



TRANSFORMATION AND CONVERSION

TRANSFORMING LIFE AND FAITH *by Carol Schersten LaHurd*

Theme verse

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:1–2).

Session 1 Theme Verse

“But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel’” (Acts 9:15).

Opening Hymn

“We Are Called” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 720) or “Listen, God Is Calling” (*ELW* 513)

Introducing the Bible Study

Most of us taking part in this Bible study will never be handpicked by God to witness to “Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel,” as was the apostle Paul. But many of us do share something with him and the other biblical and historical people we will meet in these monthly lessons. We share the experience of having been introduced to God, often when we were children. We share experiences of being led out of our comfort zones by challenges and crises that can both

test and strengthen our faith in God and Christ. We share the sense from our baptism and throughout our lives that God is calling us to share Christ’s name and to serve God’s mission in the world.

Most of us would probably not call such experiences conversions. Yet we may profitably see them as a series of transformations: of our faith in God, of our attitudes toward life and other people, of our understanding of what God wants us to do with our lives. In these nine sessions, we will meet biblical characters who find themselves transformed in these ways. We will read passages from both Old and New Testaments. And we will look especially at stories from the Acts of the Apostles and insights in Paul’s letters to the Christians at Corinth and Rome.

Overview

Our first Bible story of transformation is Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles. In the process we will examine conversion as a type of transformation and begin to think about transformations in our own lives and faith journeys.

What is Conversion?

In this Bible study we will focus on what scholar Beverly R. Gaventa understands as *conversion* and an even broader category that she defines as *transformation*

(*From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). Gaventa also uses the term *alternation* for a more limited form of change, as we will see.

A prominent example of both conversion and transformation can be found in the life of St. Augustine of Hippo. Augustine was born in 354 C.E. (Common Era) in North Africa, then part of the Roman Empire, now Algeria. He grew up with a pagan father and Christian mother. As a child and young adult he encountered Christian beliefs, pagan practices, Latin literature, and a strange religious cult. Along the way he had his share of sexual escapades and fathered a son with a woman he never married. While teaching, this young man converted to Christianity. Eventually he became St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, and one of Christianity's most influential theologians. Augustine's faith journey here illustrates various types of transformation and conversion we will ponder in this nine-month study.

Gaventa's distinctions will be helpful as we meet people from the Bible and history whose faith and religious life have been transformed. Conversion, for Gaventa, is a radical change, a rejection of past relationships and commitments and the development of a new identity such as we see in Augustine. Transformation also involves radical change but also a reinterpretation of one's perception of one's life, both its present and past. We also see this as Augustine radically redefines not only his belief but his self, his history, his future. Another good example of conversion and transformation is Martin Luther's new sense of God and God's righteousness toward humankind after preparing to lecture on Paul's letter to the Romans, together with the way his perception of his past and future as a priest were changed.

Alternation, for Gaventa, however, means a more-limited change of commitments or behaviors growing out of past dispositions, for example the evolving

prophet role of John the Baptist. John was born to Mary's cousin Elizabeth and her priest husband, Zachariah, according to Luke's gospel, and "grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel" (Luke 1:80). As a young man he was a lone prophet warning his fellow Jews of coming judgment, calling all to repentance, and baptizing followers in the Jordan River. His eventual role was to prepare the way for the ministry of his cousin Jesus as the promised Messiah. As he becomes more focused on drawing attention to Jesus' Messiahship than to this own message, John the Baptist illustrates the shift in vocation called alternation. (See "Nature of Transition," p. 18.)

In this study we will focus on conversion and transformation. We will meet people with evolving beliefs and experiences who also make a conscious choice to stay inside their religious communities. For example, Jesus' 12 apostles did not stop being practicing Jews, but they gradually came to see the tradition they grew up with through a new lens as they listened to Jesus' words and saw his ministry to those in need. This is a process of transformation, and some of the Twelve may have experienced conversion to the new faith that emerged after the resurrection, as they became increasingly separated from the synagogue religion.

Similarly, we hear today about individuals who have decided to leave a strict religious community such as the Amish in order to live in modern society. Even though such people may be shunned by friends and relatives still in the group, they often retain the religious and moral values they grew up with inside the closed community. They are experiencing transformation but not necessarily conversion in their new environment.

Introducing Paul and the Acts of the Apostles

This year we'll meet biblical characters like Moses, Israelite prophets, King David, and Jesus and the disciples—in passages from both the Hebrew Old Testament

and the Christian New Testament. Many passages will come from Luke's gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, and the apostle Paul will recur as a central character.

A New Testament book believed to be from the same author as Luke's gospel, the Acts of the Apostles will take us out from Jerusalem into the very diverse Mediterranean world of the First Century Roman Empire. In Philippi of Macedonia we will watch the conversion of Lydia, a Gentile woman who has a successful business selling purple cloth. On Mars Hill in Athens, Greece, we will hear Paul quote classical poetry to Greek philosophers. And we will meet people being transformed by the disciples' preaching and healing.

The second half of Acts will follow the missionary travels of Paul after his dramatic encounter with the risen Christ. From the disciples' and Paul's successes and failures as missionaries we will learn more about the challenges of bringing Christ to the varied Jewish and non-Jewish communities. (See "On the Road," p. 22.)

1. Read aloud Acts 1:8 and 9:15. What surprises you in these verses?

What are some of the ways they summarize the story of Paul's mission in Acts? What do the verses say about our mission as the church today?

Biblical scholars disagree somewhat about whether the author of Luke and Acts (usually thought to be Luke) was writing mainly for Jews or for non-Jews (Gentiles). But these two verses are good evidence that the answer is both. Both the people descended from Abraham and Moses and the people born into the Roman world of pagan rituals and Greek philosophy need to hear the good news. Those who already believe in God and God's son, Jesus, need to hear that the promises God made to the Old Testament Israelites are being shared now with all the world. New converts and long-time believers need to have their faith strengthened and to learn how to become a Christian community within the Roman Empire: how to become the church.

Paul as Faithful Jew and Missionary for the Risen Christ

- 2. Read aloud Acts 7:58–8:3 and 9:1–31. List some of the key events and symbols in this story, such as the bright light and three days of blindness Paul experienced. Which ones make the greatest impression on you and why?**

The author of Luke and Acts is an expert storyteller. In a transition from the stoning of the evangelist Stephen in Acts 7, he sets the stage for the dramatic events on the road to Damascus by telling us in Acts 7:58–8:3 and 9:1–2 that Paul welcomed Stephen's execution and himself persecuted followers of the Lord Jesus. At this point Paul was still called by his Hebrew name Saul, not his Roman name Paul or Paulus. To the followers of Jesus, Saul was a feared enemy. We do well to remember that at this point in his life Saul sincerely believed he was protecting God and his own Jewish community from a splinter group. This group called Jews to accept and obey as risen Lord an obscure carpenter and preacher from Galilee.

Note in Acts 9 how the author recreates dialogue and uses eyewitnesses to draw the reader into the drama (see verses 4–7). Remember that Saul walked overland to Damascus to arrest the Jewish followers of "the Way" of Jesus Christ—even if paintings and movies show him on a horse. Imagine how he might have reacted to the blinding light and unseen voice calling, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He could not see and for three days he "neither ate nor drank."

It's no accident that Luke's account reminds us of Moses meeting God in burning bush (Exodus 3:2) or of the prophet Elijah's 40 days of fasting before being told by God to travel to "the wilderness of Damascus" to "anoint Hazael to be king over Syria" and Elisha to be prophet (1 Kings 19:15–16). Late first-century readers of Acts would likely also remember that three days had passed between Jesus' death and resurrection. This skillful weaving together of Old Testament and gospel

references helps us grasp the importance of this experience for Paul and prepares us for his eventual role as the chief missionary to bring Jesus’ “name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15).

God Calls Ananias Also

3. Read aloud Acts 9:10–19 again. What do we know about Ananias and about why he followed the Lord’s commands? Can you think of a time when you’ve been asked or felt called to help someone’s faith journey? What did you do?

Acts tells us that the Ananias, a Jew, was a disciple of Jesus living in Damascus. In Paul’s time Damascus was a large city, standing for thousands of years on a spring-fed oasis and serving as a trade crossroad—features still true today in spite of recent civil strife. In Paul’s day in the middle of the first century, the city had large communities of both Gentiles and Jews, such as Ananias.

When he heard the Lord’s voice in a vision, Ananias’s reply, “Here I am, Lord,” recalls the ready obedience of such Hebrew prophets as Samuel and Isaiah.

But like Moses when first called by God, Ananias also raised an objection—in this case that Saul has been doing “evil” to the “saints in Jerusalem” (v. 13). Jesus reassured him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel (v. 15).

Jesus’ words clearly had an impact. Ananias went to look for Saul in a house on “the street called Straight”—a road that still runs east to west straight through the Christian quarter at the center of the ancient walled part of Damascus. There Ananias not only sought out the ailing Paul but addressed him as “brother” (v. 17).

At the Lord’s prompting, Ananias laid hands on Paul to heal his blindness and called for Paul to “be filled with the Holy Spirit” (v. 17). The scene ends with Paul regaining his sight, being baptized, and eating to regain his strength. Immediately Paul began to proclaim Jesus as “the Son of God” (v. 20) and “the Messiah” (v. 22). Remember that Jesus, too, laid hands on people to heal them.

Many years ago my college-professor husband and I served on the volunteer ambulance corps in our small

Paul and Judaism

It is not only individual Christians who experience change and transformation. Our understandings of the Bible and the biblical world change too. Since the second half of the 20th century, there has been a transformation in how biblical scholars and theologians view first-century Judaism and Paul’s relationship with it. We know now that there were varied expressions of Jewish temple and synagogue worship and varying degrees of emphasis on ritual law (such as kosher food) and moral law (as outlined in the Ten Commandments). Paul in Philippians claims to have been raised with strict adherence to all the Jewish law (Philippians 3:4b–6).

After his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damas-

cus and the start of his witness to Christ as Messiah, Paul faces opposition and even death threats from Jewish leaders. Despite the threats, Acts describes Paul as continuing to reach out to his fellow Jews, as well as to Gentiles, as he travels around the Roman Empire. Paul’s own letters, such as Romans 9–11, show that he continues to value the Jewish tradition. What has changed is the greater value he places on his relationship with the risen Christ: “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ” (Philippians 3:7). Likewise, both the Gospel of Luke and Acts make many references to Jewish history, symbols, and worship practices. (See “Changed Utterly,” p. 26.)

Pennsylvania town. I was part of the team to transport neighbors for cancer treatment, while another volunteer babysat for our young children. On nights and weekends, my husband captained an emergency squad that raced to highway accidents to give first aid and take the injured to the hospital. We will never forget the experience of touching people's lives literally and symbolically. We could see the calming effect of a hand laid on a frightened, injured person. In those few years, we became part of their community—and were no longer just “the people from Wisconsin.” (See “Abiding Presence,” p. 16.)

After his meeting with Ananias, Saul/Paul joined the community of people who would soon be called Christians. We can be sure that faithful Christians like Ananias gave Paul needed support as he started out in a bold journey to share his new faith in Jesus as Lord and Messiah.

From Darkness to Light

4. Quickly reread silently today's passages from Acts 9. Notice the places that refer to “seeing” and “sight.” Think about the various meanings of “seeing” when considering Christian faith. Can you tell about experiences, sermons, or people that have helped you see more clearly? What did they do? How did you respond?

The references to seeing in Acts 9 tell us about both Paul's recovery from physical blindness and the new faith in Christ he received from direct revelation. As Acts retells Paul's missionary efforts, much of his success and failure is described in images of sight and blindness, darkness and light. These themes in Acts continue what Luke has introduced in his gospel.

In Luke 1, the Jewish priest Zechariah was unable to speak following the visit of an angel that announced the coming birth of his son, John the Baptist. When the time came to circumcise his baby son according to Jewish law and tradition, Zechariah's voice returned. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he prophesied that another

infant will “give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79).

When Mary and Joseph dedicated the baby Jesus in the Temple, a devout old man happened to be there. Simeon, too, was guided by the Holy Spirit. He held Jesus and said, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples...” (Luke 2:29–32). Throughout this Bible study we will meet people in both the Old and New Testament, people whose faith transformation is marked by both the power of the Holy Spirit and by new ways of seeing.

Transformation and Us

5. Think of one or more life experiences and/or people who had a significant impact your own developing Christian faith.

Share your stories in pairs or with the whole group.

We can learn from this dramatic story of Paul's journey toward Damascus that transformational life experiences often happen when people are separated from their usual routines and status in life. In Paul's case, the persecutor of Jesus' followers was traveling through the desert on foot to Damascus in Syria. Then for three days he existed in a reversed status. He was temporarily blind and had lost control. Perhaps these conditions made Paul more receptive to the physical and spiritual transformation that was soon to come as Ananias laid hands on him and the Holy Spirit filled him.

For many of us, summer church camp was a time to be away from our families and everyday lives—and thus a time for new learning, for new ways of seeing, for transformation. While I value my own church camp experiences, my summer job just after college graduation was even more life-changing. For three months, I served as a residence counselor at a federal Job Corps training center in Charleston, W.V., the heart of Appa-

lachia. I worked the 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. shift, making sure all the girls were in their rooms—and dealing with any emergencies that arose. Usually a half-dozen of us female counselors spent much of the night in the staff lounge. Among the staff of 20 or so counselors, I was one of only two White women. All the rest were African-American, as were 90 percent of the teenage residents, who came mainly from the cities and mountains of West Virginia and North Carolina.

During those long nights in the staff lounge I was definitely separated from my mostly White community life in the still very segregated United States of the late 1960s. The other counselors, five or 10 years older than I, were very welcoming to me as the newcomer. But being a person in the minority for the first time in my life was hugely transformative. Night after night the Black women retold their family experiences and never sugar-coated the realities of segregation and prejudice. I was grateful for their candor and their friendship, and grateful that they trusted me enough to speak openly. Hearing their stories both expanded (and altered) my schoolbook knowledge of American racism and helped me see the world through their eyes.

6. Have you ever had an experience of being away from your home and in an unfamiliar environment or routine? Did it change your thinking and perception of the world? In what ways? (See “Life’s Rhythm,” p. 10.)

Looking Ahead

The apostle Paul was not the only preacher of God to be called to ministry in a dramatic way. In the next session we will meet Old Testament prophets and disciples of Jesus who received and accepted a call from God, even if sometimes reluctantly. We will look at how their lives were transformed. Finally, we will reconsider Paul’s Damascus road experience in the light of his own letters.

Closing Prayer

Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.

He will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday.

O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.

Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God. Amen. (Psalms 37:5–6 and 43:3–4) 🌸

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