

Acts 9:1-19
“The Energy of Conversion”
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Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA
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The Reading: Acts 9:1-19

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’⁵ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.’⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’⁷ The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

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

“Conversion” is a tricky word. Sue Carroll and I got a chuckle this week proofing the worship bulletin, because either due to auto-correct or a simple miss-stroke, the first version she sent me had my sermon title as “The Energy of *Conversation*.” Just two letters – an “a” and a “t” – made that much difference!

Conversion can be a tricky religious concept as well. There is more than one kind of conversion story in the Bible and in church history. They aren’t all the same. Some are sudden, dramatic changes like Saul’s, while others are subtle transformations over time like Ananias’. Some might be *private* experiences, but most involve a community. Conversion is contextual. Furthermore, it is not ‘one and done,’ say at a confirmation or a revival.

Some probably think of conversion negatively, as ‘churchy’ or holier-than-thou, because, tragically, instead of *inviting* people into faith, some churches try to frighten and force others to convert. At the same time, to convert to Christ’s way *is* a change of “Lords,” so it is a weighty, radical commitment.

Walter Eichrodt ascertained at least twenty Hebrew and Greek phrases in scripture for the idea of conversion.¹ The most common in Hebrew is “shuwb,” which means “to turn” or “return.” The Greek word “metanoia” in the New Testament is connected to this linguistically. So the concept of conversion is a change of heart and mind – to turn to God or Christ with one’s intellect *and* feeling, indeed with one’s *whole self!*

And what this passage from Acts has re-emphasized for me this week is that conversion to the living Christ brings about a conversion of our physical energy, as well. When we turn our lives over to Christ, how much energy we have and where it is directed changes.

Science defines *energy* as an entity’s capacity for doing work – for getting things done. So spiritual conversion makes a difference in *where and how* you and I behave and work. Christ fills us with strength and tells us where to focus this power.

How did this happen in Paul’s story? Notice: when he was Saul, on the hunt for Jesus followers, he was preoccupied with being right and persecuting those he considered God’s enemies, so energetic for evil and filled with hatred, his breath smelled of it!

Today this makes me think of Putin and other warmakers, of white supremacists, of those that hunt for women seeking an abortion, and those who harass LGBTQ+ persons. Conversion takes place in real life. In fact, Jim Wallis, a bridge person between the evangelical and progressive wings of the church, wrote: “Any idea of conversion that is removed from the social and political realities of the day is simply not biblical.”²

So back to Saul in *his* socio-political context. After he was blinded by the light and heard the living Christ speak, Saul was temporarily drained of energy. He couldn’t see, had no appetite, and needed to be led by the hand. I think that he was like an exhausted mother after hosting a birthday party for ten kids!

But the next stage of his conversion brought him a renewal of vigor, that is, for *good*. When Ananias laid hands on him, Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit and fitted for God’s mission. **As the story says, he became “an instrument,” no longer for persecution, but for God’s purposes.**

How did this occur in Ananias’ story? Unlike Saul, Ananias was already a Christian, a member of the church in Damascus. He had already experienced a first conversion, but now, facing this new situation, God led him through change again. He was carrying out his own routine when Ananias received a divine vision and instructions to go to Saul! He didn’t obey right away; Ananias protested. “Shouldn’t I be protecting the church from him instead of leading him into the church? What are you thinking?!”

¹Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2, trans. J.A. Baker (London: SCM Press, 1967), 465-6.

²Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion: Recovering the Gospel for These Times* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981), 5.

It must have been as disorienting to Ananias as it was to Saul to obey *God* and to go to that Street called “Straight.” It wouldn’t surprise me if Ananias was tempted to *persecute* Saul the Persecutor instead! But the Holy Spirit converted him and filled Ananias with strength to carry through. **He too became an instrument for God’s purposes. This can happen to you and me.**

It’s taking a lifetime, but I have found that I must allow Christ to convert me daily. Without this, I’m pretty useless!

A morning spiritual practice that I find effective is to stop myself from going right to work on my to-do list and depending solely on my own energy. Rather, I go to my window in the office, turn toward the sky, physically kneel, and sing a prayer song. I find that this opens the ‘channels’ in me to Spirit energy and makes me more fit for God’s purposes. In this way, conversion *is* a conversation!

As church together, with Paul and Ananias, let *us* now **pray:** Lord, make us an instrument of your [purposes]. Amen.