

The Rev. Rose Anne Lonsway
The Third Sunday of Easter
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
May 4, 2025

Jesus is very busy in the readings today – transforming Saul to Paul, and calling on Peter to state Peter's deep love for Jesus, asking for a response as many times as Peter denied him prior to the crucifixion, while instructing Peter to feed and tend his sheep.

Both Saul/Paul and Peter come into direct contact with the risen Lord – Saul has his conversion experience on the Damascus Road – and it does not sound like it was a gentle event – he is confronted with a light flashing from Heaven and falling to the ground, loses his sight, and, ultimately, loses the way of life that he has known, that of a self-described Pharisee of Pharisee's. And now Saul is confronted by the very person whom he believes is causing him to persecute his fellow Jews. “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? According to Jesus, persecuting Jesus followers is the same as persecuting Jesus!

It is important to understand that the main actor in this story is God, not Saul. It was God that took Saul from a person who was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” (9:1) to someone who “proclaimed Jesus”, so that all who heard him were amazed.” (vv 20-21)

None of this was something that Saul was anticipating or that he wanted. He was set on finding and punishing those of “The WAY”; Finding and punishing those he saw as rejecting the faith that he loved and respected, the faith that he saw as being weakened, those he saw as undermining that faith – the long-standing faith of Israel”

As we well know, Saul was not God's only example of transformation! Scripture shows us other examples of God making God's self known in unmistakable ways. The book of Ezekiel tells us that Ezekiel “saw something that looked like fire, and there was splendor all around. Like the bow in the cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all around.

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it I fell on my face and I heard the voice of someone speaking. He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet and I will speak with you. “(Ezk 1:27b-2:2) This was the way God sent Ezekiel to bring God's message to a recalcitrant Israel.

C.S. Lewis provides us with a non- scriptural description of God's transforming actions. Lewis described his transformation this way: ‘God closed in on me’. And then he exclaimed – ‘So it was you all along! He didn't find a new life, a new life found him.’” Lewis was known to be rather anti-Christian, at times atheistic, or, at the least he had no use for Christianity. Yet, in 1931, Lewis wrote to his lifelong friend Arthur Greeves, telling him that “I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ.”

Lewis wrote in “Surprised by Joy”, “Picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted for even a second from my work, **the steady, unrelenting**

approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared, came upon me...I gave in and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England.” (P 228)

Will Willimon described Lewis’s transformation thus: “It is as if Lewis wants to make clear that his ‘self’ in Christ was not the result of earlier influences, not the end of some earnest intellectual search... it was a divine gift. This gift came from outside the self, reforming the self, transforming the self, in ways the self did not previously intend.”

Lewis’s great moment of spiritual insight came as he rode in a sidecar, attached to his brother’s motorcycle on their way to Whipsnade Zoo on a sunny morning in September of 1931. Willimon commented that “This has always struck me as the most ridiculous of situations for a religious conversion – stodgy C.S. Lewis, bobbing along in a motorcycle sidecar on his way to a second rate zoo. At least St. Paul was on a road going somewhere to do important business.”

Lewis said of his conversion, his transformation, ‘When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did’.

Willimon concludes with this – “That’s it? This is uneventful spiritual stuff, even for an English professor!” (p283 Lectionary Sermon Resource) I guess Willimon was expecting something much more attention grabbing!

How about you? Has God given you a transforming experience?

Have you had an experience of God pursuing you, as God does – maybe there was no huge drama of a Saul or Ezekiel, no flashing heavenly lights, - maybe it was more like C.S. Lewis experiencing “the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. ...”. It would seem that as much as we do or do not seek God, God seeks us – would seem that we may run, but we can’t hide from our God. Our God who pursues us with love, with forgiveness, with mercy and desiring reconciliation.

The story of the conversion of Saul into Paul shows us what amazing transformation of life is possible with our God; our God who loves us so much that Jesus went to the cross to make that love and reconciliation, that transformation, visible. We are God’s and God seeks us, sometimes in spite of us.

Willimon asks – “Have you known such a surprising, disrupting, transforming encounter with the Living Christ? Here’s the promise of Easter – you will!” (p 284)

Amen.