

Third Sunday After Easter
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
St. Francisville, LA 70775
5 May 2019

Acts 9:1-6, (7-20)

The reading from Acts of the Apostles today is a foundational story in the history of our faith. This story is so important that Acts of the Apostles gives it to us three times, here in 9:1-30, the second time in Chapter 21:27 ff, when some Hebrews in Jerusalem tried to lynch Paul, accusing him of defiling the Temple. Paul was rescued from the bloodthirsty mob, and, afterwards, he was given permission to address the crowd from the stairs of the fortress of Antonia. The third time, begins at chapter 26: 8, when he is defending himself in front of King Agrippa, his sister Bernice, and Porcius Festus, the new Procurator of Rome to Galilee.

Many experts believe, and I agree, that this is the most important conversion in the history of Christianity. In fact, I remember reading an Encyclopedia of World Religions the other day. When I turned to Christianity, I read the following, “A religion founded by Paul of Tarsus based on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.” This, of course, is not technically truthful, but, what is true is that Paul is central to the spread of Christianity into Gentile territories. So, this is what we know of Saul of Tarsus, who changed his name after his conversion to his commonly known name of Paul:

Saul of Tarsus was born a Roman Citizen five years after the start of the Christian Era, and, since Jesus himself was born about three years after the Christian Era began (There was an error of almost three years when the date of the “Birth of Christ” was set in the calendar), this means that Paul was approximately two years younger than Jesus. We know that his father was a prominent businessman, who, most likely obtained his Roman citizenship because of services rendered to the empire. Saul grew up in Tarsus until he was ten years old, after which he was enrolled in the Rabbinical school of Gamaliel, a famous teacher in Jerusalem, who himself had been a disciple of Hillel, one of the greatest Rabbis of Judaism. Saul lived with Gamaliel until the age of 15, when his education was completed. This “Sending away” of wealthy children to study under a popular teacher was customary then. In fact, the word “Disciple” or “Learner” is often understood as “One who learns at the feet of a teacher.”

We know little about Saul’s life from ages 15-28, but it is wildly assumed that he was employed in an official capacity within the Temple structure. We do know that he became a Pharisee in the year 31 and was present at the stoning of Stephen in the year 32. As he himself tells us, he was a rising star in the Jewish Temple, who was a persecutor of the Church from the year 33-34. According to the words of Ananias we heard today, Saul had caused great distress to the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem since the death of Jesus. In fact, he was on his way to Damascus, about 225 miles northwest of Jerusalem, chasing disciples who may have escaped him in Jerusalem, as well as other local Christians (They were called “Followers of the Way” at this point.)

The episode of Acts 9, most likely took place in the year 34. The episode tells us that, as he was arriving to Damascus, “A light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’... For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.” We are then told of Ananias visit and Saul’s healing. Then we hear a word that always makes me laugh. Acts tells us that “Immediately” he began to proclaim Jesus, saying that he is the Son of God. I believe Luke, the author of Acts could have been Colombian. We use exaggeration and hyperbole in almost every conversation. I listen to my siblings tell stories and they go like this, “So, I was on the lobby of the bank (three stories high) and I told Susana a joke, and everyone in the whole building was dying laughing.” Everybody in the whole building was not just laughing, but, literally, dying laughing. That was one powerful joke! Anyway, Luke’s “immediately” in Acts took about 13 years to start.

We know that after his conversion, Paul stayed with disciples, most likely in Egypt, for three years, learning about Christianity. After this time of “Seminary,” he spent some time with the apostles in Jerusalem, and he mentions spending at least two weeks with James, who by then had become the head of the Church in the city. At this time, he also reconnects with Barnabas, who was the cousin of Mary of Jerusalem and a second cousin to John Mark, the author of the Gospel of Mark, and her son. After spending some time in Jerusalem, Paul goes back to Tarsus in takes a job as a Tanner.

Acts tells us that Barnabas traveled to Tarsus and convinced Paul to join him in ministry at Antioch Pisidia (There are several Antioch’s in the New Testament). There is evidence that Paul accepted this call and served in an important capacity with Barnabas, until the Church sent the pair to Jerusalem in the same year to deliver a collection for the Church, which was suffering greatly because of a famine. This is the first of several collections Paul delivers to Jerusalem. On their way back, Paul and Barnabas bring John Mark with them and, soon after that, the church commissions them to go on their first missionary journey into Asia Minor.

Paul and Barnabas separate after their first mission. Paul chooses Silas and starts his second mission, which brought him to Galatia, Macedonia, and Corinth in Greece, while Barnabas and John Mark went back to Asia Minor. Many authors believe Paul planted churches in Ephesus, which in turn branched out to plant many others, Phillipi, Corinth, Cypress, Crete, Thyityra, Philadelphia, Smyrna, Laodicea, Pergamon, Syria, Arabia, and Sardis. Many believe he may have planted close to twenty churches, either directly through his ministry, or indirectly, through the ministry of his disciples. Lastly, we know that Paul was killed under Emperor, either in 66 or 67, although some authors believe it may have been as late as 68.

This is what we know of the historical Paul of Tarsus. But, of course, you all know how much I love Paul. It is in Paul’s understanding of the Gospel of Jesus that Solafideism finds its center. He is, therefore, the intellectual and theological father of Luther and his

great reformation of the Church. Not only is Paul responsible for unchaining the Gospel from its Jerusalem origins, extending its reach to all nations, but he is also responsible, at least in part, to the great Reformation which started in 1517. We, who are not ethnic or cultural Jews, need to be very grateful that this message has reached us all the way across the globe. We too are gentiles or “Ethnos” (nations). Without Paul’s understanding of the message and ministry of Christ, the great legacy of Christianity could have remained a Jewish phenomenon. But, thanks to Paul, we know that salvation is a free gift of God, we obtain by faith. As someone who tried to measure up, and realized early on that he couldn’t, I am exceedingly grateful to Paul of Tarsus.

May his message of salvation by faith inspire you today, and may the lessons of his life, and the content of his letters, continue to inspire to love God above all things, through his Son, our Savior, by the power of his Holy Spirit. Amen!