

The Rev. Shelley Ryan  
St. Luke's Episcopal Church ~ Anchorage, Kentucky  
The Third Sunday of Easter ~ April 9 & 10, 2016  
Acts 9:1-20

“I was a brand plucked from the burning” a good friend from seminary used to say to me and others. The quote is from a passage in the Book of Zechariah (3:2), which reads “Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?” John Wesley (an Anglican, who was the founder of Methodism) referred to this scripture verse as he told his story of his survival during a house fire, when he was a young boy. (Tell the story). Ever after, for the rest of his life, John Wesley referred to himself “as a brand plucked from the burning,”

My friend, Michael likens this same scripture to describe his life of being born addicted to drugs by a mother who abandoned him at birth. Throughout his young life pastors reached out to Michael in an effort to help him any way they could. However, the choices that Michael made eventually coerced him in to heavy drug and alcohol use, ultimately leading to drug dealing the law caught up with him and Michael ended up serving time in jail. During his time in jail, Michael remembered how his pastor tried time and again to help him, and so he reached out to his pastor and to the church, and as Michael puts it “God took my mess and made it a message.” He had in his words “a conversion experience.”

Michael's life was changed forever. He married his best friend and in their blended family consists of eight children. He became very active in the Methodist church, which eventually led him to discern the call to be to the ministry, and within a few years he attended seminary. He currently serves as a pastor at a thriving Methodist church in central Florida. In addition to being a full-time pastor, Michael is committed to an ongoing ministry at the local jail where he shares messages of hope, healing, grace & redemption.

When you think about it, is it not amazing how God can take negative, and in some cases unimaginable circumstances, and through His tender mercies create something good? This was certainly the case with the Apostle Paul, as demonstrated in his conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Many of you may know the background history of the Apostle Paul, but it is important to be reminded of it in order to illustrate God's divine providence in making old things new.

First, please allow me to clarify why Paul is also known as Saul. It is mistakenly believed that Jesus changed his name upon his conversion experience. Saul of Tarsus was born a Jew, and the Hebrew name given to him by his parents was Saul. However, because Saul's father was a Roman citizen (and therefore Saul inherited Roman citizenship), Saul also had the Latin name Paul. The custom of dual names was common in those days. After Saul's conversion in order to most effectively share the gospel with the gentiles, as he tried to meet the people where they were so to speak, he restored his Roman name, and became known as Paul, which was the name that the Gentiles were accustomed to.

Paul was a Greek-speaking Jew from Asia Minor, born in Tarsus in eastern Cilicia. It is recorded that his family lineage had been very devout in revering pharisaic traditions and observances for generations. He received his formal education in Jerusalem, and when he returned to Tarsus, he took up the trade of tent-making, like his father. There is minimal detail known about Paul's life during in his adult years until he begins his acts of persecution against Christians and the Church. He was present and active in the martyrdom of Stephen, and he was dramatically feared by Christians within Jerusalem and beyond... He persecuted Christians and sought them out only to have them imprisoned.

It was on his journey to Damascus that Saul would be transformed by the risen Christ himself. Divine grace transforms even the life of a persecutor, and Saul was known as the archpersecutor. “The power of the risen Christ, transforms even this archpersecutor of His Church into its most ardent defender and prominent witness.” (The Anchor Yale Bible). May it be noted that “The conversion of Saul is the only account in the New Testament that tells of a post-Pentecostal appearance of the risen Christ to anyone.” (The Anchor Yale Bible).

Over these past several weeks as we observed the holy season of Lent, Holy week, and as we now celebrate the risen Christ – we have journeyed into repentance, forgiveness, and grace. During this blessed season of Easter, I encourage each of us to reflect on the call of Saul as he was a ‘chosen instrument’ of the risen Christ to carry His name before gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. This remains to be one of the great wonders of Divine mercy in history, not only of Christianity but of the world.” (The Anchor Yale Bible). On a much smaller, yet still equally important scale to Saul’s conversion story, I share this quote from my friend Michael “I believe that people are attracted to me not because of my righteousness, but because of my brokenness.”

God can do amazing things through us in spite of our trials, if we only open our hearts to Him. In the words of the Apostle Paul – “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—Ephesians 2:8

