

Acts 9:1-19a
As One Untimely Born
WRCoB 5.1.22

Sundar Singh, a convert to Christianity
Speaks of his conversion
In a book entitled *The Sadhu*.

Praying in his room early in the morning
On December 18, 1904
He saw a great light:

Then as I prayed and looked into the light, I saw the form of the Lord Jesus Christ. It had such an appearance of glory and love. If it had been some Hindu incarnation I would have prostrated myself before it. But it was the Lord Jesus Christ whom I had been insulting a few days before. I felt that a vision like this could not come out of my own imagination.

I heard a voice in Hindustani, 'How long will you persecute me? I have come to save you; you were praying to know the right way. Why do you not take it?' The thought then came to me, 'Jesus Christ is not dead but living and it must be Him Himself.'

So I fell at His feet and got this wonderful Peace which I could not get anywhere else. This is the joy I was wishing to get. When I got up, the vision had all disappeared, but although the vision disappeared the Peace and Joy have remained ever since.

What is striking about Singh's experience
Is the similarity with the Apostle Paul's experience.

What is even more striking
Is that Sundar Singh had never heard the story
Of Saul's conversion.

Didn't know who the Apostle Paul was.

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Today is the third Sunday we look at
The stories of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances.

We leave the Gospel of John
And move into the Book of Acts

The Book of Acts was written by the physician Luke
Who also penned the Gospel of Luke.

They are essentially part one and two of Luke's writings.

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Today we read the wild and amazing conversion story
Of the least likely candidate to convert to Christianity.

If one needed proof of Easter's unapologetic proclamation
That Jesus died and rose again
And is the very living and very present God

One need look no further than Paul's conversion.

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In 1 Corinthians 15:3-8
Paul lists the people the Risen Lord appeared to.

Paul writes that Jesus first appeared to Peter.

He, unfortunately, makes no mention
Of the women at the tomb!

He then states Jesus appeared to the twelve disciples.
And then to more than five hundred.

He then appeared to James, the brother to Jesus
Who later became the leader of the Jerusalem Church.

And then to all the Apostles.
Not sure who that includes.

And lastly, according to Paul, Jesus appeared to him
As to one untimely born, least of all the apostles.

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Earlier in the Book of Acts
Saul, who we now know as Paul

Approved and witnessed the stoning of Stephen
One of the seven newly appointed deacons.

He continued breathing hatred
Wanting to continue the persecution.

He was a Jew with an extreme ideology.
In fact, one could call him, a Jewish terrorist.

Paul sought permission from the high priest
To go to Damascus
To continue the persecution.

Fortunately, Jesus stopped him from doing that.

Our passage is broken into three parts.

1. *Saul's encounter with Jesus*
2. *Ananias' encounter with Jesus*
3. *And Saul and Ananias encounter with each other.*

Saul had this incredible confrontation with Jesus Christ
On the road to Damascus

He carried papers allowing him
To arrest any "Followers of the Way."

That was what Christians were called
Before they were called Christian.

Blinded by his encounter with Jesus
Paul (Saul) was led to Damascus
Where he stayed three days
Neither eating nor drinking.

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Meanwhile, Ananias had his own experience with Jesus

Jesus tells Ananias to go and lay hands on Saul
To prepare him for the work the Lord wanted him to do.

Ananias knew of Saul's reputation.
He didn't want any part of this.
Who would blame him?

It's sort of like asking a Nigerian Christian
To go and lay hands on the leader of Boko Haram.

Or a Syrian Christian asking for a face-to-face
With the leader of ISIS.

NOT A HEALTHY SCENARIO FOR A CHRISTIAN!

But Jesus wouldn't have it.

**Acts 9:15 CEV The Lord said to Ananias, "Go! I have
chosen [Paul]**

Looking back from our vantage point
Some 2000 years later
We can see why Jesus wanted Paul.

The Apostle Paul was Christianity's greatest missionary.

Not only
He was also the greatest theologian and apologist.

His letters are now a part of the New Testament
So influential was his writings.

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And so, Ananias did as Jesus requested.

He went to the house where Saul was staying
And informed Saul he too had a vision.

He laid his hands on Saul
And prayed for the Holy Spirit's blessing

Following prayer, Paul regained his eyesight.
And was baptized, presumably by Ananias.

And thus began the spectacular ministry of the Apostle Paul.

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Now let me ask

Is there anyone more unlikely to become a Christian
Than Saul of Tarsus?

A religious terrorist whose goal it was
To exterminate Christians?

This, my friends, is the transformative power of God.

It is happening in the Muslim world today.

From the website the Lausanne Movement
Based in Lausanne, Switzerland.

For decades, a well-documented phenomenon has been occurring in the Muslim world—men and women who, without knowledge of the gospel, or contact among Christians in their community, have experienced dreams and visions of Jesus Christ.

The reports of these supernatural occurrences often come from “closed countries” where there is no preaching of the good news and where converting to Christianity can invoke the death sentence.

But these are more than just dreams. Setting them apart is the intense reality of the experience and the surrender of one’s heart and mind to Christ in the wake of the dream.

These are encounters with the Risen and Living Lord!

Two things stand out in our story today.

The first, of course, is God's ability to transform lives.

We see it in the conversion of Paul
Who went from a religious extremist
To Christ's greatest advocate!

We hear about it in the beginning illustration of Sundar Singh
And to the conversions of people
Who have never encountered Christians.

God is a living and active God.

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The second lesson for us today is a bit more subtle
But no less important.

It is not only God's ability to transform hearts and minds
But God's power as the Great Reconciler
Building bridges of reconciliation.

It was intentional on God's part
To enlist Ananias to go to where Paul was staying.

God wanted to build a bridge of reconciliation.

God didn't need Ananias to help convert Paul.

God needed Ananias to build a bridge between
Paul and the Christian community.

God did that to prevent division in the church..

Following Ananias' gesture of peace
Paul strove the rest of his life
To reconcile the differing groups of Christians

Jews and Greeks
Male and female
Black and white

Paul strove to build a church
Across ethnic, racial, gender and cultural lines.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit
Paul became a reconciler for the church.

Read through his letters.

You will find him constantly at work
Reconciling the divisions in the church

Paul sums up the two aspects of reconciliation here.

2 Corinthians 5:17-18 NIV

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:

Hear me well!

EVERYTHING God does has to do with relationships.

Really! It is that simple!

Our relationship to God

Our relationship to one another

Our relationship to God's wonderful Creation.

That is the reason for Jesus.

Jesus is God's Great Reconciler!

And once our relationship to God is restored

Jesus gives us the Spirit of reconciliation

To begin restoring relationships where we can.

This is the ministry of the church.

The Episcopal Church's Book of Common Prayer

Asks the question.

"What is the mission of the Church?"

And then proceeds to answer it.

The answer: "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."

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Jesus is the Great Reconciler.

God sent Jesus specifically for that reason.

Jesus is the bridge that connects all people.

Paul clarifies.

2 Corinthians 5:19 CEV What we mean is that God was in Christ, offering peace and forgiveness to the people of this world. And he has given us the work of sharing his message about peace.

A monumental and unbelievably difficult task?

Absolutely!

But hey!

With God's Holy Spirit, everything is possible!

Look at Paul?!!

And like Ananias

God will place before you

The relationship God wants you to restore.

It's all part of God's plan of salvation.

And it can simply begin by remembering

We are in this together.

Jesus, his life, death and resurrection

Built a bridge connecting us to God.

Thanks be to God.

Now God calls us to be bridge-builders

With the assistance of God's Spirit of Reconciliation.

I close with a simple lesson from Marilyn Maciel

I/you/us/them/those people/ wouldn't it be lovely/if one could/live/in a constant state/of we?

Some of the most commonplace words can be some of the biggest dividers.

They

What if there was no they? What if there was only us?

John 3:17 NRSV Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

By God's grace, may it be so.

Amen.