

“The Way to Go” Acts 9:1-22

It was the name before “Christian” according to Luke. No one can say for sure where the name originated but we can suppose. This designation was “in print” according to Luke, in letters to local synagogues, apparently complaining about a “new” following. A recently crucified Jewish Rabbi had apparently ruffled a few feathers among the religious right. They felt their “authority” was threatened and it is far easier to “eliminate” opposition rather than convince them to stop. And this is where Saul comes onto the scene. Well, actually he’s been on the scene for awhile now, if you call one small mention just a chapter ago, “an introduction”. At the beginning of chapter 8, just moments after the stoning of the first Christian martyr known as Stephen, we are told, “Saul approved of the killing...” (8:1) Notice it doesn’t say Saul picked up a stone, handed anyone a stone or even threw a stone but only that he “approved” of the killing. Now as you know “approved” could mean “he approved”, as in, “thought it was a good idea” or (and more likely as we will later learn) “Saul approved”, as in, “had the approval of authorities” and made others believe that what he said was right and just. It apparently was a new “way” of doing things in first century Palestine. Persecution of people “like” Stephen became the norm and Saul became the persecutor’s best friend. In fact Saul became the voice of the persecutor, at least according to our passage. Now I’ve seen angry people before. Sad to say I have been one of those angry people. Yes, I am not proud to say I’ve whispered under my breath about uncaring or dimwitted politicians. I have waved an angry fist at aggressive drivers on 400 series highways. And I’ve rolled my eyes at people who have offended me. But I have not “breathed out murderous threats” against anyone. So to be Saul and to do this kind of thing you must be “angry”, but even more, you must be feared. It doesn’t take much time or many verses to find out how feared Saul was when a man by the name of Ananias is later introduced to us. (9:10) Ananias, and others like him, because of their association with Stephen, had every right to be afraid because of Stephen’s murder. But then again Ananias was as fearful as you might think because he lived a ways away from the center of where everything was happening, like Jerusalem, where Stephen was put to death. Ananias, unlike Stephen, lived some 150 miles away in a place called Damascus. Jerusalem was the center of all that was “religious.” Jerusalem was where Solomon’s Temple was located. It was the home of the High Priest and as Allyson reminded us last Sunday, the market place for sacrifice. Damascus, although one of the Middle East’s oldest cities but nowhere near the prominence of Jerusalem and therefore little concern to the religious authorities. Damascus was really only known for it’s road, a major thoroughfare that stretched from Jerusalem to Damascus and just happened to be the road that a young man by the name of Saul traveled one life-changing day.

Saul was on his way to Damascus and not because he had heard of problems like Stephen, but to see “if” he could find others like Stephen. And on his “way” something happened. It’s a story, if you have grown up in the church that becomes a paradigm for “conversion” or the more literal understanding: “a turning about”. That “idea” is something you hear a lot about in the church – more so in some churches rather than others as does the wording. So the action of turning about, being born again, giving your heart to Jesus, making a profession of faith, being converted comes about because of what happened to Saul that day. But he’s not the first and he certainly won’t be the last. It’s just that this story is a reminder to us all that whether we need to turn a little (a few degrees) or turn alot (a 180 degree about face) “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) and “the wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23) And if anyone needed to “turn about” (I mean really turn around) it was Saul. Although a religions zealot he was misinformed and misdirected. No different, I suppose, than the “Christians” from California who were recently arrested because they tied their children to the bed to discipline them and make them more obedient or the “Christian” who holds up condemning placards at the funeral of a gay man or woman. Saul must have seen his hatred as “God’s way” but he couldn’t have been more wrong. This was not God’s way. To understand God’s way we need to turn or “re-turn” to Jesus. It seems one statement of Jesus in particular becomes central to those who follow Him. “Nearly every religion sees its converts as pilgrims,” writes Will Willimon. “The goal is to take us from where we are to a new place.” (Willimon) “But there is one primary way Jesus differentiates himself from other religious leaders/thinkers (Krishna, Buddha, Muhammad, Moses etc). Such religious icons claim to be the ‘way showers’ or ‘signposts’. That is they point away from themselves to the end or goal of human flourishing. But none (not one) claims to actually be ‘the way’ in and of himself” - that is – except Jesus Christ. The apostle John tells the account of Jesus speaking to his disciples one day and in response to Jesus comments about heading “the way” of the cross, Thomas speaks up wanting to be where Jesus is going but doesn’t know the way, to which Jesus responds, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) “There is a story of a mountain climber who had hired a Sherpa to take him to the summit. Early on the trip was easy for the terrain was not rough and the path visible. But as the trip continued the terrain became rough and the way unrecognizable to which the climber said to the Sherpa, “Who will I know the way” to which the guide responded, ‘I am the way.’” (Source: unknown) As John Stott writes in his classic book, Basic Christianity, “Jesus was not just another signpost but the destination to which the signposts lead.” Jesus’ words therefore resonated in the hearts and minds of His early followers that He was the “Way” (the only Way) so they became followers of “The

Way.” These were the ones of whom Saul hunted. But what Saul did not understand was that they were not the only ones being pursued.

On the Damascus Road is where Saul meets Jesus. In fact, it is the place all those changed by God meet Jesus. The Road to Damascus is not really a Road, per se, but a “powerful metaphor for Christian identity. Instead of being identified by a set of beliefs these faithful communities (to whom Stephen, Ananias and later Saul would belong) were known by their character in the world. Christian faith was a way of life (for these early followers) and one that impelled individuals and communities to leave the safe confines of home and church to walk on the road God had set out. ‘The Way’ suggests that faith is a living, active way of life,” writes Eric Barreto. Therefore Saul’s “conversion” need not be normative for everyone or an exact model of transformation but it is reminder of the “WAY” we are to go. Allow me to explain.

In Acts chapter 9 Luke’s account of Saul (who is later called Paul and becomes Christianity’s greatest evangelist and church planter and author of 2/3 of the New Testament) and Saul’s own re-telling of his faith story is not so much focused on what Saul does (for he really does nothing) but everything to do with what God does. God shows up to encounter Saul and not the other way around. God reveals Godself to pull Saul out of one life to place him in another – from former patterns and identity to new patterns and a new identity. We’re not sure how “far along the road” Saul was when he “saw the light” and encountered Jesus but I find it interesting that Saul and his companions continued onto to strange Damascus rather than go back to familiar Jerusalem, but then again maybe not. Countless people try to find God in what I would call “religion” when in truth God does not call anyone to a new religion but to a “relationship.” God would therefore certainly not send Saul back to Jerusalem for God was not present in the religion of the Pharisees. Instead God would send Saul to Damascus or the place where Saul could develop and grow in a relationship with God. But before this could happen God had to a new thing in Saul’s life. Upon encountering One Saul did not apparently know, (“Who are you Lord?” 9:5) Paul immediately lost his sight. Some say it was the only way for God to get Saul’s attention because as one sense leaves, your other senses are often heightened. In some ways what happens to Paul is the exact opposite of what we see in “similar” stories. Take the account in John 9, for example, where Jesus happens upon the blind man. This man could not see anything so with a concoction that Jesus makes himself and places on the man’s eyes, the blind man sees. But Saul’s vision appears ok prior to his encounter. Jesus doesn’t restore Saul’s vision (at least yet) but blinds him and even more allows him to wander in the dark for 3 days. (A good Biblical image of Jonah and even Jesus, don’t you think?). If then the first step of conversion is to step away from your original identity (that is living in relationship with the God who made you) then wander

aimlessly, the third step must be to “really” see. Ananias was the instrument God would use to bring sight to Saul and make this “enemy” of God a “friend” of God. Scales here are a reminder of the new perspective Saul would experience. We don’t know if he now had 20/20 vision or that he could put aside those glasses he always wore. I’m sure he still had the chance of getting pink eye, poked in the eye or risked his eyesight by looking directly into the eclipse but that Saul now saw things differently. It’s as if he saw things for the first time. Flowers were more beautiful because Saul now knew the One who had made them. He saw people differently and having great worth because He now knew God’s image was imprinted upon all people, no matter who they were. And no longer did things happen by chance but by the clear direction of One who was in control. God has a way of changing the perspective of anyone who has encountered Him. But that’s not all. There’s a final step in Paul’s conversion that we often forget. God doesn’t simply call us into relationship with God-self but in relationship with others. It doesn’t mean it is an easy transition because family is never easy. (Just look around the table at your next Thanksgiving Dinner and see if that person would have been invited if they were not blood.) Remember Ananias? He had every right to be nervous of Saul. But Saul was now family. And yet another reason not to return to Jerusalem. Paul’s family now resided in Damascus. Even though this story is separated by mere verses where time seems to stand still, time actually passes with Saul remaining in Damascus with the new family for some time. Saul had all the qualifications and all the academic training to begin ministry immediately but Saul needed time to become community.

And yet another good reminder for us here at KesPres and who are members of the holy catholic (universal) church. The WAY to go is Christ, let’s not forget that. And the WAY to go is together. Any other WAY we remain in an old identity wandering aimlessly alone. Here is the story of just of our own family who met Christ. (Lee Anne’s faith story).