

# **“Shazaam!”**

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## **Scripture: Acts 9:1-20**

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 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.

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "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 traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 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. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." 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, 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."

But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." 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. I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

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." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

## **Sermon**

This Sunday we explore the story of the conversion of a man named Saul. A life that was so dramatically transformed that even his name had to also be changed from Saul to Paul. It's a transformative story of a man who goes from persecuting the followers of Jesus to then spending the rest of his life trying to convert the "whole world" to follow Jesus.

And in the end, he even gave his very life, being eventually executed by the Roman Empire for these efforts. Except for Peter, whom I preached on last Sunday, no other person is likely more important to the entire Christian movement.

Paul was also a prolific writer and outside the four Gospels, his contribution (and those alleged to be his) makes up the bulk of the New Testament. His writings (like 1 and 2 Corinthians) are also the earliest in the NT even predating the gospels by a decade or so.

And though Peter was given the name, “The Rock” upon which Jesus said he would build the church. It was the efforts and influence of the “Apostle” Paul that has overshadowed all others in the history of Christianity. Certainly, he was not the only or even the first evangelist, but the majority of, “The Acts of the Apostles” is about him.

But I must also admit some biases, since as we know from an earlier story in Acts, Paul was complicit in the execution of my namesake, Stephen. But, none the less, the story read to us this morning, is dramatic, engaging, and powerful!

Its very language is intended to prompt a response. Saul was so consumed by his task that he is said to be “breathing threats and murders!” No longer was his appetite satiated by the persecution of those followers of Jesus in Jerusalem alone! His zeal has now prompted him to ask the Religious leadership in Jerusalem to expand his mission to Damascus.

Zealous, religious, ruthless and no doubt effective he was given permission to go to Damascus and round up those following the Jesus way. Many of these believers had fled to Damascus for seeking refuge from the persecution in Jerusalem. His task was noble, religiously sanctioned, and of course, legal.

But the story’s drama reaches an unlikely early crescendo as he was hit by a light so strong and bright that it knocked him off his horse! It sounds quite similar to stories of folks being struck by lightning.

But blinding lights in the night sky often herald the Divine voice. For Saul, the voice was Jesus’ and the voice told him to enter the city, but then to simply wait. Poor old Saul, the man on a mission, breathing and seething with righteous indignation, must now become content with just breathing, alone and in silence.

The leader of the pack, the one in control, the one who was so clearly able to see the threat that Jesus’ followers so clearly presented, must now be led around by the hand by others. The one who likely gave no mercy to those whom he pursued is now at the mercy of the one, whose movement he was oppressing. The guy who was used to giving orders and taking action, must now wait for three whole days before knowing his next step. (Hmm... now where else in the Bible have we heard about something transformative taking three days?) So traumatized by all of this, Saul refuses to eat anything.

The second dramatic crescendo in the story is provided by Ananias, whose name in Hebrew is translated as, “The Mercy of the Lord.” Hmm...very in-ter-resting, don’t cha think? Now the “call” of Ananias feels a bit plagiarized from any number of the calls of prophets found in the OT. It’s certainly a bit formulaic and mostly routine . . . routine that is, until Ananias learns who he will be visiting.

How so honestly real was his reaction, “No! This can’t be!” After all Saul was an evil, evil man, and had been torturing and killing those who followed Jesus. The only reason that he was now in Damascus was to hunt down and catch those folks who had managed to escape Jerusalem! Ananias is likely thinking to himself, “No way Jose! This is tantamount to certain martyrdom!”

But as many of us know, both from reading the Bible and likely from personal experience, “The Lord” can be, how should I say it, quite persuasive! Jesus tells Ananias that

he has a plan for Saul. Jesus sees other possibilities, and a potential for him that are seemingly far beyond his and Ananias' dreams.

And in hindsight the plan was quite ingenious. What better, what more powerful spokesperson is there for spreading the news of Jesus' way, than the very person who once schemed, tortured, and murdered in order to stop it?

I think we are all likely aware of this scenario? Please go ahead and shout out a few you know about. The ex-soldier who now "fights" non-violently to end war. Or the former KKK member who now works for racial justice. Or the former slave trader, John Newton, whose radical experience of forgiveness and grace led to penning "Amazing Grace."

Oh, the awesome power of radically transformed people! Back when he was alive, Jesus understood that there was something amazingly powerful about those who realize that they have been forgiven much. The deep need of repentance and of forgiveness, and the deep experience of grace that can be the result, is an immensely liberating!

Paul's story of transformation can become an "archetype" for personal and institutional transformation. For many years it was the name given to the Mennonite Church's undertaking to identify undue systemic racism in our denomination. By naming it the "Damascus Road Training," our institutional church understood not only the depth and the power of systematic racism, but also that real and radical change can only arise from powerful spiritual experience of conversion.

For Saul, the change was even physical, as "scales fell from his eyes." The old has passed away so completely, that there is now a completely new identity, a new creature, a new person and so a new name! So, Saul is no more, but he is now Paul.

Is this what you are seeking? Truth so bright that it might leave you disabled for a few days? Transformation so dramatic that it requires maybe a change of address, or identity, or nationality, or even the name you call yourself? Keep this in mind folks; dramatic change can also be slow! But change, and God with us in the transformation, are all that are really constant! And so too, we also know that God is in it for the long haul.

It's not where you start that matters but where you end up. What you did in the past must give way to that which you are committed to doing right now in the moment.

Transformation does not forget or ignore the past. But, by using our past as building blocks, we become the transformed person that God desires. And that is what really counts!

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