

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
April 14, 2013**

Acts 9:1-22

**Lessons from the Risen Christ to Paul
and to Us**

- 1. We are all "Pauls"**
- 2. Some among us could be "Pauls"**

Hymns: 148 – 452 – "Here I Am, Lord" - 162

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Acts 9:1-22 –

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.

A baby was born on June 23, 1940 in Tennessee. She was born prematurely, weighing 4½ lbs., the 20th of 22 siblings. Twice in her childhood she suffered from bouts of polio, causing her to wear a brace on her left leg and foot that had become twisted as a result. In addition, when she was twelve years old she had also survived a bout of scarlet fever.

After therapy for her leg, she played high school basketball and was spotted by a Tennessee State track and field coach. She joined the summer track program at Tennessee State. By the time she was 16, she earned a berth on the U.S. Olympic track and field team and came home from the 1956 Melbourne Games with an Olympic bronze medal in the 4 x 100 m relay!

At the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome she won three Olympic gold medals in the 100 m dash, 200 m dash, and the 4 x 100 m relay. She retired two years later at age 22. That was the early life of a woman named Wilma Rudolph. **It**

was a remarkable transformation. We love stories like that!

Today we learn about a transformation that was even more remarkable. It happened long ago in Scripture and truly was more remarkable than any earthly story. The transformation happened after the resurrection of Jesus Christ and was only possible through what happened on Easter Day. **Let's learn lessons from the risen Christ to the man Saul and to us from Acts 9. We will see:**

1. We are all "Pauls"
2. Some among us could be "Pauls"

1. We are all "Pauls"

We read about the "old Paul" in our first Scripture lesson today: *"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."*

What was the old Paul like?

- He was a Pharisee in his religious upbringing. You might remember that the Pharisees were a religious group in Jesus' day who depended much on the good works in their outward life to merit God's favor. They were very zealous about adding their own laws to those that Scripture had laid out through Moses. Therefore, they clashed with Jesus and rejected him.
- When Jesus' followers witnessed about the risen Savior and the way of salvation, Saul took upon himself the mission of exterminating them. He oversaw the stoning of the New Testament believer Stephen in Acts 8. After Stephen's death, we read, *"Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison."*
- The strategy that Saul used was violence. Later in life, he would sadly reflect on his former zealousness, "I

thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and 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)

- In our account today, Saul was "breathing out threats and murder." He was on fire with his mission. He was ready to hunt Christians.
- He sought out letters from the high priest in Jerusalem to travel 135 miles to Damascus to go arrest Christians there, bind them, and bring them back to Jerusalem. Imagine going out of your way that far in those days to hunt Christians!
- We also hear that his targets were "men and women." Many times women and children will be spared in such wars, but not in Saul's war against God and his people. Men and women alike were in his sights.

Then came a miracle! *"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."*

We hear about God's dramatic intervention:

- A blinding light from heaven
- A unearthly voice – the voice of Christ – that speaks to Saul
- A question from him: "Why do you persecute me?" (Incidentally, what comfort we find in that question, as Jesus makes it clear that he associates

himself with the persecution of his people!)

- Saul is struck blind
- The Lord tells him to go into the city and wait for instructions on what will happen next!

A “new Paul” will soon arise from the pathetic shell of the old, destroyed Saul. *“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’... 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.”*

How was the “new Paul” different from the “old Saul?”

- He was praying to God with a right attitude
- He was able to be called “brother” by the prophet in Damascus who served Jesus
- He was baptized
- He had a heart of faith
- He had gone from being his own leader to being a follower, ready to hear the instructions of God

He was now God’s man. What an amazing turn of events!

Perhaps we could sit here today and marvel that this was amazing for him. We could be amazed that God would turn him around 180 degrees. We could rejoice that God converted him. But do you see how that would fall short of learning everything that God would want to teach us today?

Saul’s story is our story. It is our history before God as well. Does that seem like an overstatement? After all, there are many people here today who haven’t arrested others unjustly or purposely hurt them, are there? There aren’t many here today who have

brutally murdered people, are there? So how is Paul’s story our story?

In Genesis 6, before God sent the Flood he was grieved because – as he puts it – *“Every inclination of man’s heart was only evil all the time.”* Nothing has changed since then. You were born with a sinful nature that reared its ugly head against God’s will and God’s rules for righteous living right from Day 1 of your life. You did not have to be taught how to be sinful and break God’s laws. Think about the things that you have been taught in your life. You probably have had some people teach you some excellent, worthy things to do in your life: music, skills, hobbies, sports, facts. However, you did not have to be taught how to be bad.

You did not have to be taught how to talk back to your mom. You did not have to be taught how to throw a toddler tantrum. You did not have to be taught how to run away when your mom said, “Come here!” You did not have to be taught how to have a sassy, crude, hurtful tongue when you interacted with other children. You did not have to be taught how to lie. You did not have to be taught how to hit your sister. You did not have to be taught how to scribble on the wall. You did not have to be taught how to throw your food. You did not have to be taught how to mock and exclude a young classmate at school. You did not have to be taught how to hate a neighbor kid. You did not have to be taught how to sneak around while sinning. You did not have to be taught how to break the rules.

For the adults here, you have not had to be taught how to break God’s laws as life progressed. Your sinful nature, an enemy of God, has known perfectly well how to do this! You did not have to be taught how to worry. No one has had to teach you how to hate or hurt others. You did not have to be taught how to be selfish in your marriage. You did not have to be taught how to curse; or how to lust; or how to lie. What is your personal past? You have a sinful nature that has given birth to sinful actions that have flown in the face of what God calls right and good! And because of it, we all stood under the wrath of God!

Stood - that's past tense. It's past tense because we can rejoice today in how God has effected a miraculous change in us! It's a change like Paul's, brought to us courtesy of Easter. Because of the Easter victory that was proclaimed long ago, we can rest assured that Jesus' payment for our sins was sufficient. In his persecution and death was enough to pay for our sins and the sins of the whole world. He died on the cross for our sins before God!

We – as “Pauls” – can also rejoice because at some time in our life God shined his light on us and convicted and converted us. Perhaps it was a day when God stopped you in your tracks as his Word convicted you clearly. Perhaps it was at a baptismal font many years ago, when the waters of baptism washed away your sins. Perhaps it was through a friend who shared their faith or invited you to church. **Thank God he has taken all of us “Pauls” and removed our sins through our Savior Jesus!**

2. Some among us could be “Pauls”

One other lesson remains today for us in this account. We see it in the words the Lord said to Ananias when he questioned God on whether he should visit Saul: *“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.”*

We see two vivid words in those verses:

- “Chosen” – God had selected the man Saul for a special purpose among the people of the world
- “Vessel” – This is the word for a simple dish or jar that carried something. It's the same word for having a “treasure in jars of clay” that is used later in the New Testament.

God had selected the man Paul not only to be a believer in the family of God, but also to be a public preacher and teacher for his kingdom.

How true this was immediately! We read, *“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.”

You might remember the rest of the story:

- Paul's preaching in Jerusalem and Antioch, the center of the Christian church.
- Missionary trips around the Mediterranean world, founding churches.
- Persecutions against him for the message of salvation in Christ that he brought.
- Trials before governors and Caesar.
- Trips and sermons we don't even know about!

What is the second lesson that we learn from this account today? **Some among us here could be “Pauls.”**

We do recognize that we all have been commissioned by God to speak about our faith and about Jesus wherever we go in our personal life. In that sense we are also all “Pauls.” **However, young people, could you be a “Paul” in the full sense? Could God use you for the public ministry in your life? By the public ministry, we mean being a full-time pastor, teacher, or staff minister.**

That's a heavy question. And I think I know how children and teenagers here today would react to that question. “Me? I wonder whether I should really be thinking about that.”

There are some myths that people believe when it comes to where future public ministers will come from:

- One myth is that there is some factory out there that produces pastors and teachers, and that it will just continue to pump them off the assembly line for churches. False!
- Another myth is that called workers are mostly the children of current called workers. False. Holy Trinity has had five men graduate from our seminary in Mequon, WI in the history of our church. None of them came from called worker families.

- Another myth is that God only calls those of perfect faith, who have always desired to be a public minister. False. Not only can we look at the Apostle Paul's background today, but think of others – Moses at the burning bush? Jeremiah, who said he was too young? Matthew the tax collector?
- Another myth is that we'll always have enough called workers. The size of classes graduating from our seminary to be pastors ebbs and flows from year to year. However, the days of class totals in the 50's and 60's is long gone. The current classes at our seminary all number in the 30's, and a class coming up through MLC is in the 20's. Workers are needed for the harvest!

We see much comfort in these verses from the Lord in providing what is needed for the public ministry, especially in the message that needs to go out to the world. This actually was a fear of mine coming through college and our seminary years ago. How could I fill a 20-minute time slot for a sermon? How could an hour time slot for Bible study be filled? How would I come up with something to say? The account of Paul's conversion gives us the main message that pastors and teachers are to share:

1. Jesus is truly the Son of God
2. Jesus is the Messiah (Christ)

That is the message, given by God himself and not needing to be invented by any pastor or teacher. And the message in its unique context of any Bible book or in a story of Scripture is a bottomless well to share. So is the guidance for our lives as Christians that God has given us in Scripture. Find time for a message?! We'll be learning more and more about our Savior and the plan of God until the day we die!

The joys that God gives in sharing this message with people cannot be matched:

- What a privilege it is to lead worship in God's house on a Sunday and share a message from the Word

- What a joy it is to baptize babies and see the Holy Spirit wash their sins away
- What joy God gives as a Bible lesson is shared with a kindergarten class and their bright, smiling faces show the result
- What a joy it is to lead a Bible class for God's people as they learn more about the truths of God's Word
- How wonderful it is to teach the Word of God in a *Bible Basics Course* lesson to people who have not heard much of it in their lives
- What a privilege it is even to go to those straying from the faith and share the message of God's law that they need to hear

There are many occupations that can benefit our world and be blessed by God, young people, yet the public ministry is a unique calling that you should prayerfully consider. It's not something you need to decide on today. In fact, it's not really your decision to make in the end. **God is the one who would make the call on whether you would walk down that path to full-time service in his Church. Yet today is a day to consider that path prayerfully.**

For those of you who are not in a position in life to consider full-time ministry as an occupation, it's a day to think about how you can encourage young people you know to consider walking down that path and seeing if God would have them serve as a Paul in his Church as a pastor or teacher. Your prayers and your encouragement for the next generation of public ministers to lead God's Church is vital!

So today, may we marvel at the power of the risen Christ. We have seen it dramatically in action in the life and conversion of Paul. **May we remember that:**

1. **We are all "Pauls"**
2. **Some among us could be "Pauls" in a unique way**

May God bless us as we follow his guiding in our lives, and may we continue to pray for the Lord of the harvest to send out more workers! Amen.