

## **Stories of Transformation - From Blindness to Sight 4-18-10**

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### **Acts 9:1-20 - The Conversion of Saul**

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 travelling 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.'

Have you ever had a Damascus Road experience like Paul. The beauty of story is that we can relate to it and find truth in it without needing to get caught up in the details. Probably few if any of us has literally been blinded by the light as the story of Saul goes. But we can relate to being absolutely sure that the way we see the world is correct and God sanctioned, like Saul, only to later have our blindness revealed to us and new sight - a new way of seeing things - uncovered.

Paul was a good religious man. He knew the scripture. He was an enforcer of the law, which he, no doubt, obeyed to the letter. He knew what scripture demanded. He knew how things were supposed to be. But then along comes this group who were called The Way. They were Jews, but they had gone astray (in the eyes of the religious establishment) following this Jesus character. And they needed to be stopped before others joined in their misguided ways. Their leader, after all, had been executed for treason. So Paul took it upon himself to be a defender of the faith by rounding up these followers of Jesus, binding them and take them to Jerusalem.

On the day of our story from Acts, Saul is heading to Damascus to round up Jesus' followers there. But on his way, something happens which allows him to be able to realize how blind he'd been and to see the world through Jesus' eyes. In this story, the transformation that comes from encountering Jesus is almost instant and quite radical. Immediately after this encounter, Saul is transformed into Paul and goes from persecuting Jesus' followers to being an avid follower of

Jesus, willing to be persecuted, facing imprisonment, suffering and death for the sake of what Jesus' stood for. In his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul later writes, "...it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." What a transformation!

I don't know about you, but it is rare in my life for a transformation to be so immediate and so radical. More often it comes little by little as seeds are planted by the spirit which reveals life in new ways which gradually replace the old ways of seeing. The blindness to sight in my experience, has been gradual with many "aha!" moments along the way.

One of the great and beloved hymns, which connects so profoundly to this story of Saul's transformation into Paul, is *Amazing Grace*. "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see." Those words came from the heart and experience of John Newton. Do you know the story of this seaman?

John Newton had one of those Damascus Road experiences like the Apostle Paul, except his took place at sea. Newton was the captain of a slave ship in the mid-1700's. He was not a religious man. However, on a homeward voyage, while he was attempting to steer the ship through a violent storm, he experienced what he was to refer to later as his "great deliverance." He recorded in his journal that when all seemed lost and the ship would surely sink, he exclaimed, "Lord, have mercy upon us." Later in his cabin he reflected on what he had said and began to believe that God had addressed him through the storm and that grace had begun to work for him. Now I used to think that it was at that moment that John Newton realized the error of his ways and denounced the slave trade. But unlike Paul's story, the story of John Newton was not so immediate and dramatic. Newton's transformation took many years with small "aha!" moments along the way. At first, he expressed this new faith in Jesus by being more kind to the slaves than the other slave ship captains. Then he gave up being Captain of a slave ship. Then he became a minister. It wasn't until much later that

he actually denounced the slave trade. Newton wrote *Amazing Grace* in 1779 as he had reflected upon his life and how far he'd come from the way he used to see the world. Encountering Jesus did change John Newton, just as it did Paul. New sight came in increments over a lifetime. But with each insight revealed, change in behavior followed. That's what it is to allow Christ to live in us. Change happens and we see the world differently. And we are called on to let go of the way we used to see in order to see through the eyes of Christ and follow the way of Jesus.

Change and transformation can shake our world. Once it starts, it seems to touch everything. Ways of seeing and behaving that worked fine for us before, now don't seem to do the trick anymore. And that can be scary. One of the "Stories of Transformation" I received this week speaks of the process of transformation. I want to share it with you. It is called: *Fear of Transformation* by Danaan Parry.

"Sometimes I feel that my life is a series of trapeze swings. I'm

either hanging on to a trapeze bar swinging along or, for a few moments in my life, I'm hurtling across space in between trapeze bars.

Most of the time, I spend my life hanging on for dear life to my trapeze-bar-of-the-moment. It carries me along a certain steady rate of swing and I have the feeling that I'm in control of my life. I know most of the right questions and even some of the right answers. But once in a while, as I'm merrily (or not so merrily) swinging along, I look ahead of me into the distance, and what do I see? I see another trapeze bar swinging toward me. It's empty, and I know, in that place that knows, that this new trapeze bar has my name on it. It is my next step, my growth, my aliveness going to get me. In my heart-of-hearts I know that for me to grow, I must release my grip on the present, well known bar to move to the new one.

Each time it happens to me, I hope (no, I pray) that I won't have to grab the new one. But in my knowing place I know that I must totally release my grasp on my old bar, and for some moment in time hurtle across space before I can grab onto the new bar. Each time I am filled

with terror. It doesn't matter that in all my previous hurtles across the void of unknowing, I have always made it. Each time I am afraid I will miss, that I will be crushed on the unseen rocks in the bottomless chasm between the bars. But I do it anyway. Perhaps this is the essence of what the mystics call the faith experience. No guarantees, no net, no insurance policy, but you do it anyway because somehow, to keep hanging onto that old bar is no longer on the list of alternatives. And so for an eternity that can last a microsecond or a thousand lifetimes, I soar across the dark void of "the past is gone, the future is not yet here." It's called transition. I have come to believe that it is the only place that real change occurs...

I have noticed that, in our culture, this transition zone is looked upon as a "no-thing", a no-place between places. Sure the old trapeze-bar was real, and that new one coming towards me, I hope that's real too. But the void in between? That's just a scary, confusing, disorienting "nowhere" that must be gotten through as fast as unconsciously as possible. What a waste! ... [these] transition zones in

our lives are incredibly rich places. They should be honored, even savored. Yes, with all the pain and fear and feelings of being out-of-control that can ... accompany transitions, they are still the most alive, most growth-filled, passionate, expansive moments in our lives.

And so, transformation of fear may have nothing to do with making fear go away, but rather with giving ourselves permission to "hang- out" in the transition between trapeze bars... Hurtling through the void, we just may learn how to fly."

What Damascus Road experiences have you had? Or, probably more appropriately, what Damascus Road experiences are you now in the middle of? What are the places you need to see with the eyes of Christ? This season between Easter and Pentecost, we will share our stories of transformation and how it is that Christ lives in us. These stories can offer insight, inspiration, a glimpse of truth and how God is alive and at work in and through us. Open our eyes, God, and let us see! Amen.