

A Sermon in the Unraveled series
The Conversion of Saul into Paul
Psalm 26; Acts 9:1-20
Plymouth Presbyterian Church
St. Helens, Oregon
Preached by Rev. Peter J. Blank
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We have been following stories of peoples' lives who have been unraveled by God. We looked at the Apostle Peter as he stepped out of the boat only to sink in the waves of the lake. He was unraveled by the elements of wind and waves. In this passage, we turn to the life of Saul, the enemy of God being unraveled and becoming Paul to then serve God.

June 1st, 2024 was the thirty eighth anniversary of my ordination. From time to time I look back down the years of ministry, I notice that the times that I've grown as a Christian, times when I've learned the most was when God has served me a huge slice of humble pie. I remember when I was teaching a Sunday School class of High School students. I made reference to Magic Johnson, the very talented L.A. Laker basketball player. I was making the point of how recognizable Magic was with his big smile. Later that day, I got a call from one of the church leaders. He was upset by my choice in choosing Magic Johnson as my example. This was a doctor in the congregation. As a doctor, he pointed out the terrible lifestyle of Magic with serial romances and womanizing. I was made aware of the baggage that came with the athlete Magic Johnson. I was set back on my heels. I admitted that I could have chosen another talented basketball player named Michael Jordan to make my point of being "recognizable." I had a large slice of humble pie that day. Humble pie is a tangy delicacy that has a rather distinct aftertaste, a taste of whiplash, you might say. Stay humble my friends, there are lessons to be learned.

You can interpret the Bible however you want, but you cannot deny this, the Bible provides *plenty* examples of God coming up to unsuspecting folks just doing their thing and serving them a slice of humble pie. There is perhaps no greater example of this truth than the passage we have before us today.

Our story today is about Saul. He was bad guy. We are told that he was "breathing threats and murder" against the disciples of Jesus. You see, hunting down and persecuting Christians wasn't just a job for Saul; he enjoyed it. His very breath was an attack on followers of the Way. As the dragon Smaug did upon the helpless villagers of Laketown in the Hobbit, so too did Saul breathe fire upon the men, women, and children that professed faith in the resurrected Christ.

We know that this was more than just a job for Saul because he didn't wait to be handed orders to persecute Christians. No, he asked for his next job. He doesn't sit around waiting for his next assignment. He knocks on the door of his supervisor, the government, and begs for written warrants to travel to Damascus to hunt down followers of the Way.

And so he goes on his way, when a violent flash of light blinds him and he falls to the ground in fear. And he hears a booming voice from the sky, the same voice that called Abraham and Sarah to be the parents of God's people, the same voice that called from a burning bush to compel Moses to confront Pharaoh, the same voice that spoke to the prophet Jeremiah, the same voice that cried out from the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." That same voice brings Saul to his knees with an accusation that tells Saul that he's messed with the wrong god. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?" Not "why are you persecuting Christians?" But "why do you persecute *me*?"

"Why do you persecute me?" God's indictment is a reminder to us all that what we do to

the most vulnerable around us is what we do to the very God we claim to love and serve. Saul hears this question and has no response but if we use our imaginations we might come up with a few he might have offered had he not been so frightened.

- “I’m persecuting you, Lord, because my supervisor told me to do it and I need a job to pay the bills.”
- “I’m persecuting you, Lord, because the government has encouraged me and others to despise a certain group of people.”
- Or “I’m persecuting you, Lord, because if the Christians don’t like the way things are around here then they should just go back from where they came.”

But Saul can’t say any of this, either because he is too dumbstruck or because he knows that all of these excuses are empty. And so, God commands Saul to continue to Damascus and await further instruction. At this point in the story, Saul is utterly helpless. First of all, he’s as blind as a bat with none of the bat-like benefits such as echolocation. Secondly, he has no idea what is waiting for him when or if he somehow manages to get himself safely to his destination. But it’s not exactly like he has a choice. He’s blind and in the wilderness with nothing but the kindness of his traveling companions to guide him.

The man who had been the strongman is now nothing more than a helpless creature stumbling about blindly, being led by the hands of his inferiors. Saul, who had been the number one predator of Christians, is now heading to a Christian’s house vulnerable and exposed.

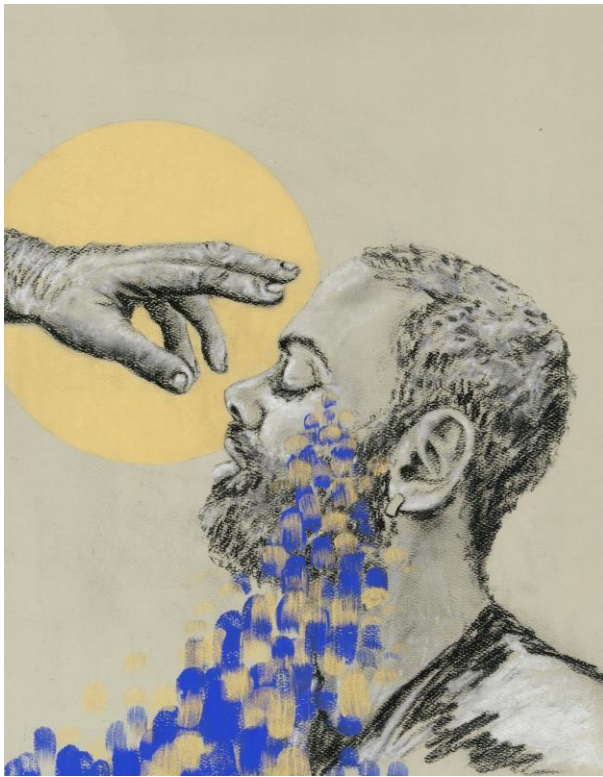
He gets to the house of the Christians in Damascus and finds not horror, but hospitality. He is cared for during his blindness. For three days, holed up and helpless, he depends on the grace of the very people that he has made it his life’s cause to persecute. For three days, he goes back into a darkened womb in order to be reborn as something new.

Three days. For three days, Jonah was in the dark belly of that giant fish before it spit him out. For three days Jesus was in the dark of that tomb before God resurrected him. And for three days, Saul is in the dark, a forced exercise in vulnerability.

But then Ananias shows up. Although he is understandably hesitant at first, he agrees to obey God’s command to minister to the person that he has been taught to avoid his entire life. Ananias walks up to Saul, and, before saying a word, places his hands upon him. I wonder if Saul flinched, wondering if this was going to be the moment the Christians finally got their revenge and put an end to his terrorism. But instead of a violent touch, he found a gentle one. A touch that restored his sight.

And then the scales fell. Flaky scales fall from his eyes and it all falls away. All the prejudice. All the fire-breathing. All the hatred and discrimination and divisive political rhetoric. All that falls away. And he sees. Not just physically, but spiritually, emotionally, vocationally, he now sees. Saul finds a new path. And he now has a new name to go along with the person on that new path: Paul.

I invite you to look at the painting that comes to us on this slide from Lisle Gwynn Garrity of A Sanctified Art. Take a moment to drink it in.



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On the left, you see the hand of Ananias, reaching out to touch Saul, who kneels before him. Behind the hand is a golden halo, representing the holiness of that moment when a disciple of Christ is called to minister to an enemy of the movement. Saul's lips are slightly open, as if he is taking a deep breath.

And from his eyes pour the scales. When I first saw this picture, I only saw them as scales and nothing more. Nothing but blue and gold scales. But the more I looked at this painting, I discovered another aspect to it. It looks *baptismal*, doesn't it? It looks almost as if a river is flowing either from or to Saul's face. Which is appropriate, after all. Today's text tells us that Saul was baptized immediately after having his sight restored as he set out upon a new path, a path that God had laid out for him.

I feel like it is one of the prime jobs of the Holy Spirit to remove the scales from our eyes, the scales that prevent us from seeing what it is that God is calling us to do.

Some of you might remember a moment in your life when the scales were abruptly taken from your eyes. A moment when a revelation came up out of nowhere, when some life event happened and all of the sudden things became clearer. I can certainly look back at my life and see many such examples of "sudden scale removal."

But some of us might also relate to another process, a more gradual process of scale removal. I feel like the older I get, I look back on my 31 years on this earth and see scales being removed from my eyes bit by bit, day by day, year by year. Each day, as my life progresses, unravels, challenges, and blesses, a scale is removed from my eye and I see more clearly what God is calling me to do.

Now, that's not to say that some days I don't add my own scales to my eyes through hardening my heart. So although God might remove a scale one day, I might just add one out of my own stubbornness the next. However, part of the Christian journey is understanding that the net result of discipleship is the removing of scales. Whether during one minute or one decade, we

are like Saul: constantly being molded into the image of Jesus Christ.

The story of Saul's conversion is our story. It is a metaphor for the work that we do, and the work that is done to us, each and every time we gather as a faith family to be transformed into what God is calling us to be. So let's see what happens when the scales fall off!