname than Rocky, since Peter will end up denying Jesus three times, Peter the first bishop of Rome, the first pope.

Today we close the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity by remembering the other “bookend” figure of the early church, the apostle Paul who began his career as a hyper-zealous Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus, whom our first reading from Acts identifies as a “persecutor” of the early church, one who “*breathed threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.*” I don’t think it’s too far afield for us to call him a “terrorist,” a word we’re all too familiar with today, a “religious terrorist” whose zeal for his faith led him to plot violence against those early followers of “The Way,” as the Jesus’ movement was

first called. And as Acts tells the story, it wasn't that Saul simply had a "change of mind," but as he himself always insisted, he had an actual confrontation with the risen Jesus one day on the road to Damascus, a confrontation that utterly changed his life as he received a **call** from God—like the prophets before him—that utterly changed the direction of his life—leading him to see his God and his religion in a new light.

One day, so the story goes, while on his way to Damascus where he was headed to bring back "in chains" followers of the Way, men or women, according to Luke the author of Acts, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him knocking him to the ground as a voice thundered "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*" Saul, ever the good intellectual, schooled never to take mere experience at face value, is moved to ask the Voice, "*Who are you, Lord?*"

And what does the Voice answer? "*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting?*" Now the

first part we get. The Voice is Jesus' voice. But isn't it peculiar that Jesus should say, "*whom you are persecuting?*" For Saul, of course, thought that he was persecuting the **followers** of Jesus, Jesus the Galilean who had been crucified by the Romans in Jerusalem some years earlier, whose followers then claimed they had experienced as risen from the dead three days following his death on what they came to call Easter Sunday which they then began celebrating ever after as the "Christian Sabbath," no longer Saturday, the 7th day of the week, but Sunday, the 1st day of the week.

"*You are persecuting me,*" the Voice told Saul, what I can't help but think of as the origin of Paul's later theological claim that the Church—the followers of the Way—are themselves "the body of Christ"—Jesus' continuing because en-Spirited body in the world. "*You are persecuting me,*" the Voice of Jesus told Saul, absolutely upsetting, turning topsy-turvy,

Saul's world, setting him on the road to becoming the other leader of the early church, the apostle to the Gentiles, Simon Peter's bookend—Simon the unlettered Galilean fisherman, the rough and ready, “rocky” and temperamental leader of the disciples, whom Acts doesn't hesitate to show us still has an awful lot to learn about the early church's mission—and how it will not be necessary, as Peter and the rest of the Jerusalem church leaders first assume, for followers of the Way, for the Church, to become adherents of the Jewish law in order to become Christians.

Saul of Tarsus become Paul the Apostle —also, notice, having gone through a change in name symbolic of his life changing call on the road to Damascus— constitutes the other “bookend” of the early church whose life stands in sharp contrast to Peter's. For Paul is a well-educated Pharisee from the cosmopolitan world of the Jewish diaspora who had been schooled in

Jerusalem at the feet of the famous rabbi Gamaliliel, a Greek-speaking Jew who many think probably had the status of an official citizen of the Roman Empire, a person who was naturally looked upon suspiciously by church “headquarters” in Jerusalem—by pillars like Peter and John and James, Jesus’ brother, but who would become the Way’s ambassador plenipotentiary to the Gentile world, carrying the good news of this heretofore little Jewish sect to the “whole inhabited world”—the *ecumene* as it was called in Greek.

As the Book of Acts and Paul’s own writings don’t hesitate to show, Peter and Paul weren’t always on the “same page,” as we would put it, having serious conflicts and differences as strong-minded leaders often do. As some wit once observed, whoever it was who famously said of the early church “*See how they love one another!*” must’ve caught the church in an unusually quiet moment, for from the beginning real-world

conflict and controversy marked the life of the church. In fact, as I like to say, the clearest sign of “apostolic succession” in the life of the church is not the laying on of hands of bishops but the very controversy and conflict that continue to mark the life of the church—just like it was back there in the days of Peter and Paul.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying this is a good thing, or the way it’s ‘sposed to be. I’m just saying it’s a real thing—just as the church is a real-life human institution—and often acts like it. So get used to it! And what’s more, while Peter and Paul had their serious differences, the church in time came to embrace both of them and they were able to reconcile their most serious differences in the cause of the unity of the Gospel by the intervention of the Spirit. And perhaps most significantly, tradition has it that both suffered death in Rome—the heart of empire—as martyrs—witnesses—to the good news of

Jesus shedding their very blood in witness to the One who had shed his blood for them and for the salvation of the whole world.

Krister Stendahl, the great Swedish Lutheran biblical scholar who once served as Dean of Harvard Divinity School and then as the Bishop of Stockholm, whom we once had the privilege of hosting in Ann Arbor—and who died not many months ago—long argued in an illuminating and persuasive way, that we really celebrate this day wrongly by insisting on calling it “The Conversion of St. Paul.” For rather, what occurred that day on the road to Damascus was not Paul’s “conversion” from Judaism to Christianity—from one faith or religion to another. But rather as both Luke’s account of the story in Acts and Paul’s own recollection in our reading from his Letter to the Galatians plainly reveal, Paul on the road to Damascus was encountered by a revelation—an epiphany if you will—of the risen Jesus himself—which he understood to

be a call from God himself, as he writes the Galatians, “*so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.*” Moreover Paul describes his “call” in words and images resonant with the call stories of old he knew from Scripture—from the stories of the prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah and Amos and Ezekiel and Moses and the boy Samuel, as we heard last week. For Paul came to believe that “*God, who had set me apart before I was born...called me through his grace*” to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

Of course there was a conversion but that life change was from that of being an enemy to a proponent of the Gospel. As Paul himself admits, people said in astonishment “*The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy!*” Or as Luke reports in Acts, “*Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name?*” adding “*And has he not*

come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?”

Suspicion, you see, dies hard among us religious types who find it hard to believe that a “leopard can change its spots” or a “terrorist can become a peacemaker” — that the lion can lie down with the lamb, as Isaiah once put it. It wasn’t a new God or even a new religion that Saul the Pharisee was converted to, as Stendahl insists. It was God who revealed to Saul his real call through a revelation — an epiphany — of Jesus Christ, and that call — perhaps as Luke suggests, mediated by a disciple in Damascus named Ananias — led to Saul the religious terrorist’s rebirth as Paul, Jesus’ apostle to the Gentiles. Paul did not change Gods, but Paul’s God certainly changed him into a servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Amazing, huh? Those who had known and feared Paul the terrorist certainly thought so — and weren’t all that sure they could trust the “new Paul.” But it’s no more

amazing than the change God can work in the likes of you and me! And that's good news! Change we can believe in, to coin a phrase.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.