

Conversion of St. Paul, 2009

Text: Acts 9:1-22

Title: Conversion Stories

+INI+

We Lutherans get a little nervous when you start talking about conversions. We get uncomfortable, maybe squirm a little bit. The fact is, most of us do not have a conversion story, and we're not quite sure what to do with someone who does.

If you have friends who are Baptist or Methodist, or another brand of American Protestant, you may have heard their conversion story. It probably goes something like this:

"I was raised in a nice family. We went to church on special occasions, but not regularly. When I was a teenager I started to hang with the wrong crowd. I got into sex, drugs, and rock and roll. It was only by a miracle of God that I didn't end up in jail or lying face down in the gutter somewhere.

"I knew that there was something missing in my life, but I didn't know what. One of my friends invited me to come to their church. I didn't really want to go, but I decided to give it a try. Near the end of the program, a speaker got up and began to witness to me. He talked about his own story, how bad his life was until he found Jesus. He said that I could change my life around if I made a decision for Jesus, if I prayed a simple prayer and came down to the front of the church. Those words touched me deeply. I realized that I was lost without Christ and need to make a change in my life.

"With tears in my eyes I decided that I needed a new start, and so I came forward and received Jesus into my life. I was born again and my life has changed. I'm now fire for the Lord."

These stories make us Lutherans nervous, because they usually don't sound too much like our stories.

Now each one of us is different, and none of us have the same story. But most of our stories have a similar plot line. Many of us could probably identify with a story like this:

"I was born to Lutheran parents who were active in their church. They brought me to be baptized when I was only a week or two old, and I don't remember it at all. My parents brought me to Sunday School, and I remember learning about Jesus there. We learned our Bible stories and some simple songs. When I was older, my parents brought me to confirmation class. We had to memorize the catechism and even face questioning by the pastor in front of the congregation.

"I was married in the church, and I brought my children to be baptized. I tried to raise them as I was raised, but sometimes it was a struggle. We went through difficult times as a family, but the Lord always brought us through. Sometimes I felt close to the Lord, but other times he felt

distant. I still have some questions about what the church teaches and why we do what we do, but I know what I believe and I'm comfortable with the way things are."

Now I know that's not the story for all of you. Some of you are here because you married a Lutheran. Others came here for other reasons. But most of us were baptized as infants. We don't have that conversion story that others have. We don't have that one moment that we can point to and say- this is when I decided to follow Jesus.

We may have special times in our lives when our connection with the Lord felt particularly strong. You may have had a mountain top experience when you were on a retreat, perhaps as a teenager or young adult. You may point to your confirmation as when you declared what you believed. But you probably wouldn't say that you were converted at that time.

Because we were baptized as infants, we are tempted to wonder if it really counted, if we're really Christians. We can't remember it, we didn't have a say in it, and sometimes it doesn't feel like it really took. It might feel like there's something missing, like there's something more that we have to do to make it count.

If only we had that moment when we made a decision for ourselves. If only we had a conversion experience, then we would know for sure.

Now St. Paul, he had a conversion experience. He turned his life around, right?

Well, let's take a look at the text. It begins with Saul, out to murder Christians. He is so opposed to Christ that he is even on his way to a foreign country to hunt down His followers. Saul has devoted his life into stamping out this new religion.

But something unexpected happens along the way. Jesus appears to Him in a blinding flash of light and with a loud voice. It's enough to knock Saul off his horse.

But Saul is still not converted yet. The light and the voice do not convert him. Saul doesn't even know who is talking to him.

So the Lord sends Him into the city to wait. But he's blind. He's confused. Saul has to be led around. He's helpless. Saul is used to being in control. He's used to giving orders. But now he's no longer running the show. But he's still not converted.

Saul spent three days without eating or drinking. All he could do was sit in silence. All he could do was wait. He was totally helpless. And he was still not converted.

Then the Lord acts again. He calls Ananias and tells him to go find Saul.

The pastor doesn't want to do the job. He's scared. He's heard the rumors. He knows what kind of person this Saul is. But the Lord sends him anyways. He's just the person the Lord has chosen.

When pastor Ananias finds Saul, some amazing things happen. It begins with Ananias calling Saul, brother. This very man, who had supervised the stoning of Stephen. This very man who had persecuted the church throughout Judea, this very man, who had come here, to Damascus, for the expressed purpose of arresting Ananias and all the fellow believers. Ananias calls him, “brother.” The Lord had called Saul, and that made them brothers. Before this, they had been enemies, but now they are brothers.

Ananias tells Saul that the Lord has sent him to Saul to restore his sight and fill him with the Holy Spirit.

And then three things happen in rapid succession. Saul receives his sight, Saul is baptized, and Saul is fed. And all of this through pastor Ananias.

Now Saul is converted. He once was blind, but now he sees. He is filled with the Holy Spirit through Holy Baptism, and he is strengthened by the food he receives.

And his life is completely different. He goes from being an enemy of God to being one of his chosen apostles. He goes from persecuting Christians to being called their brother. He goes from being blind to having sight. He goes from being weak to being strong.

Eventually he would get a new name. He would no longer be called Saul, after the mighty king of the Old Testament, but he would be Paul, which means small, insignificant, shorty.

That is the story of Paul’s conversion. And it is your story as well. Whether you were baptized as a child or an adult. Whether you left the Lord and came back, or whether you’ve been in these pews every Sunday for your whole life.

At one time you were an enemy of Jesus. Even if you were only a tiny baby. Even if you didn’t realize it. You were conceived and born in sin, and were an enemy of Jesus.

But Jesus still loved you. Just as He loved Saul. He loved Saul by sending Ananias to him.

You were as helpless as Saul was in his blindness. And the Lord sent a pastor to you, too, to deliver his gifts. The pastor may have even been a little reluctant. But he came anyways. He spoke your name, he laid hands upon you, he baptized you, and he gave you food to eat.

And you were converted. Even if you don’t remember it. Even if you had no choice, no say in the matter. You were truly converted and became a child of God, just like Saul.

You see, your conversion is not about you. It’s not about your choice, or your decision, or even your faith. You might have even slept through the whole thing. But it wasn’t about you. It was about the Lord, and what he did for you, in changing your life and turning you around.

Saul was not presented with a choice. It was not up to him to make a decision. Saul did not decide one day to turn his life around and live differently. And that’s a good thing. Because the Lord did it all. The Lord called him, the Lord healed him, the Lord baptized him, and the Lord

strengthened him. When Paul retells this story it's all about the Lord and what the Lord has done for him.

At your baptism, the Lord did it all. You do not need be embarrassed or ashamed for not taking a more active role. It was real and it counts, even if you don't remember it. Instead, it's all about the Lord. You point to the Lord as having done the whole thing. His word is sure and you can know for sure that you were converted precisely because you yourself did not play a role.

And this is how you now live your life. It's not about you and what you're able to do in being a good husband or wife, son or daughter, or whatever the Lord has given to you. We all fail at these things every day. Being a follower of Christ means relying on the Lord for everything. It began with your baptism, but it does not end there. Even your confirmation was not about you. Confirmation is a prayer that the Lord would confirm in you the faith he gave you at your baptism. It's a prayer that you would be filled with the Holy Spirit, and that the Spirit would strengthen your faith.

The reason we come here every week is because we can't make it on our own. We need the Lord's forgiveness for the mistakes we've made, and we need His Spirit to strengthen us for the week ahead. And He freely gives us all these gifts. He does it all, just like He did when you were baptized.

Your conversion, your baptism, is something that you can draw strength and comfort from when fears and doubts assail you. The Lord chose you and made you his own, just like he chose Saul. Since you belong to Him he will never leave you or forsake you. You are precious to Him and He cares for you. You have a wonderful conversion story that tells all about the Lord and what He has done for you.