

Old Testament: Psalm 30: 1 - 5
New Testament: Acts 9: 1 - 20

Please pray with me. And now Lord God may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be pleasing and acceptable in Thy sight our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Our reading this morning was, no doubt, very familiar to so many of you. The conversion of Saul is one of the most iconic conversion stories or experiences in all of Christendom. For some strains it has become almost an expectation for what “true” conversion looks and feels like. For others, it has become the proof of conviction regarding how the love of God can move even the most stubborn of hearts. Maybe the point, however, isn’t the conversion process itself. Instead, maybe it is the end result; the confession of faith for all to hear that Jesus is the Son of God.

If you expand your context to look back just to chapter 8, it starts with Saul ravaging the church. Then, the writer Luke offers two conversion stories. Simon the Magician believes and is baptized but ends up offering to pay for the power to lay hands on people and enable them to receive the Holy Spirit. When he is rebuked by Peter he receives said accountability and repents. The second conversion story is that of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Here the eunuch, like Simon before him, believes but this time the eunuch himself notices some water and asks to be baptized, to which Philip consents. The third conversion story is the story of Paul. Now, there could be some significance simply in it being the third story as the number three is a holy number; the trinity. I do not, personally, put much stock in numerology but in this instance I do feel like it is at least worth noting. Here in this conversion experience much more radical intervention by Jesus himself is required. But that does not take away from the weight or veracity of the previous two experiences. Simon heard the good news and believed. The eunuch was himself reading the scriptures and asked Philip to explain something he found confusing and as Philip explained to him the good news, he believed. Perhaps more radical intervention was needed because of just how hard, it has previously been revealed, Saul’s heart is. He approved of the execution of Stephen. He dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Simon the Magician did party tricks for money and the eunuch was simply another person studying scripture. Saul was another matter entirely. When it comes to it, Saul too is baptized like the two men before him but the biggest difference, I contend, is his response to baptism: “he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God’”.

Simon the Magician, we’re told, repents and asks for forgiveness asking Peter to pray for him that nothing horrible might come upon him. The Ethiopian eunuch went on

his way rejoicing. Saul began also sharing the good news of the resurrected Christ, the Messiah, saying Jesus is the Son of God. Perhaps the story of the conversion of Saul is less about the how, and more about the end result of said conversion. Saul's life made a direct 180. I've explained before about how repentance is a literal turning away from sin and turning back to God. This is exactly what Saul does. Before the experience on the road to Damascus, he's walking down a path of violence, persecution, anger, threats and wrath. And he's doing so on behalf of those who hold sway in the local synagogues. When his life is changed by Jesus because of his conversion, he starts proclaiming Jesus' lordship in the same places he was just working for to persecute people who do that type of thing. It's a complete reversal. A complete 180. Perhaps Saul's conversion experience is not included in scripture to serve as a template for how "authentic" conversion experiences happen, but to serve as a model for true repentance. Moving forward in surrounding context, we will soon see Simon Peter too repent of his favoritism and partiality after both his vision on the roof and being invited to the home of the centurion Cornelius. Conversion is less about how it happens and more about how the person is changed as a result.

Saying that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus is Lord, means that a whole lot of things, a whole bunch of other allegiances we hold, are not. I am not saying we cannot still hold these allegiances, I am just saying that they cannot be lord of our lives if we confess that Jesus is the Son of God; that Jesus is Lord. Part of the reason for our extensive current tension is that so many have decided to make a political party or position lord of their lives. Folks may confess Jesus with their mouth, but they're not in the synagogues like Saul was actually putting their money where their mouth is. Speaking of money, wealth and the accumulation thereof is also something many people in this country have decided to make lord of their lives. Jesus was really clear about this one; you cannot serve two masters, you cannot love both God and money, is what he said. And that's a tough one for us as disciples here in the US. Because I could make the argument, I won't do it here, that the worship of wealth *is* the national religion of this country. So, how do we worship Jesus as Lord in the context of living in a place where worship of mammon as lord is commonplace? I'll have to pray on that one and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Saying that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus is Lord, means that we ourselves are not. We need to practice self-love and self-care. We need to practice self-awareness. We do *not* need to practice self-aggrandizement and self-worship. God alone is worthy of praise.

But let's not only dwell on the negative. Let's not only dwell on what *not* to do. Saying Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus is Lord, means that we do do the things that Jesus did. So, we share meals with one another and break bread. And not just one another but with everyone around us. One of the best ways to practice hospitality is to invite someone over to share a meal with you. You share the good news of Jesus' lordship

by serving other people a meal just as he serves us a meal. Challenge yourself these next couple of weeks not to invite someone over with whom you're already friends for a meal, but someone you'd like to know better. Sharing the good news of Jesus' lordship is loving people. "You catch more flies with honey than vinegar." Sometimes, love does look just that sticky sweet. Sometimes, it looks like tough love, like I recently talked about at Barb's funeral. But it is always love. It is not critical or judgy. It is love. Jesus being the Son of God, Jesus being Lord, means that we can be bold and brave. Your calling might not be to preach in the synagogues like Saul or even to come up here and preach to a, mostly, friendly audience like me. But that does not mean that there are not other ways to boldly and bravely, facing your fears, proclaim the good news of Jesus' defeat of death. To proclaim the good news that love wins.

Jesus is alive. And because Jesus is alive we can trust the truth and veracity of our own witness and testimony that Jesus is the Son of God; that Jesus is Lord. Amen.