

As I was thinking about Saul and his mission to stop the spread of Jesus followers, those who would corrupt and pollute the faith he held dear, I remembered a satirical short film made by two of my high school youth group members entitled *Faith Wars*. The youth modeled *Faith Wars* after George Lucas' *Star Wars*.

But in *Faith Wars* the struggle was not for control of the universe, but for control of the church. The hierarchical, institutional church was attempting to squash a new ethos. This new ethos was seeking to build a more compassionate and equitable world where freedom of expression and freedom of choice were embraced rather than shunned. The film included lots of special effects, including a light saber duel fought in the sanctuary of the church just like Darth Vader and his son Luke Skywalker fought with light sabers. (see slide) In *Faith Wars* the battle resulted in the eventual demise of the Darth Priest and reform to the church. Come to think of it *Faith Wars* would be very appropriate today, as you know in the Methodist Church we have Progressives and Open Church advocates pitted against Traditionalists. How some things never change!

As to Saul, if we were to capture his early ministry on film, it could easily end up as a first century version of *Faith Wars*. The film would depict Saul as the champion for observance of traditional Jewish thought and laws attempting to destroy the followers of Jesus. Like many that have followed him, Saul did not want to see the faith diluted or corrupted in any way. Saul did not want to see the Jewish faith corrupted by those who claim that Jesus ben Joseph of Nazareth is the Messiah. He was so incensed by the work of Jesus' disciples scripture describes him as one breathing threats and murder against them.¹

A little background on Saul might be helpful. Saul was born in Tarsus in Asia Minor, an area heavily influenced by the Greeks. He was then educated in Jerusalem in a very respected school. Based on where he was born and where he was trained it is safe to assume he spoke several languages and was, as shown by his letters, quite able to express his thoughts. Saul was a Pharisee and well thought of by the religious elite. He was very devout, and very determined.

Saul was among those that had approved the stoning of the disciple Stephen.² The day after Stephens' death Saul went on a rampage throughout Jerusalem, entering households and sending any of Jesus' followers to prison.³ Saul may have been hoping that his actions would encourage the disciples to stop preaching and healing in Jesus' name. Instead the disciples scattered throughout the globe, taking their

¹ Acts 9:1

² Acts 6-7.

³ Acts 8:1-3

⁴ See Acts 22, 26, Galatians 1.

message of Jesus the Messiah with them. Philip went to Samaria and points south. Some headed north, some to the city of Damascus.

Saul, on his mission of orthodoxy to preserve the Jewish faith, obtained the necessary credentials to head to Damascus and root out and imprison any and all of Jesus' followers. Now Damascus is about 135 miles north of Jerusalem and about 200 miles south of Tarsus. Damascus is an ancient city that had been conquered over the centuries by the Assyrians, the Persians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, and then the Romans. The city was on the trade routes and was a hub for commerce. Like many Roman trade centers, Damascus was a mix of people from all parts of the globe. Damascus was also home for followers of Jesus as well as orthodox Jews.

It is amazing how things don't often go as planned. It is amazing how God has other ideas. It is amazing how God will meet us where we are or where we are headed resulting in a change in direction, a detour, a conversion a transformation of heart and mind. Which is exactly what happened to Saul on that road to Damascus.

As presented in the Book of Acts, as Saul was walking with his traveling companions he was struck by a great light from above that was so powerful it knocked him off his feet. A voice was then heard, a voice wanting to know why Saul was so bent on persecution. Confused by the question, Saul wanted to know whom it was he was supposedly persecuting. The voice makes it clear that Saul's actions are persecuting Jesus. As instructed by the voice, Saul now blinded by the light, gets up and is lead by the hand to Damascus by his fellow travelers. Confounded and disoriented, Saul is dropped off at a stranger's house. For three days he sits in this house, he is blind and he eats or drinks nothing.

On the scene comes the very reluctant disciple, Ananias. As instructed Ananias announces to Saul that Jesus told him to come and pray with Saul, to heal him so he may be filled with the Holy Spirit. If I were Saul, I might be thinking, "this is all too much to take in. Here I am blind and so confused. I am faint from a lack of food and water. And now this guy says he can heal me all because Jesus spoke to him? Jesus like the voice I heard on the road?" As Ananias lays his hands on Saul's head the scales of Saul's disbelief fall from his eyes. His eyesight is restored and the eyes of his heart are open to the reality of Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus who died and rose from the dead is still alive. Saul was then baptized in Jesus' name and spent time learning with the disciples.

So when Saul then went to the synagogue his message was not what people expected. He no longer lambasted the followers of Jesus, but declared Jesus as the Messiah, as his Lord and Savior. Saul is a changed man. He has been converted, transformed in Jesus' name. Now we must remember Saul is still Jewish. He has not changed his religion. What has changed is his understanding of who Jesus is

and the importance of Jesus in his life. Because of this he has come to understand his mission in a new way.

And as we read about Saul's conversion, we think wow, that happened fast and he did it all on his own. The reality is it was not instantaneous nor was it a solo event. Saul had help. He was helped to get to Damascus. He was left to pray, for 3 very long and very dark days, to think about what he had been doing and why. His healing was not of his own accord but the work of God through the hands of a disciple. He spent time with the disciples before he started preaching.

Through Paul's letters we are presented with several different accounts of what he did next, as well as variations in the retelling of his conversion.⁴ The Book of Acts tells us he preached in Damascus until the orthodox Jewish community plotted to kill him, and so he left town quickly with fellow believers. In Galatians he tells his readers that he spent time as a missionary in Arabia, preaching to the Gentiles, before heading to Jerusalem. Regardless of the exact sequence of events after his conversion, Saul, also known by his Greek name Paul, had been blinded by the light of Jesus so he could become light to the Gentiles.⁵

So what do we learn from Saul's conversion, his turning to Jesus. First off while Saul was well educated, on fire for God, and with very broad shoulders, he was not on his own before his conversion nor after. After his conversion Saul traveled with Barnabas, with John Mark, Timothy and others to deliver the message of God's saving grace that comes to us through the living Christ. As Biblical Studies' Professor John Wall states, "The Book of Acts' reminds us that Christian discipleship is far to demanding for the individual. Only within a caring community will the believer find those resources and relationships that forge an enduring faith."⁶ Saul had support of a community that traveled with him, offered their resources to further the mission, housed him and even shuttled him out of town when folks became incensed by what he had to say.

For us to become effective and remain effective and strong, viable and relevant witnesses to God's love for the world, we need each other. We need each other to learn together, to stand together, and to support one another in good times, hard times, and in our mission as a church. So we are never too old nor too young to join a bible study, to read scripture, and to spend time in prayer and worship, so we are able to hear God's call, and the eyes of our hearts are always ready to accept where God is calling us next.

⁴ See Acts 22, 26, Galatians 1.

⁵ Sacra Pagina, Luke Timothy Johnson, (Collegeville; The Liturgical Press, 1992), 169.

⁶ The New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes, Vol X, (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 2002), 155.

We also learn that conversion, whether it happens in an instant or happens over a lifetime, is really a process. As a process, our transformation calls for us to make a daily commitment to being faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Again, we need to be in a community that helps us stay focused and on track. We need to be part of a community that is strong and willing to stand up to the powers of darkness in our world, however they may manifest themselves.

Regardless of how we are called, like Saul, we are called to be a light to the world. As Jesus said, "Let your light shine for others, so that they may see your good works, and give glory to God."⁷ Which means we don't just have a change of heart, we also change our daily priorities. From Saul's conversion Professor Wall affirms, "Conversion is not about moving into sanctified self-absorption but a call to concrete ministry."⁸ So as much as we find comfort in growing our personal relationship with the Triune God, we are also called to share what we have learned by living our faith. In Wesleyan jargon we speak of the dual sides of the faith coin, one side focused on Acts of Piety – that is worship and devotion, and one side focused on Acts of Mercy – that is we become boots on the ground and arms extended in compassion in Jesus' name.

So our conversion to Jesus is about keeping our eyes open, ready to witness to God in the world and ready to see God in the world. Conversion is not about a one-time commitment to discipleship, but a daily commitment. And our commitment to live ever transformed in Jesus' name can only be fully sustained and enhanced when we are in community.

The result, we are able to remain true to our understanding of God's call to us regardless of the *Faith Wars* that have gone in the past and are going on in our world today. For we know our Redeemer lives and our Redeemer loves all. Amen

⁷ Matthew 5:15

⁸ The New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes, Vol X, 155.