

WORSHIP SERVICE 5/12/20

MORNING PRAYER – LOIS HARDER

Creator God, you are the giver of all good things, maker of heaven and earth, the One who knows the number of hairs on our heads. You know our thoughts before a word is on our tongue. You know our needs before we can imagine speaking them. You give us the breath of life and the gift of each new day. We thank you, and we worship you. We are grateful for your presence with us through your Holy Spirit.

God, we thank you for your provisions for us – for what we need each day and for what we need across the span of our lives. We're keenly aware in these days of the significance of our relationships with family and friends, the ways we can connect and find strength and hope and joy in the bonds of faith, as we seek to follow your son, Jesus, together.

We thank you especially, this morning, for the graduates of this season. We have prayed for these students, not only the graduates, but all the students, for their teachers, administrators and everyone who has been working so hard to help them get through this strange and difficult time of on-line learning, schooling at home, struggling to learn without the benefit of social interaction. God, you have heard and honored our prayers as we celebrate these who have successfully completed this school year and have graduated. We also acknowledge that there is grief and loss – that the graduations cannot be celebrated in the ways we were looking forward to. God, I ask for comfort in this grief, for patience that we might look ahead to celebrations and ceremonies to be held in the future. I pray that you might show us creative and meaningful ways to honor these students and their accomplishments – that they may have hope and happy anticipation as they move into the next chapter of their lives with confidence and joy.

We take a moment this morning, God, to recognize and give thanks for those who have plowed the difficult ground of conscientious objection to war. We have clear and difficult instructions, “Do not kill.” “Love God. Love your neighbor.” But difficult to live out in our culture of military might. Thank you for the courageous examples – following Jesus’s example of willingness to die but refusal to kill.

Gracious God, we offer you the prayers of our hearts. We ask for your continued care and presence in this time of pandemic. Many of us are tired, we feel isolated, fearful, uncertain, anxious. Be especially with those who are the most vulnerable – those for whom resources are scarce and life literally hangs in the balance each day. Be with those whose options are severely limited – those in prison, in refugee camps, those without homes or incomes. God, be with those who ought to have options and rights and representation, but because of the color of their skin, they don't. Have mercy, God, on the family of Breonna Taylor as they grieve her untimely and unjust death. Have mercy on us, as a nation, as we struggle to name the racism that prevents us from truly loving one another as you've commanded. Liberate us – and help us to liberate ourselves as well as our brothers and sisters of color from the chains of hate and fear and apathy.

Be with us now, God, as we continue to worship, to praise, to learn. Be with us as we hear your word and prepare to have our own eyes opened to your truth. Let us be ready to be blinded, to be incapacitated and to be transformed by your love and grace. Amen.

REGAINING SIGHT – PASTOR CALEB

Acts 9:1-19

The coronavirus pandemic has continued through the season of Easter, when we Christians remember the hope of the resurrection. As we continue wading through this unusual, and for some of us, a very trying and scary season, we've tried to remember that the power of the risen Jesus is with us.

We've delved into the stories of Jesus in scripture after the resurrection. What strikes me about these stories is how they touch on the fundamentals of Christian faith. The story of Thomas (John 20) deals with what it means to *believe* without all the evidence. The account of Jesus meeting Peter at the lakeshore (John 21) teaches about *love* and *forgiveness*. The disciples on the road to Emmaus only recognize Jesus with them at the moment when they break bread (*fellowship*). On a mountain in Galilee, Jesus commissions his core group of disciples to now *disciple* others.

The last account of this series is the *conversion* of Saul. Saul goes from being a persecutor of the church to becoming a persecuted missionary (Paul). It might seem odd to include this story in a group of resurrection stories. Saul's vision takes place later, and doesn't seem like the same kind of experience as the eleven disciples had. But Saul/Paul claimed to have seen the risen Jesus. I'm going by what he wrote in 1 Cor. 15:8 – "and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."

"Conversion" might feel like a loaded word for some of us. To be clear, it doesn't say anywhere in the Acts passage that Saul/Paul was "converted." That comes from the heading Bible editors add. Conversion and repentance are words that both have to do with "turning around," making a drastic change. Many of us know someone who has had a dramatic conversion. Many of us grew up in the church and don't recall any real moment of conversion or drastic change. Does that mean that we aren't real Christians?

No, I don't think you have to have a clear "conversion" memory that you can point to. Many of us have had faith nurtured in us from a young age, and we've lived that faith out, however imperfectly, throughout life. But the problem is that we may be making the meaning of "conversion" too narrow. Surely none of us have "fully arrived." Faith is a journey, and any of us have grown over time, struggled at times, and have needed to come back at times – like the Israelites who made lots of turns while wandering in the desert.

This more expansive understanding of conversion means no matter how much we've "advanced" in life and in faith, we need to be open to God "turning us around," rather than settled in a comfortable way of life.

Saul was a devout Jew with connections to the religious establishment. He did not like this new Jewish group that followed Jesus the Messiah. He set off for Damascus, Syria with arrest permits so that he could take some of these followers as prisoners to Jerusalem.

That's not what happened. Instead he's stopped in his tracks by a blinding light and the voice of Jesus, whom Saul has been persecuting. Jesus tells him to arise and go on to the city with a completely

different purpose. Suddenly, Saul is like a bound prisoner – he becomes blind for the next three days and his companions have to lead him by the hand the rest of the way.

There are some unmistakable parallels with others stories. We can think of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist who became mute until his son was born (Luk 1:20). More to the point, there's Jesus himself who died and was in the grave for three days. Saul is having a kind of "death experience" that will turn into completely new life afterwards. Sometimes we really need to be thoroughly disoriented in order to be turned around.

Then there's the disciple named Ananias, whom the voice of the Lord Jesus calls to approach an enemy, so that Saul can receive the Spirit and regain sight. Jesus told Ananias (in so many words), "by the way, I've already told Saul to expect you." Ananias doesn't have much choice but to do it!

Saul's transformation didn't happen overnight. According to Galatians 1-2, it was some years before we really began his missionary journeys. This transformation would mean going from a man who breathed "threats and murders," to laying down his weapons to become a nonviolent missionary. For being a persecutor to being persecuted ("I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" -v. 16).

A few different places in his letters Saul/Paul referenced the fact that he used to be a persecutor and changed (see Galatians 1, for example). He's matter-of-fact about it, and doesn't live with ongoing guilt or remorse. But he's also humbled by it, and knows that only by the grace of God he is who he is.

Saul's change is evident in becoming known more and more as Paul. Many people in the Bible have names changed. Abram's name was changed to Abraham. Sarai's name was changed to Sarah. Jesus gave the name Peter to Simon. The change from Saul to Paul is actually of a little different sort. Saul is a Hebrew name and Paul is a Greek name. Saul goes by Paul as he embarks on missionary journeys and engages folks who aren't from Jewish background. It's a little bit like the fact that I went by "Kah-LEHV" in Latin America rather than "KAY-lub." We know him as Paul precisely because he followed through on God's call to proclaim Jesus to people all backgrounds.

I'll share a kind of "conversion experience" in my own life. Many of you know that after college I lived in the country of Honduras and taught computer classes in an underprivileged neighborhood. I worked primarily with a 10-15 age range. At one point, discipline issues in my classes seemed to get worse and worse, and I was losing my temper.

The issue was not just creating an environment where all could learn, but my own insecurity around feeling like a failure as a teacher. This fueled my frustration. I'd ask the kids, "do you get away with behaving like this at school?" At one point a student roaming around the room stepped out, so I simply locked the door in order to not let him in. He had a sister in the class that got upset and left.

Tension continued as weeks went on. I lived in the neighborhood with a Honduran family, and Consuelo, the mother of the family was wise and perceptive. She had noticed I had been more exhausted lately. Started with some practical advice about explaining expectations with expulsion from class a clear and expected consequence (it is after all an authoritarian culture).

But she went on to remind me that many of the students had difficult home lives (what we'd call "adverse childhood experiences"). "*Usted no ha sufrido.*" "You haven't suffered." That wasn't easy to hear. How could she declare that I hadn't suffered? But I got the point.

A few other things contributed to my contrition. Perla, the younger sister of the one troublemaker described me as "*enojado.*" Angry or irritable. My conscience was pricked. At some point, the other sister had acted out by stealing and destroying an ink cartridge. Her grandmother came by -- a very friendly and comprehending woman who was apparently the caretaker of these siblings. She came to apologize and dutifully pay for the cost of a printer ink cartridge. She was so appreciative that I was here teaching. I didn't sense the least bit of blame from her. And I felt horrible.

I suppose the mini-conversion happened in having a shift in attitude. What was important? It wasn't feeling "in control" of the classroom or "successful" as a teacher. It wasn't likely that any particular computer skill would lift them out of poverty.

It helped me put things a little in perspective to realize the goal was to show love to these adolescents and create a positive experience for them. If they simply had positive experiences in class, they might gain confidence that would empower them to pursue opportunities in the future. There is just one student that still keeps in touch with me, who clearly is gifted at technical things.

I'm hoping this story helps you to recognize "conversion" experiences you have had, even if you hadn't thought of it that way. In our church, we are at different stages of life, different occupations, different circumstances. The way we hear the Spirit intruding in our lives may be different from one another. But the Spirit will intrude if we get out of the way. Conversion remains a possibility for any of us. In fact, to have faith in Jesus means putting yourself in a position where you remain open to reconversion, to being converted again. Rather than being surprised by it, we need to live with the expectation that we'll be converted.

For some of us, living through a pandemic may be just the experience of disorientation that we need in order to be reconverted. However uncomfortable the process may be, may our eyes be opened as we live by the Spirit.

BENEDICTION

Eternal Lord,
As we go from this moment of worship,
May we know that you never leave or forsake us.
Help us to go with the song of faith in our hearts,
The peace of Christ in our lives,
The protection of the Spirit beside us,
And the security of your presence beneath us. Amen