

In the Name of Jesus

4th Sunday after Epiphany – January 29, 2017

Text: Acts 9:1-22 – GOD’S GRACE IN CHRIST MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE!

Scripture Readings: Matthew 17:22–18:4, 1 Corinthians 15:3-11

Hymns: 37, 388, 778, 391

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!” “Yes, Lord,” he answered. The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.” “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.” But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

In the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church, our Savior, dearly beloved of God:

There are two dates in our church’s history that are noteworthy (both in January):

- Sunday, January 17, 1993. It was on that day that voting members from St. Luke of Denver and St. James of Golden held a meeting where the decision was made to consolidate into a single congregation, believing the work of the Lord in the Denver area could be carried on more effectively that way.
- Sunday, January 3, 1993. Two weeks before, when a meeting was held to choose a name for the soon-to-be-formed congregation: ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH.

I don’t know the reasons that lay behind the decision to choose that name. Perhaps the

voters were thinking how it would be a beautiful reminder of the power the Gospel has to change hearts. Maybe they were thinking how Paul served the Lord as a missionary and his name would be a reminder of how Jesus has called all Christians to be missionaries. They may also have been aware of an important date that was soon to fall on the calendar (eight days after their meeting). January 25, the date on which the Christian church has commemorated the Festival of the Conversion of Paul.

Whatever the reason for “St. Paul” being chosen as our name, this morning we want to direct our thoughts to that life-changing event in Paul’s life. We want to consider the blessed truth that **GOD’S GRACE IN CHRIST MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE!**

1. It made all the difference for St. Paul the Apostle.
2. It makes all the difference for the members of St. Paul Lutheran Church (and for all).

1.

I’d like to begin by providing a summary of events in Paul’s life *before* his conversion:

- He was a native of Tarsus, the capital of the province of Cilicia, situated in the southeastern corner of modern Turkey, about 8 miles from the Mediterranean, roughly 400 miles due north of Jerusalem (Acts 22:3).
- Paul’s father belonged to the Jewish tribe of Benjamin, the same tribe King Saul belonged to, which is probably why his parents named him “Saul” (Philippians 3:5).
- He had one sister we know of (Acts 23:16).
- As a child growing up Saul received a thorough grounding and strict training in the teachings of Moses.
- As a youth, he studied at Jerusalem at the feet of the famous rabbi, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3).
- After completing his course of instruction (which probably lasted several years) he very likely returned to Tarsus where he learned the trade of tent-making (Acts 18:3).
- As far we know Saul wasn’t in Jerusalem during the days of Jesus’ ministry and probably never saw Him during that time. It appears that, after Jesus’ resurrection, Saul returned to Jerusalem to further his studies with a view towards becoming a teacher of the Jewish religion.

Regarding his personal life: Paul was never married. Health-wise he suffered throughout his life from a painful medical ailment (the specific nature of which the Bible doesn’t say) ... he describes it as “a thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7). Students of his writings have suggested it might have been an eye disease, chronic migraines, or epilepsy, but we cannot say for sure.

The first time we hear about Paul/Saul in the Bible is Luke’s account of the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7). Stephen was a member of the church at Jerusalem. The Jewish religious leaders had come to detest Stephen for his preaching about the crucified and risen Savior and his accusing them of murdering the Prince of Life whom God sent to save them. They were so filled with rage against Stephen that they dragged him outside the city to stone him. That’s where we read that they took off their coats and gave them

to a young man named Saul. He was an eyewitness of this stoning and gave his full approval to it! He was probably thinking: *“Let him have it! He deserves to be stoned for preaching about this Jesus ... saying we’re saved by trusting in Him and we don’t need to follow the laws of Moses in order to be saved!”*

That brings us to our text where we learn about the most important day in Saul’s life. In the fury of his zeal he applied for a commission to travel to Damascus (140 miles from Jerusalem up in Syria) to seize those who were of “the Way” and bring them back in chains to Jerusalem. After receiving his commission he headed off merrily down the road to Damascus. He’d almost arrived there . . . WHEN IT HAPPENED! The resurrected Christ appeared to him in a light so brilliant that it struck him blind. He heard Jesus’ voice calling: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” “Who are You, Lord?” he asked. “I’m Jesus, the One you’re persecuting!” “What do you want me to do, Lord?” “Stand up on your feet, go into the city. I’ll let you know what you need to do.”

He was then led by the hand by his traveling companions into the city. Three day later a Christian man, Ananias, at the Lord’s direction, paid him a visit, to cure him of his blindness and baptize him. It was in this way, by God’s gracious, mighty working, Saul the *persecutor* became Saul the *believer*!

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What happened in Saul’s life is what the Bible calls CONVERSION. The Lord in His grace by His mighty Word turned him around 180°. He cured Saul not just of *physical* blindness but *spiritual* blindness so he could see with crystal clarity and deep appreciation everything in regard to the wonders of God’s love in Christ. Before his conversion he believed salvation was something he could earn on his own. Now, after his conversion he knew salvation is a free gift through Jesus who had died for his sins on the cross and rose again. “Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, having the righteousness that comes from God through faith” (Philippians 3:7-9).

The difference God’s grace made in Paul’s life can also be seen in that *he was filled with zeal to serve the Lord*. He became a willing instrument in the Lord’s hand for opening the eyes of others and turning them from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God so they too might receive forgiveness for their sins and a place in heaven through faith in Jesus. He took the story of Jesus on the road for 10,000 miles (on three mission journeys and a voyage to Rome), confronted along the way by numerous obstacles and terrible trials. He was used by the Lord to provide us with over one-fourth of the New Testament ... twelve epistles in which he magnifies the grace of God ... and uses that word “GRACE” (not surprisingly) over eighty times. A few examples:

- Paul wrote to Timothy: **“Though I was once a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The**

GRACE of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 1:13-14).

- To the Ephesians he wrote: **“By GRACE you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is a gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9)**
- To Titus: **“He saved us ... through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his GRACE, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5-7).**
- To the Corinthians – **“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take away (my thorn in the flesh). But he said to me, ‘My GRACE is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Corinthians 12:8-9).**

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Oh, what a difference God’s GRACE made for Paul! It cleansed him from his dark past and prepared him for a life of serving Jesus ... preserving him in faith to the end so he could declare with joy (before he died): **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—as He will to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8).**

2.

That was what the Lord did for Paul. What about you and me? We can also see, can’t we, His amazing grace at work in our lives. *It has made all the difference for us, the people of St. Paul Lutheran Church.*

When was the last time we stopped to think about our conversion and the grace of God that made it possible? For us it wasn’t as dramatic as Paul’s conversion. There was no eye-blinding light flashing around us. No booming voice speaking from heaven. For most of us our conversion was a seemingly insignificant event that happened at a baptismal font, with water sprinkled on our forehead three times in the name of the Triune God. Or perhaps, later on in your life, with seemingly ordinary words spoken to you by a friend, a Christian spouse, or a pastor. However it happened, it was miracle of God’s grace just as Paul’s conversion! Because even though the circumstances surrounding our conversion were different, our hearts were by nature the same. Like Saul’s they were dead in sin. We couldn’t turn or respond or make any positive movement in the direction of God (any more than a mannequin at the shopping mall can move or respond to stimuli it is exposed to). The Bible says:

- **“Like the rest, we were by nature objects of God’s wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ– it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:3-4).**
- **“We were as sheep going astray but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls” (1 Peter 2:25).**

The God of all grace stepped in and performed His great work of turning us around spiritually so that we trust in Jesus our Savior with the faith of a little child. We confess with joy:

Lord, 'tis not that I did choose Thee;
That, I know, could never be;
For this heart would still refuse Thee
Had Thy GRACE not chosen me.
Thou hast from the sin that stained me
Washed and cleansed and set me free
And unto this end ordained me,
That I ever live to Thee.

(TLH 37:1)

There's another special way God's GRACE has made all the difference in our lives. It has been said that *"a follower of Christ is someone who stops doing what he or she wants to do and starts doing what Jesus wants him or her to do."*

Just as Paul, after his conversion was used by Jesus as an instrument in His hand for spreading the Gospel, founding churches, bringing others to know Him as their Good Shepherd just as he did (empowered by God's grace) ... so He does for us. He leads us to ask: **"What shall I do, Lord?" "Show me Your ways, teach me Your paths"** (Psalm 25:4). Show Me how to serve You ... in my spouse, in my children, in my parents, in my brother, in my sister. Teach Me how to serve You in the congregation with the talents You've given me. Lord, I want to serve You with prayers and offerings for Your kingdom work to the glory of Your name, empowered by Your grace.

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St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church. When a meaningful name for a Christian congregation. It was a good choice by the voters in that special meeting that was held 24 years ago in January of 1993. As we think about the grace God showed towards Paul in his life and strengthened him for his walk of faith, may we also reminded of God's grace towards us. May we strengthened in our life of Christian service to Jesus till in heaven we see Him and praise Him face-to-face, together with St. Paul and all the saints redeemed by His blood. Amen.