

The Book of Acts: A Spirit-Fueled Adventure!
“...That Saved a Wretch Like Me”
Sermon on selected verses of Acts 9:1-31 (6/25 & 6/26/16)
Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

[Sing: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind but now I see.”]

The writer of the hymn “Amazing Grace” – a white Englishman named John Newton – experienced a powerful conversion in his life, which is reflected in his famous hymn.

As many of you are perhaps aware, John Newton grew-up in England in the 1700's, was a sailor for much of his career, and, in that career, he became involved in the slave trade. Mr. Newton was also a devout Christian who, after years of involvement in the slave trade, became clear that slavery was not in line with Christian faith and life.

After that “conversion” of sorts, he became actively involved in the abolition movement in the United Kingdom and celebrated the end of Britain's involvement with the African slave trade in 1807.

When he wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace, I suspect John Newton was thinking not only of his own conversion story, but that he was thinking also of *Saul's* conversion story...the story we just heard read a few moments ago.

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We first meet Saul in chapter seven, during the story about the apostle Stephen being stoned to death for preaching boldly about Jesus. Saul was a devout Jew and, though we don't know for sure what his role was within the Jewish religious leadership, he persecuted the earliest Christians.

Beginning early in the book of Acts, the Jewish religious council repeatedly ordered the apostles not to preach and teach about Jesus, yet they did it anyway – over and over again.

At the end of Acts chapter seven, the apostle Stephen was stoned to death because he boldly preached about Jesus *to* the Jewish religious council.

Then, at the beginning of chapter eight, we were introduced to Saul by learning that, not only did he *approve* the stoning of Stephen, but Saul *also* started going from house to house in Jerusalem, arresting Christians and putting them in jail. That's our introduction to Saul. We are *not* meant to like him – at least not at first.

See, what all of us 21st-Century Christians need to know and remember is that, 2,000 years ago, when the stories of the book of Acts were happening in real time, The Church was *not* a thing yet – not really, anyway...certainly not as we know it to be a thing.

The first believers in Jesus were Jews who had followed Jesus from the start or who had begun believing in him based on the testimony of those who had experienced him first-hand. However, belief in Jesus as Messiah created a fundamental rift:

if you were Jewish – as Jesus' first followers were – to believe in Jesus as the Messiah made you *different to the core* from fellow Jews who did *not* believe Jesus was the Messiah. And this critical difference caused significant heartache in the Jewish community after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven.

This difference also caused much more than heartache for the members of the early church. Enter: Saul – also known as “Paul.”

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Again, we were introduced to Saul, Persecutor of Christians, at the beginning of chapter eight...and then we didn't hear about him for the rest of the chapter. Instead, we heard about the guys we heard about last week: Philip the apostle with Simon the witch and Philip the apostle with the Ethiopian official.

The stories of Philip with both Simon the witch *and* the Ethiopian official are such compelling stories that we, as readers, have likely forgotten about Saul by the close of chapter eight. But, then, he shows-up again at the beginning of chapter nine – the beginning of today's reading.

And he shows up again in a dramatic, even *violent* way, with these words: “Saul kept on threatening to kill the Lord's followers. He even went to the high priest and asked for letters to their leaders in Damascus. He did this because he wanted to arrest and take to Jerusalem any man or woman who had accepted the Lord's Way.”

Somehow, Jesus' followers were so threatening to the Jewish religious leaders of that day, that they wanted them imprisoned...and worse. The way the writer tells the story, Saul was perhaps the worst among those who were persecuting the early Christians.

And then...something happened.

Saul was traveling with a couple men to Damascus – on a mission to arrest the Christians in that city – when, all of a sudden, just before entering the city, a bright light from heaven flashed around him. Saul fell to the ground and then he heard a voice that said, “Saul! Saul! Why are you so cruel to me?”

Not knowing what else to say in response, Saul asked the voice, “Who are you?” The voice's reply was shocking: “I am Jesus. I am the one you are so cruel to. Now get up and go into the city, where you will be told what to do.”

The men who were with Saul heard the voice as well and, apparently, when multiple people hear a voice from heaven telling you to do something, you do what the voice tells you. Saul got up from the ground to follow the direction. As he got up, however, he opened his eyes and discovered he could not see anything. So, someone led Saul by the hand into the city.

For three days, Saul experienced this blindness and he was completely helpless – at the mercy of whomever was willing to help him. He didn't eat or drink anything during that time.

While Saul was experiencing his blindness, a Christian named Ananias *also* had a heavenly conversation with Jesus.

Now, the Ananias in *this* story is *not* the Ananias in Acts chapter 5. In Acts 5, we met the infamous Ananias of “Ananias and Sapphira,” the couple in the early church who decided to withhold a portion of money they'd dedicated to the church...and who, because of that dishonest withholding, dropped dead. Four chapters later, the Ananias in Acts chapter 9 is not *that* Ananias. Obviously!

This Ananias we'll call “Ananias of Damascus.” In a vision, Jesus told *this* Ananias where to go to find Saul. Jesus also told Ananias that Saul had been struck blind and had been praying for days...and, in fact, in the midst of his praying, Saul received a vision of a man named Ananias laying hands on him to heal his blindness.

I love the next part of Ananias' conversation with Jesus. See, Ananias was no dummy. The Christians in Damascus had heard all about Saul and about the terrible problems he was causing for Jesus' followers. So, even though Jesus was telling him to go help Saul out, Ananias was hesitant...*and* he wasn't afraid to challenge Jesus!

Ananias responded to Jesus by saying, “Lord, a lot of people have told me about the terrible things this man has done to your followers in Jerusalem. Now the chief priests have given him the power to come here and arrest anyone who worships in your name.”

It's Ananias' way of saying, “You want me to go *help* this guy? Are you kidding me, Jesus?!” But Jesus isn't kidding. After all, this is the same Jesus who told his disciples to love their enemies and to pray for those who persecute them. This is also the same Jesus who, as he was dying on the cross, asked God the Father to forgive those who crucified him.

Jesus said to Ananias, “God! I have chosen [this Saul] to tell foreigners, kings, and the people of Israel about me...” So Ananias stopped protesting. He found where Saul was staying, explained to Saul that Jesus had sent him...Ananias laid hands on Saul to heal him of his blindness *and* to bless him with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“Scales” fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He was immediately baptized and then stayed with the Christians in Damascus for several more days.

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I love so very many things about this story – the story of Saul's conversion to the way of Jesus – I love so very many things about this story...but it's possible my favorite thing about it is that the Christians in Damascus helped take care of Saul in the midst of his helplessness.

I mean, here was this man who had traveled to Damascus for the sole purpose of arresting the Christians there – this man who had approved the stoning of Stephen – and they trusted God enough to take care of Saul in his blindness...and to them welcoming him among them after Ananias healed him.

If I'm being completely honest, I'm not sure I could do that. I'm not sure I could welcome into my community someone who, in the very recent past, had been so violently hateful *to my community*. Could you do that?

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Conversion is powerful. It brings about new life for the newly converted, but it also requires the community to *accept* their conversion. Saul received new life during those days in Damascus...but the Christians in Damascus also had to open their hearts to someone who had persecuted them.

They were kind of like sheep willingly welcoming a wolf among them. I'm not sure I have enough faith to do that. But I sure am challenged to pray for faith that is that big.

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As I contemplated this story of Saul's conversion, I thought about a story I read during one of our Wednesday worship services in Lent this past Spring. It's a story I found in a book of sermons by Rev. John Braaten.

In one of his sermons, Rev. Braaten tells the story of *another* preacher – a story from that preacher's life that connects powerfully to the concept of conversion...and to the idea that, not only does the newly converted experience something powerful, but their community needs to experience something powerful as well: their community needs to accept their conversion – needs to accept that life is different now.

Rev. Braaten used this story to illustrate a story in the Gospel of Luke wherein Jesus allows a “sinful woman” to wash his feet, rather than judging and condemning her, as other religious leaders did.

This story is about a woman named “Lily” and the unfortunate judgment she received when she became involved at a church in her town. It's from decades ago, so pieces of it seem a bit antiquated to our contemporary ears. It's told from the perspective of a young girl who grew-up as part of this church. The story goes like this:

“Lily began attending our church when [I was 10-years-old]. One Sunday in Sunday school class, we [girls] asked our teacher...why [the adults in church] referred to Lily as the woman of sin. Certainly we knew that Lily looked different from all the other women of our congregation. She wore high-heels and lipstick; she was by far the prettiest woman we'd ever seen. 'Woman of sin,' what did it mean?

“In our Illustrated King James Version of the Bible there was a picture on page 90 with the caption, 'Woman of Sin anoints the feet of Jesus.'

“We studied that picture looking for clues. There were five figures in the scene. The three men who stood in the background glaring furiously looked a bit like the Elders at our [church].

“The glare on the faces was just like the one they used when they stood at the end of the pews during communion to make sure that the children didn't snitch any bread. It was the same glare that they had on their faces whenever Lily came into church and sat by herself and wasn't even offered communion.

“There there was Jesus in the picture:...wearing a dazzling white robe, a shining halo around his head, his hand resting tenderly on the head of the 'woman of sin,' who knelt weeping at his feet. The 'woman of sin' wore a crimson robe which was only a little deeper red than her hair which flowed at least down to her waist. She looked exactly like Rita Hayworth who we had only seen in magazines because we weren't allowed to attend the movies. 'Woman of sin.' What was her sin?

“Playing 'Woman of sin' became a favorite pretend game for us girls. We'd imagine the worst, most shocking scenario we could. Something that would really offend the elders at the local church. Our favorite scenarios were: that Lily had been seen coming out of a movie, or maybe the Saturday night dance. Or maybe Lily had been seen smoking or coming out of the...liquor store with a brown bag.

“Would Lily ever publicly confess her sins at the Thursday night prayer meetings? Attendance escalated in hopeful anticipation. Lily did stand up every Thursday and speak, 'By grace I have received forgiveness for my sins. I thank God for giving me new life.' Then she would sit down and say no more.

“[One] Sunday morning Lily stood up in the pew and walked clear down the center aisle to the front of the church, she turned around and faced the congregation and said in a clear voice, 'I'm leaving this church to find another church where people will rejoice with me in God's forgiving grace. You people only want me to wallow in my old life. You don't see that I'm a new person.' And out of the church she walked and never returned.

“The next Sunday was communion Sunday. Three 10-year-old girls carried out a pact that they had made secretly during the week. Under the furious glare of the elders each one of them took not one, but two pieces of communion bread, one for themselves and one for Lily.

“Though we didn't know what to call it, she had given us our first glimpse of freedom, of newness in Christ. Somehow as young as we were we understood it was Lily's faith, her new life, that angered and frightened that congregation so much more than her sin.”¹

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I suspect that far too many of the folks in Lily's church had not yet been converted themselves...because, in the way they gossiped about her, and in the way they treated her as a continual outsider, they certainly seemed too full of their own sense of self-righteousness and judgment to accept her.

But thank God for those young girls who decided to behave differently than the judgmental grown-ups in their church, right? Thank God for those girls who understood that the love and new life offered in Jesus Christ was real for Lily...thank God they had the courage to defy the grown-ups in their church in order to offer Lily that Communion bread.

And thank God for the Christian community in Damascus – the community that accepted among them the newly converted Saul, former persecutor of Christians...for Saul went on to become St. Paul, chief apostle to the gentiles and author of many New Testament letters.

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[Sing: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind but now I see.”]

We are, every single one of us, a “wretch” in need of saving. We are, every single one of us, lost and in need of finding. We are, every single one of us, so often blind to our need for mercy.

So *thank God* for the amazing grace of Jesus Christ.

¹ John Braaten in *The Greatest Wonder of All: Sermons for Lent and Easter*. 51-53.

May we, Christ's followers today, be ever grateful for that grace...and may we find ourselves ever more challenged to extend his amazing grace to others in the way he constantly extends it to us.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, send your Holy Spirit to breakthrough into our hearts and into McCabe United Methodist Church. Lead us to bold, new ways of sharing your love with one another, in our neighborhood, in Bismarck-Mandan, and beyond. May we look to you always as we build your heavenly kingdom on earth. We pray this in the powerful name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.