

*Texts: 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Acts 9:1-19a*

*Subject: Saul's Conversion*

*Theme: When We Can't See*

*Third Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2022; Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven, and our risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

I was a new member of Holy Spirit Lutheran Church about 15 years ago. I enjoyed coming to worship to hear the preaching, to meet new people, and to pray and sing and praise God. Eventually, I was serving as a worship assistant, playing guitar in the band, helping out with Family Promise, and coming to Bible study. I was thankful that I had found a church home and spent more time reading the Bible and praying. I had been praying for God to show me where to go, and promising to follow. Devra, our ministry coordinator suggested I might think about going to seminary. But I thought, "No thanks. I have a job." I didn't give it much of a thought at all. But I kept praying, "God, show me where to go, and I'll follow." I continued helping out, helping with confirmation class, joining the church council, and starting a men's ministry. Ivy was leading Bible studies, coordinating weddings, and leading a mom's group. Again, this person suggested I think about going to seminary. I didn't know the first thing about any of that, and I think I googled it. Eventually, while pregnant with Isaac, Ivy and I went and visited Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. We visited with faculty, students, and staff. We asked a ton of questions, and got to see the campus housing. When we got home, and got back to our regular schedule, I was reflecting on the trip. As I pulled into the parking lot at work, I parked and thought to myself, "This is too much. Who quits their job, and sells their house, and just about everything they own in Las Vegas and moves to Dubuque, Iowa? I will just go to work and stay put." At that moment, as I sat in my car, I

felt a punch in the gut. My heart seemed to drop into my stomach and I let the tears roll down my face. I knew that I was going to Dubuque. I was going to seminary to become a pastor, and I could not run from God's call on my life. My prayer changed to, "God you're going to have to show me the way, because I do not know how this is going to go."

It's fair to say that four years of seminary and moving 6 times with a growing family, and focusing on learning theology and studying scripture will transform a person. So does serving a congregation for 7-plus years. Where we begin our lives, our careers, our families, and our personalities may not be where we end up decades later. People change and grow. Life happens. When we can't see the road ahead we get to trust that God is leading us, teaching us, changing us.

This is the third Sunday of Easter and in this season we are focused on sharing the good news that Jesus is *not* dead but risen and with us always! We hear the good news that we are saved from death and forgiven of our sins. We are transformed, and made new through the death and resurrection of our Lord. We believe and we share this good news. We praise God for grace and mercy and love that we get to share. But maybe we feel a little left out. Most of us don't have these dramatic stories of transformation. Especially if you've been part of the church your whole life, and you show up and worship and share what you've been given, and study the Bible, and serve your neighbors and come to every church potluck. It's like water to a fish. It's all around you, and you hardly notice a difference. Maybe we long to have this kind of amazing experience where we get knocked down on the road, and see a vision of the Lord, or an angel appears to us in a dream, or the voice of God speaks to us in a way that reorients

our lives. Maybe we can be a little jealous of Saul's experience. Or like Thomas, we'd like to see and really know that we're on the Way with Jesus.

When we can't see, we feel powerless. When I was in college, my roommate Justin was in a class that included a session on learning compassion and solidarity with people who are vision impaired. Students were blindfolded and led across campus by another classmate, so that they could experience what it might be like to be blind. He told me it was helpful to feel vulnerable, to rely on someone to lead, to trust that they were going to keep you from tripping over a curb or your own feet. But then, he got to take off the blindfold. It was only a temporary loss of sight and self-reliance.

Saul was an enemy to those who followed Jesus. We're told he had authority from the synagogue in Jerusalem to go after those who were seemingly deserting their Jewish practice and life to follow Jesus. Where did this anger come from? Saul wasn't just pushing back against cultural change, or violently reacting to a threat to his personal ideology. He was acting on his deeply held beliefs that, as N.T. Wright puts it, "if God's was going to establish his reign on earth as in heaven, then those who were zealous for God would have to say their prayers, sharpen their swords, and get ready for action." He is what we would call a fundamentalist. His worldview worked one way, and anything that contradicted it was a threat. There was nothing that could change his mind. Until...

There was a blinding light, and a voice saying, "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?" Saul had to have wondered what was happening. He answered by saying, "Who are you Lord?" Jesus spoke to him. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were with

him heard the voice too, and they led him into the city. They must have been just as shocked. Saul became Paul. His whole world changed.

Hear it from N.T. Wright again: “What drove Paul, from that moment on the Damascus road and through his subsequent life, was the belief that Israel’s God had done what he always said he would; that Israel’s scriptures had been fulfilled in ways never before imagined; and that Temple and Torah themselves were not after all the ultimate realities, but instead glorious signposts pointing forward to the new heaven-and-earth reality that had come to birth in Jesus.” On the road to Damascus, God showed up and Saul got a glimpse of the fullness of God in Christ. It was blinding.

He saw what Thomas wanted to see. He saw what so many who came to believe after Jesus rose from the dead wanted to see. He saw what those who have died in the faith get to see. He saw Jesus face to face. What kind of change would that bring? Saul went from the fundamentalist zealot, persecuting followers of Jesus, to the greatest evangelist that ever lived. He traveled across the known world to start new communities to proclaim Christ in places where his life was in danger, in homes and in the streets and public squares and from behind prison walls. He was still zealous, still faithful, but changed.

Maybe you never felt that punch in the gut. Probably you were never struck blind or heard a voice from heaven calling your name. How can we trust God when we don’t see what Saul got to see? What will move our hearts to remain faithful when the world seems to be crumbling around us? How can we be changed when we can’t see?

In Saul’s story, a disciple named Ananias made a world of difference. The Lord spoke to him in a vision and called him to invite this dangerous man from Tarsus into his

own home and to pray for him. Saul was without his sight, without food or drink for three days. Jesus gave Saul three days without sight, wondering what would happen, waiting to see again. We hear echoes of the story of Jesus' three days, and a journey from the cross to the grave, to the empty tomb and the locked room. Saul was pretty weak. He'd been through hell. Ananias is worried and protests, but the Lord lets him know that this is the one that God has chosen to work through. Ananias listens and lays his hands on Saul and his sight was restored. It takes two. Saul was filled with the promised Holy Spirit and after regaining his strength stayed around and preached. He went back to Jerusalem to meet with Peter and Jesus' crew. The rest, as they say, is history. Or theology? Both, I guess.

Our Lord is the one who will change us. Our Lord is the one who gets our attention when we think we're going one way and redirects us to serve and give and become ones that God will work through. Often it happens as we meet others along the way. They show us and see in us what we can't see. They pray for us until the scales fall from our eyes and we hear God speaking, through scripture, through service, through our own answered and unanswered prayers. God moves in our lives and we become disciples. Sometimes we find ourselves on roads we never thought we'd be on, speaking and leading and sharing in places we never thought we'd be, and God is there to give us the words, to lead us through the difficult times, to open new doors.

Don't think it can happen to you? Throughout time God has always chosen the most unlikely ones to preach good news, to speak up for those in danger, to lead movements and bring a promise of God's peace where there has been only death. God calls us in so many ways, beginning with our baptisms, where for most of us our family

members led us to the waters, and we were forgiven and filled with the Holy Spirit. Maybe you drifted away from church for a while and came back, or maybe you've warmed a pew for decades, or have served in every role in the church. You've been changed too. You have been called. You have been gifted and fed and sent.

Jesus is not dead but alive! He showed himself to his disciples and to some guys on the road to Emmaus and to Saul on the road to Damascus. He shows himself to us too, through scripture and worship, fellowship and prayer, serving and giving. May we continue to follow him on the way, listening for the voice that still is calling our names, transforming us, and sending us in new directions with open eyes, hearts, and hands. Thanks be to God. Amen.