

# Acts 9:1-19a

Easter 3, Supplement Series C, April 10, 2016

Theme: With Saul's spectacular conversion, the Lord opens our eyes

I. So we see Jesus our Savior II. So we see Jesus work through his powerful word  
INJ It is the dream of a young boy to meet the heroes of his favorite team. He watches on the screen, but can't wait for the day he can attend the game in person. Can you see him arriving early to watch the warmups, perhaps hoping for an autograph. Suddenly, he turns around and right next to him is the star. A feeling of panic: what should I say? Stumbling over words. Embarrassment. Then the moment is gone. Now imagine the tales of that encounter to be told when that young boy gets home again!

If you turned around and suddenly were face to face with Jesus, your Savior and your God, what feelings would you have? Are you honored to have Jesus here, with you? Perhaps you are scared at his holiness and your sinfulness. What would it be like to stand face to face with Jesus? You aren't sure how you would feel? Our lessons have Jesus appearing to his people, and they felt all those different things. Saul was terrified. John was honored. The disciples didn't know what to think.

Today we look closer at Saul's spectacular conversion. When he met Jesus, he temporarily lost his eyesight but was given the insight of Christian faith. The Lord has opened our eyes, too, so we see Jesus our Savior and so we see Jesus work through his powerful word.

We start with a review of Saul's former way of life. He was a "top of the line" Pharisee who was intent on wiping out those who confessed Jesus. They were called followers of The Way. Remember that Jesus had said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." After Pentecost, when 3,000 were baptized, the movement gained momentum in Jerusalem. Soon there were more than 5,000 in town confessing Jesus.

Saul couldn't stand their religious beliefs. To him, Jesus was a criminal killed for his blasphemy. His followers were misguided or delusional. They undermined the authority of the religious leaders. Instead of working hard to follow the Pharisees' rules, they turned to Jesus who freed them from those laws! Saul led the official response, persecuting the followers of The Way, putting them in prison and perhaps worse.

The persecution did not wipe out the Christians. Individuals and families simply moved to places where there was no persecution for their faith. Apparently many went to Damascus, and they spoke the word there, gaining new converts to Christ. Saul wanted to stop any proliferation of The Way. He asked for and received authority to travel to Damascus and round

up some of these blasphemers, bringing them to Jerusalem for punishment.

Saul was dedicated to his business. It seems he was good at it. He had gifts and abilities beyond many others. But he was opposed to Jesus. All those talents were being used against God and against Christ.

It would be easy to make a connection between Saul's persecution and the persecutions we face in our world today. Surely there are many who can't stand our confession and who seek to stamp out the followers of Jesus. They go to great lengths to silence us and even seek to do us harm. But I think the connection with murderous Saul is even closer to home than our society. We have within our own hearts a rebellious evildoer who can't stand Christ. Our natural inclination is to be like Saul, opposing Jesus.

We were born that way. Dead in sin. Blind to spiritual truth. Enemies of God. Our hearts had no love for God. Only sin, all the time was our condition. If there was a spiritual interest, it showed itself in work righteousness. In proud comparisons with those considered "worse."

That rebellious evildoer still lives in our hearts even today. It works against God and despises his word. We have a Saul inside, who goes to great lengths to prevent us from living as followers of The Way. He would rather you obey some outward laws than truly repent of your sin. He is happy when you rely on your own abilities and strength rather than rely on God's gospel word. He has done great harm to you if Jesus feels like a burden on your life choices rather than a blessing to them.

God stepped in to stop Saul in his tracks on the road to Damascus. Jesus appeared in spectacular splendor. Light shone on Saul and he fell to the ground. You had better be scared when you see Jesus! "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" If Saul had thought Jesus was an imposter, now he knew Jesus is God Almighty. Jesus would now use Saul and his considerable talents to proclaim the Good News of forgiveness across the world. The miracle that happened was that God made unbeliever Saul into a Christian. God opened his eyes to see Jesus his Savior.

The people traveling with Saul didn't see the vision of Jesus. They heard the sounds, but saw nothing. When it was over, Saul was blind. They led him by the hand into the city. Can you picture important and famous and powerful and talented Saul, unable to see and being led by his servants? We will get to the rest of the story in a little bit, but in that picture of humility you see the huge change God brought about. Saul was no longer proud and boastful, but repentant, with eyes open to see his Savior, Jesus.

God intervened in your life. It wasn't with a spectacular vision, but it was in the simple sacrament of Holy Baptism. God turned you around from unbelief to faith with his powerful word connected with the water. That

word is still what energizes your faith and keeps it going. God doesn't make you physically blind, but he humbles you by pointing out your sin. He announces your forgiveness in the blood of Jesus. He feeds your new, spiritual nature with the Sacrament of Holy Communion. You are no longer blind, but you see Jesus your Savior. God has done a miracle in you.

I think we have to be clear about the miracle God did in bringing each of us to faith. It wasn't because of anything any of us did. You can see it in Saul: he didn't ask Jesus to come to him. He didn't pray for God to turn his heart around. He didn't have an emotional experience that moved him closer to God. Many American Christian churches talk about coming to faith in that way – like we have to participate in the conversion somehow. We cannot help God the Holy Spirit do his work of making people into Christians. He does the miracle. He does it through the gospel word. He did it for you: The Lord opened your eyes so you see Jesus your Savior. He alone is The Way to eternal life.

From this point forward, we see a big change in Saul. In Damascus he is still blind, but he is praying. He is fasting, not to prove how good he is, but as a humble acknowledgment that he is a sinner. After this time he changed his name to Paul. He went on missionary journeys as God's disciple to the Gentiles. He even wrote much of the New Testament. It was quite the turnaround that God performed! We were changed the same miraculous way. Is the difference noticeable in our lives? The power to live as Jesus' disciple comes from the powerful word of God. Ananias used that word in our lesson, and the Lord opens our eyes to see Jesus work through it.

Ananias was a Christian living in Damascus. He had heard about Saul's persecutions and knew he was coming to town. Imagine his surprise when the Lord told him to go find Saul and heal him. Ananias would have understood if the mission was to neutralize Saul. If Saul could be scared off or misled. But to be kind to him? To speak to him? To heal his blindness?

The evidence was presented to Ananias, but he had a hard time believing God's word – letting God's word direct his life. God said that Saul was praying – not breathing out murderous threats; not opposing Jesus, but praying to Jesus. Saul had seen a vision regarding Ananias' visit. Saul would be the instrument the Lord used to bring the gospel to the world. How could God say that about Saul? Ananias didn't want to go.

In a similar way we are often reluctant to let God's word direct our lives. It seems too risky to give up all that time for God's Word in Bible Class, Sunday School, and church. Home devotions, too? I might not have enough time for myself! Can I put that much into the offering plate this year? What if there isn't enough for what I want to do? If I leave that sin behind, I will suffer more than if I keep doing it. Can I follow God's Word?

Can I trust what God says? Can I live in repentance? It sure seems risky.

But listen to God's Word. Ananias trusted God's instructions to heal Saul's blindness. There was nothing to fear! God had done all the work, and now the fruits of faith would be seen. Isn't it a touching scene when Ananias approaches Saul, when what seemed like scales fell from his eyes, when these two strangers first saw each other as brothers in Christ Jesus? When the water and the word were used together in Baptism, it was a powerful testimony that God's word works.

Jesus still works through his word. He did it in you, making you a Christian. Every time you hear and learn God's word, God continues the miracle. How can you trust God to do what he says? It seems outrageous to think that your sins are forgiven by a cross and an empty tomb. It seems backwards to trust God's blessing before you see it. It is scary to live by faith and not by sight. There is nothing to fear! God has done all the work, and now the fruits of faith are seen. Jesus works through his powerful word.

That is why you are here. Because God has worked in you, and in all the other people sitting with you. Do you see how God's word has worked? You are sorry for your sins. You trust Jesus has cleansed you of all guilt. You put an offering in the plate trusting God's blessing upon it. You live as a beloved child of God. The Holy Spirit has worked in you the desire. He has given you the opportunity. He moves you to do it with joy!

You need God to work on you every day. You need to hear and learn God's word at church on the weekend, but you need his word in your home, too, in your daily devotions. Without the word filling your heart, you will become empty, fearful, disoriented, lazy. Without the gospel of Jesus, you will soon return to being spiritually blind like Saul used to be.

Your congregation brings you God's Word. It offers you the Sacraments. We remind each other of what Jesus has done to forgive. We encourage and help each other to remain in the faith. You are not alone in the struggle against the sinful nature. You are not losing the battle, but Christ has won the victory by his resurrection from the dead. He gives you the victory! As you use the gospel, your eyes will be open to see Jesus work through that powerful word.

Open your eyes. Do you see Jesus? Not in dazzling splendor like along the road to Damascus, but hidden in the word. Jesus is here with us in Holy Baptism. In the Lord's Supper. Through gospel proclamation. You are forgiven! God sends you to tell of this wonderful encounter. Like he did with both Ananias and Saul, God says: "Go!" Let others see Jesus in your considerably talented actions used for his glory. Let them hear Jesus in your fearless words. It is spectacular when you live by faith. Our eyes are open to see because Jesus, our Savior, works through his word! SDG Amen.