

“Faith to See, Courage to Live”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
April 14, 2013

Acts 9: 1-20

Today feels like the last day of school for me. The last few weeks have reminded me of the waning days of the school year. You know there's a date circled on the calendar, and after that date your normal routine is going to change significantly. And yet, you also know that summer will eventually come to an end, and that first day of the new school year will come soon enough.

Since January of last year, when we formally decided to pursue this opportunity for renewal, April 14th has been a date far in the future. It was a date listed on a calendar and a grant application, but it never seemed that “real” or “imminent.” But, as we have all learned in life, time marches on, and the calendar now reads “April 14.”

Today is a very significant milestone in the life of our congregation. There have been other milestones in our church's life: major anniversaries, completion of building additions and renovations, celebrations of ministries. But today's significance is not found in changing a physical space or bringing in a new minister or lay leader for service. This day is significant because it is a day we do something intentional and meaningful to reflect, renew, and refocus our energies and vision for what God wishes for us to do in the years to come. Today we seek the faith to see the Spirit's guidance, and the courage to live in the light of that guidance.

In this season of Easter, we have a story today from Acts which also speaks of seeing faithfully, of trusting God's Spirit, and living courageously as Christ's disciples. The conversion of Saul is our reminder that no matter how we view the world, God will see the world through a lens that produces redemption, transformation, and the greatest opportunity for Christ's Gospel to expand.

What's it like for someone to have their identity change suddenly and dramatically? We've actually had a recent example of that. On March 12, 2013, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina entered the Sistine Chapel for the Papal Enclave. The next day, on March 13, he was elected as the next pope of the Roman Catholic Church. In less than 48 hours, Cardinal Bergoglio's life had changed forever, as well as how the world would know him: his name is now Francis I.

There was a great photo with a funny caption circulating after Francis' election. It showed him at the desk of the guesthouse where he was staying during the enclave, and as we have all heard he paid for his own room for the nights he stayed. But the caption which someone added to the photo said: “Oh, that's right. I checked in under a different name.”

This modern example has some similarities to Paul's conversion along the road to Damascus. One morning, this man woke up as Saul, an individual who was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” He was “public enemy number one” for “the Way,” the newly-born Christian Church in Israel. He

was a Jew, and anything that contradicted his traditional Jewish understanding was, in his mind, to be eliminated.

That was in the morning. That was not how his day would finish, however. After going to the high priest and asking for permission to go to the synagogues in Damascus, Saul started out on his journey. While he was on the road, “suddenly 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?’” From that moment on, his life would never again be the same.

When Saul saw the light of God, he met Jesus face-to-face. Saul’s life was full of one thing: defending his faith at all costs. But God changed Saul’s life – changed his identity – so that his life would have a new purpose. How? By revealing himself through a blinding light. It was almost as if Saul already knew what was going on, as he responds to the voice by saying, “Who are you, Lord?” And Jesus did not leave him in the dark, as he responds, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

From that moment on, Saul’s identity would change completely. Our identity refers to how we are known by other people. Our person does not change over the course of our life, but our identity can change. When I got married to Debbie, I became her husband. When Erin was born, I became a father. When I was ordained fourteen years ago, I became a pastor in the Presbyterian Church. Throughout all of those events, myself as a person did not change. Instead, it was my identity which changed; namely, how others knew me in my relationships of life.

The same can be said of Saul. For after he was blinded by God’s light, his identity changed from persecutor to proselytizer. The one who once sought death, now seeks life. The one who saw only a narrow view of the world, now sees the breadth of God’s love in Jesus Christ. And with this new identity comes a new name: Saul sees the light, but it is Paul who carries on.

At the beginning of our meeting in March, I read this story from Acts to the Session. At the end of the meeting, I asked the Elders to reflect on this story and what it has to say to us about renewal and keeping sabbath, especially as we enter this time of sabbatical. A couple of key observations were made which I want to share with you.

One was how we can get so stuck in our day-to-day routines that we are unable to see what is going on around us. Saul had his head down, blinders on, focused on his task of defending his Jewish faith at all costs, but he had no idea how that might be impacting others. It took a bright light shining from heaven to get his attention and see the larger picture. We can get sucked into our hectic, focused, day-to-day routines as individuals and as the church, that we are unable to see the bigger picture. This time of intentional sabbath-keeping is our bright light shining on the road to Damascus, helping us to stop, be still, and listen again for the voice of the Lord.

Another key observation is recognizing from this story that people can change through God’s power and light – no matter what we might think of them. Perhaps my favorite part of this story is Ananias’ reaction to the Lord’s direction. When Jesus tells him that there’s a man from Tarsus named Saul who is waiting for

him to come and minister to him, I think Ananias' response in our modern language would have been, "Excuse me? Are you kidding? That guy only wants to kill non-Jews and has the authority to do so from the chief priests. I'm not going anywhere near him!"

But Jesus reassures Ananias – and us – that it will be okay. "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel" (9:15). Ananias then has the courage to faithfully follow the Lord's assurance, and prays and heals Saul of his blindness. It's our reminder that it is not our place to write people off, to assume they will never return, to "play God" and deem when someone is beyond hope. Our role in all of this is to be open to the Lord's voice, to be instruments of God for whatever purpose God deems important, and to celebrate when change occurs in situations we never thought humanly possible. For with God, all things are indeed possible.

The final thing which struck me and the members of the Session was the idea of blindness, and what it is like to have the scales removed from our eyes so that we can see clearly. Early in the story, Saul is blinded by the light for three days, sitting in a house in Damascus, waiting for his vision to return. When Ananias arrives, he lays his hands on Saul, and after praying with him "immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored" (9:18). It wasn't only Saul's physical sight which was restored. It was his vision for his life that was renewed by God, and that vision was sealed by his baptism (9:19), and from that day forward he proclaimed Jesus as Lord.

I can honestly say that a year-and-a-half ago, my eyes may have been open, but I could not see clearly. I had blinders on, focused on what I thought I was supposed to be doing, unable to see how that busyness was preventing me to see the big picture. Ever since I shared openly and honestly how lost I was feeling, and my need for renewal and reorientation for ministry, it has been like scales falling away from my eyes. I now see more clearly my role as your pastor, how this time of renewal will further sharpen my vision, and how refreshed I already feel and know I will further feel when I return to you in August.

Are your eyes open, but you are unable to see clearly? What scales are covering your vision for your life, and how might this time of renewal offer you a chance to shed those blinders? If you cannot see the good around you, because you are focused on all that is wrong or bad, how might this time allow you to see and live according to God's vision for you? If you are unable to let go of past hurts, and cannot believe people can truly change, how might this time allow you to abandon the weight of the past, and embrace the hope of the present and future? If you are weary with the chaos of everyone else's demands upon your time, how might this period of renewal allow you to pause, reflect, and reorient what is most important for you or your family? What scales need to fall from your eyes, so that you might have the faith to see and the courage to live in the light of God's love for us in Jesus Christ?

In closing, I would ask that you all take out your bulletins and look at the back cover. This statement is from the statement of purpose for the Clergy Renewal Grant Program of the Lilly Endowment, which is allowing us to undertake this time

of collective renewal. I shared this with the class I taught the last three weeks on the sabbatical and renewal, and I feel it's important that we all hear, clearly and without distraction, why this opportunity is important and necessary for congregations and pastors.

Lilly Endowment seeks to strengthen Indiana congregations by providing opportunities for pastors to step away briefly from the persistent obligations of daily parish life and to engage in a period of renewal and reflection. Renewal periods are not vacations, but times for intentional exploration and reflection, for regaining the enthusiasm and creativity for ministry, for discovering what will make the pastor's heart sing.

Lilly Endowment believes ministry is profoundly important, not only to the people directly served, but also to the larger community and society. The clergy renewal program honors pastors and congregations. We have learned a great deal about what pastors and congregations value about this program.

Life-giving experiences – strengthening relationships, renewing a sense of call, meeting and serving the neighbor in a new way, finding joy and purpose in a simplified life, traveling to new lands and unfamiliar territories, creating opportunities where members of the congregation can exercise their gifts for ministry – are common themes of these renewal times. Profound discoveries that pastors and their congregations describe as “life-changing events” occur as they participate in this program (Lilly Endowment's Clergy Renewal Program, Statement of Purpose).

Today is a milestone for this congregation because you are being honored for your God-given identity in who you have been as a community of faith, and what you will become in the years to come. Today is a moment to give thanks for how God has blessed us in innumerable ways, and how we might honor God for those blessings in how we utilize this gift of renewal. Today is a day to ask God to remove our blinders, to shed the scales which cover our eyes, and to reveal a clear vision of how we are to serve joyfully as the people of God at John Knox Presbyterian Church.

Today is not the last day of school. Today is the start of a new chapter in our journey of faith. As we walk our mutual paths of renewal in the weeks and months to come, may we faithfully see and courageously live in the light of our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.