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Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL  
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Acts 9:1-22

### **The Voice of Christ Changes the Course of Life**

1. He changes your heart
2. He changes your purpose
3. He changes your outlook

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Grace to you and peace from Him who is, and who was, and who is to come. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

In the book *The Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, sociologist Christian Smith refers to a broad sociological fact about life changing events: namely, that life transitions and disruptions affect religious practices. He refers to evidence showing that life changes—such as divorce, death, leaving home, loss of a job—have a negative effect on religious practices. These, “causal mechanisms” as he calls them, break patterns and disrupt routines. These transitions make it very difficult to establish new patterns that closely replicate the practices of faith that were once a part of your everyday life. For example, if you move to a new community, first, it may be challenging to find a CLC church; second, it is not easy getting as actively involved as you might have been now that you have a new church with new people and a new personality. Also, a dramatic life change might mean you’ll need to find a new residence, new ways of transportation, new community resources. If you are starting a new job or moving into a retirement home, you might need to learn a whole new culture. You’ll need to meet new people, build a different social network which will expose you to different ways of thinking, different beliefs. This is especially true of young people who move out of the house, into the dorm; or out of the dorm into an apartment. Smith points out that during these transitions, it usually takes a strong religious background to stand against the forces that are moving you toward change.

In today’s text, we have a young man who was highly religious to say the least. He was a Pharisee, one of the more devout religious groups among all the Jews in Palestine. He is so devout that he has pledged himself to eradicating those who threaten their religious principles. He is so devout that he stands by to watch as a group of his peers lay hold of a Christian named Stephen, drag him out of the city, and

raise up stones to put him to death. He holds their coats as they cry out, and stone him to death. A great persecution rises up in Jerusalem, and Saul is at the lead. He is a devout Pharisee, and dedicated to taking up the cause of the High Priest; a holy cause in his mind; tearing into the houses of Christians and dragging them off – men and women, fathers and mothers – dedicated to silencing anyone who would blaspheme the name of God by calling on the accursed name of Jesus.

Here is a man who is dedicated to his cause; the momentum is in full swing. What could possibly have happened to make him stop? What life transition would be serious enough to get him to give up this cause? What disruption in his life would be so severe that in just a few days he would go from a persecutor of the church to a proclaimer of Christ?

The Word of God that comes to us today is the story of Saul and how the voice of Christ changed him while on his way to Damascus.

#### Acts 9:1–22

<sup>1</sup> Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. <sup>4</sup> Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

<sup>5</sup> And he said, “Who are You, Lord?”

Then the Lord said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”

<sup>6</sup> So he, trembling and astonished, said, “Lord, what do You want me to do?”

Then the Lord *said* to him, “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

<sup>7</sup> And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup> Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought *him* into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

<sup>10</sup> Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, “Ananias.”

And he said, “Here I am, Lord.”

<sup>11</sup> So the Lord *said* to him, “Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for *one* called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. <sup>12</sup> And in a

vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting *his* hand on him, so that he might receive his sight.”

<sup>13</sup> Then Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.”

<sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. <sup>16</sup> For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.”

<sup>17</sup> And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” <sup>18</sup> Immediately there fell from his eyes *something* like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.

<sup>19</sup> So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.

<sup>20</sup> Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.

<sup>21</sup> Then all who heard were amazed, and said, “Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?”

<sup>22</sup> But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ.

This Word of the Lord is spoken for you.

We pray, O Lord, bless our hearts and lives with Your Word and grant that all those gathered here today would hear your voice and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## 1. He changes your heart

Saul’s heart was dedicated to God. Or so he thought. His behavior was in keeping with all he had learned. To be fully dedicated to the Law and to the Traditions of the elders; to pursue righteousness in his works, in his dedication to the Jewish High Council. And when Christians came along and spoke against the Law, saying that there was another way to be saved, he was duty bound to do something.

Saul had been dedicated and very religious. He says numerous places elsewhere, how zealous he was. Zeal – that is, enthusiasm, energy, excitement – was full bore: threaten, capture and imprison those who would call on the name of Christ; his goal: put an end to Christianity. And that is what drove him to Damascus. He heard of the

growing number of Christians that were seeking refuge in Damascus. And his zeal was stirred; to do a good work for God and bring these blasphemers back to Jerusalem for trial. There he makes his way along the road, surrounded by soldiers, accompanied by an official decree from the High Priest himself. His heart was driven. What could reverse such momentum?

Well you know what happened. The voice of Christ happened. And it changed the momentum. He had his plans, but God had other plans. It was a life transition so unsettling that there was no way he could settle back into the life he once knew. It changed his heart.

There was something so stinging in that voice. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” It surrounded him. It cut to his heart. The one whom he supposed to be dead was alive; the one he thought a figment of heresy, was speaking; the God, he thought to be helping, was being hurt. His persecutions were not just against the church, but they were striking against Son of God. His desire was to silence the church, and in that desire, he had silenced himself.

It stung. And what could he do? What could he do to change what he had done? But there was nothing for Jesus. Nothing he could offer Jesus, but himself and his sins. So Jesus must do the doing. He must pick Saul up. He must set him on a new path to Damascus. “Arise, go. Go, and you will be told what you must do.” In those few words, in that voice, Saul’s life had changed.

Conversion is so impossible, only God can make it happen. There is no decision for Christ here; rather there is a decision by Christ. Christ has made a decision and it is to knock you down. To sound forth those stinging words: why have you done this to me? He says it and we know it; we know what we have done – the different ways we’ve stood against Christ – the ways we’ve pretended he was dead, as if he doesn’t know or doesn’t have concern for us. It stings because we know there is nothing we can do for Jesus to make it right. Our sins bind us to the same pattern of thought, the same repetition of the flesh that we experience week after week. There is nothing left to say. We’ve been knocked down.

But we must be knocked down. Repentance can never come about by our doing. We must hear from Christ. We must know that he has truly died, that he has felt the sting of our sins and our death; and we must know that he does truly live again. Just like the disciples in the boat in our Gospel reading. There he stands on the shore, preparing breakfast for us; but until we hear his voice, forget who he is; but there the voice calls, and it calls forth all creation to bow, so that not only their boat is filled, but

our hearts are filled. He brings forth our daily bread, and he brings forth our daily salvation. His voice brings forgiveness to even the worst of sinners. There is no sin that is beyond his cross. And when we hear his voice, we find love as we have never known love before. "Arise," he says to you. "You are forgiven. You are my special, chosen instrument. You are mine." The momentum of life changes.

So Christ changed things for Saul. He shifted the momentum, and gave Saul a new purpose.

## **2. He changes your purpose**

As far as momentum goes, Saul had a good thing going. To be a personal liaison for the High Priest was to have it made. He was of noble Jewish blood, of the tribe of Benjamin. He was well educated, trained by Gamaliel, a prominent member of the Jewish High Council. He the knew the Law and the Traditions well, and was gifted at writing and reasoning from the Law. He had a lot going for him; a blossoming future ahead of him. As things played out, it might be him who would sit on the Jewish High Council today; financially secure, politically cared for. In short, he had settled into a nice position and promising career. What would cause him to give it all up?

Saul had found something that was worth more. Something worth giving up the comforts of having a nice career, a political future, a safe outlook. The voice tells him otherwise. "Go," he says. "And you will be told what you must do." He is told to go and find a new purpose in Damascus, at the feet of Ananias. And that means, leaving his old self behind. He is becoming a new person. Ananias is skeptical. Is this not the same Saul? Is this not the one that just days ago was bringing decrees from the High Priest to bind and imprison us? But the voice of Christ changes things.

"This is my chosen vessel; he has been chosen by me to bear my name and to suffer for my sake." In other words, Saul has been repurposed; recycled; recreated as be God's chosen instrument, his vessel, to bear his name. He will no longer be called Saul the Pharisee, but now Paul the Apostle. And this life transition would bring total disruption to his routine. Nothing would be the same. He would have to relocate, become a traveling Apostle who would never really have a place to call home. He would have to find a new means of income, making tents for his pay. He would be threatened in almost every city he entered, for now he bears the name. His life of privilege would become a life of suffering; a future bound for death.

Is it worth it? To suffer for something like this? Christ says to you, "Arise, go." Christ calls you to get up; to go. It is perhaps not so dramatic as being an Apostle, but

here you have come none the less. And the suffering is no less real. You've come here, to be greeted by those whom Christ has brought to care for you, to receive you, to give you that new purpose. And the purpose is this: to bear Christ's name. Here you've come, and like Ananias, your pastor has placed the name of Christ on you. You are not yourself. You are repurposed.

Your future is no longer about reaching retirement; it is about hearing the voice of Christ who sends you where he would have you go. Your family goals is not to raise kids that want to have a lot of stuff and make a lot of money, but to raise kids that know the name of Christ. Your money is not a means to reach your life goals, but a means to serve others for Christ's sake. You have been called to suffer for Christ and the momentum in your life has shifted.

### **3. He changes your outlook**

And what has changed all this: the voice that speaks over the water. The disciples have been out fishing all night, but caught nothing. As the sun is just stretching over the hills, they notice a man standing on the shore by a fire. He is looking out, waving to them. So the disciples stop and listen. "Drop your net on the right side of the boat!" He says. So they do, and then they know. They bring in such a catch, a multitude of fish so that they struggle to bring it to shore. And there they sit down to eat baked fish cooked over coals. For the voice of abundance has spoken. This is the voice that travels over the waters and provides God's grace.

This is the voice that travels over the waters and changes the outlook of the Pharisee Saul. Ananias lifts the water and pours it over Saul's head; as it drips from his beard, the words of Christ drip from heaven. The voice of Christ is spoken over the water and Saul is washed, cleansed, baptized into a new outlook. Now he can see.

The voice of Christ has traveled over waters to you too. He has called to you over the waters of baptism to provide such abundance, that you need never worry. He calls out with the voice of creation to provide you with such abundance, that you might sit down to breakfast and be at peace with God. For that abundance is proclaimed here, the forgiveness of sins and peace with God. It changes your whole outlook on life. Now you can see. You can see God at work in this world. Through the people we meet, the help that friends like Ananias provide, the vocation we take up. We can see, Jesus is everywhere; he is in the fish we catch, the fire we burn, the breakfast we eat. He is there in the world changing things, changing people, changing you.

Transitions are difficult. And change can be disruptive. But Christ can use it for good. Just listen. Just listen for his voice: spoken from heaven while you are on your way, calling across the waters of baptism as you say your daily prayers, saying to you, "Arise and go," and changing everything. Amen.