**An Unlikely Conversion**

**Narrative Lectionary - Easter 3**

**April 15, 2018**

Acts 9: 1-20

On Friday, Film and Faith went to see the movie Indian Horse. The story follows a boy from northern Ontario through residential school, into a hockey career, and the challenges he faces. It was a well done, powerful movie. The Catholic priests and nuns are portrayed in the movie with great zeal for their ‘mission’ but the zeal is also harsh and heartless much of the time. I found myself saying in the discussion afterwards, I didn’t see much Christian or even Godly behaviour in their actions and responses to the children. The main characters’ name was Saul, and when he is brought to the school and asked his name, the sister comments at least he has a good Christian name. When you think about it, it is an ironic statement as Saul was not a good Christian. Saul is the name we use for Paul before his conversion, and he too was zealous in his mission, heartless and one could say not very Godly.

Saul, was also Paul. His name didn’t change after his experience on the road to Damascus. Saul was his Jewish name, Paul was the Roman version. He used and people claimed the Roman version following his conversion. He had a passion for his ministry, which he saw as rooting out false teachings, and for him, that is what the Christian movement was. He approved the stoning of Stephen, and rounded up Christians, breaking into their homes and taking them to prison. The early Christians were known as People of The Way – the way of Jesus, the path to God, connecting with Jesus’ identifying himself as ‘the way, the truth, the life’. Paul was now ready to expand his crusade to Damasacus, in Syria, which is another jurisdiction. The Jewish didn’t have civil authority there but he was going to work through the synagogues and was asking for letters from high priest to give him authority to do so. He obviously got it as he is on the journey, which would take almost a week, when he has a profound experience that would change his life forever.

On the road, he has an encounter with Christ, who in a light brighter than the hot sun in the middle of the desert, appears to Saul and asks him why he is persecuting him. Upon determining that it is Jesus who has appeared to him, he finds that he can’t see and needs help from his colleagues to make it the rest of the way to Damascus, which could have been three days. His three days in darkness could likely have been on the road. He did not eat or drink and whether this was an intentional fasting it is not known, but it is known that fasting is a spiritual practice which Saul may have engaged to reflect on this experience. It is significant that it was three days, alluding to the three days that Jesus was in the tomb. Saul must have felt vulnerable having to solely rely on others for that time. He was also probably confused and terrified, trying to make sense of the vision challenging his beliefs to the core.

There are times when we can feel trapped in darkness, the painful, challenging times when we wonder where the hope is. I am sure, many of the Humbolt families feel this way. Anyone who has had a tragic loss of a loved one or in their own personal faculties can probably relate to Saul’s experience of darkness for those three days. We also know that there is light at the end of the darkness - and even within the darkness if we look for it. Light of the support around us, and as we come out of the darkness we are often stronger and more resolute in our faith and understanding. It is important that we not go through the darkness alone. I’m sure Saul appreciated his colleagues’ support during that time.

Ananias then enters the story, a disciple whose only appearance in scripture is this story. He receives a vision from the Lord, telling him to go to Saul, lay hands on him and heal his sight. Ananias has heard of this Saul, such that he challenges the Lord, and names Saul as evil, knowing the horrible deeds he has done. He is probably terrified that God wants him to go this man, who can have him arrested and carried off to prison. He is assured that Saul is chosen to spread the good news to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews. Before Paul, Peter was the dominant apostle, who had just had an experience with the Ethiopian Eunich who converted to Christianity. The first gentile in the stories. Paul would end up continuing this mission to the gentiles.

So Ananias trusts the vision and goes to Saul. He has moved from fear to trust, even calling Saul brother as he greets him. Can you imagine meeting with someone you consider evil, knowing God is calling you to do so, and addressing them with such an endearment? Who in your life, in our lives today, would be that person? When have you been hesitant to trust God’s message?

When I was in my training for ministry just over 30 years ago, I was questioning how I could be a minister in a flawed institution of the church which is patriarchal, homophobic and racist, and I was also discerning how could I be gay and be a minister. I was at a national youth and young adult event at the time and there met and hung out with a number of the leaders who were ministers, many of whom were gay or lesbian. Their commitment to the church and God’s love, inspired me and assured me to know that it can be done and affirmed my calling to the church. It is important when we have questions and hesitation to draw on the strength of the community around us. We might assume that Ananias did that as the passage indicates that after Ananias visit with Saul and he regained his sight, he stayed with the disciples – Ananias shared with the disciples about Saul and I assume he did not go alone to visit Saul, but took some other followers with him for support. We can also fairly safely assume, that these disciples taught Saul about the good news and their experiences of Jesus, during those several days.

Saul was baptized and his zeal transformed into a zeal of love and grace for the Good News of Jesus Christ. He becomes the dominant apostle, sharing the good news and teaching the community of The Way, the early Christian communities through his travels and letters. He is a powerful witness because of his conversion experience, and an example of the transformational power of God in our lives.

In the movie, Indian Horse, there is no real transformation of the religious characters and their zeal in the story. There is challenge of that zeal and some of the actions carried out by one of the nuns, by a priest who seems to be a light in the darkness. However, we also see that where there is light can also be shadow. While there is no transformation of those involved in residential school, there is transformation in the story. The conversion and transformation is also up to us, as we are encouraged to engage in reconciliation, see this movie, be open to hearing the stories and build relationships with survivors. May we have the same zeal and passion as Paul for the love and grace of God, working in our lives, reaching out to those who have suffered, and being open to the transformation of evil. The power of resurrection lives in us, and that power can transform lives as we seek to live love, knowing that love wins and grace abounds.