

"THE REBIRTH OF A MAN"

A Sermon By

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### INTRODUCTION

On Friday... the Christian Church celebrated a remarkable event that took place almost two thousand years ago. The event I refer to is the conversion of St. Paul. We do not celebrate this event in the Methodist Church the way some of the other branches of Christ's Church do. And perhaps we ought to make more of it than we do for historically we have always believed in conversion. It's interesting to note in passing that on the 25th of December we celebrate the birth of a child, and that on the 25th of January we celebrate the rebirth of a man. This morning I should like to review the story of Paul's life with you and let some of the rich meaning of this life spill over into our lives.

Nearly one half of the New Testament is devoted to the life and the letters of Paul. This sizeable section of the Scriptures furnishes us with various treasures. For instance, if you're looking for one of the most exciting biographies in history, here it is. Or, if you're looking for a travelogue with insights into the world of the first century, you'll find it here. If you're looking for a classic account of one man's journey in the Faith, it's here. Outside of our Lord Himself, there is no person in the pages of the Bible about whom we know as much, or whose influence has been as great as this fearless figure of the Faith whom God used to give width to the hearing of the Good News and depth to its meaning.

### HIS LIFE

We seldom think of Paul as a contemporary of Jesus, but it's quite evident to us that their lives overlapped. About the time that Jesus journeyed with His parents to the Temple in Jerusalem as a twelve year old, a baby boy was being dedicated by his parents in a synagogue in Tarsus - a town in Asia Minor, about 300 miles north of Jerusalem. This name of this younger boy was Saul, after the first king of Israel. In some respects, Jesus and Saul followed similar paths. Each was brought up by God-fearing, Jewish parents; each was faithful in his attendance at the synagogue; each learned a trade. But there came a point where their paths separated. Jesus went on to emphasize a man's response to the love of God. Saul (or Paul as he was later to be called) went on to emphasize a man's response to the laws of God and man.

Whether or not Saul ever saw Jesus, we do not know. It is possible that Saul was in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion, for loyal Jews always made the pilgrimage to the Holy City at Passover. While there is no indication that Saul witnessed the proceedings of that first Holy Week, there is a good possibility that he heard about them. In one of the lodging places of Jerusalem on that first Good Friday evening, it is entirely possible that he and his young friends celebrated the defeat of that foolish Nazarene who had dared to suggest that God might be interested in something more than outward observance of the Law.

However that may have been, we are on more solid ground historically when we place Saul in Jerusalem several weeks later. By that time he had left his home in Tarsus to study in Jerusalem with the respected teacher, Gamaliel. And like many other young men, intoxicated with independence, he was an extremist with no patience or tolerance for those whose views did not coincide with his own. In particular, he was irked at the persistence of the followers of this man from Nazareth. The colossal nerve of these people - pitting themselves against the power of the Church and the State. He would do what he could to help stamp them out.

And so he was there that day when a young man named Stephen who belonged to this small group was dragged before the Sanhedrin on some false charges and condemned to death. Stephen spoke in clear, trumpet tones in defense of his Christian Faith. What he said and the manner in which he did it infuriated the mob and what followed was a First Century, first class lynching. The record says that Paul stood by - a kind of checkroom attendant for the garments of the mobsters who stoned to death this young man, Stephen. No protest on his part as he witnessed the death of the first Christian martyr.

The only thing was that Stephen died in heroic fashion. Something about his face and his manner that left one with the impression that he was the conqueror rather than the conquered. Saul never could forget it. Moreover, Saul later admitted that he was a walking "civil war" at that time. The more he tried to pull himself up by the laws of righteousness, the more frustrated he was over his failures. But he tried to ignore it and directed his time and energy to pursuing and persecuting the early Christians. One day he volunteered for Gestapo service in Damascus, vowing to capture any Christians he could find in that city and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment and death.

DAMASCUS If you know your New Testament, you know what happened. That road to Damascus was to become famous for quite another experience than that which Saul had in mind.

A light. A voice. A complete change of direction. The Paul of later years spoke of the experience with a note of reverent wonder. "He appeared to me" he said. Words, of course, have their limitation in portraying what actually happened and our minds have their limitation in comprehending what actually took place. But the decisive reality of that Damascus road experience is beyond any doubt. For it was then that Saul became Paul. It was then that this fiery foe of the Christians turned about face and was set on his way to become the foremost person of Christ's way in its early years.

In the years that immediately followed, Paul slowly built a reputation as an able exponent and example of the Christian Faith. About ten years after the Damascus Road experience, a Christian leader by the name of Barnabas in Antioch invited Paul to come over and help him in the little church there. It was during that year that First Church, Antioch, asked Paul and Barnabas to serve as their ministers abroad. They accepted the assignment and "after fasting and praying they laid hands on them and sent them off".

There are three distinct missionary journeys recorded in the Book of Acts that Paul undertook. He moved throughout the Mediterranean world, pioneering as an itinerant preacher across Asia Minor, Greece and Macedonia. Wherever he went he stirred up opposition with this Gospel about a Risen Lord who had revealed God's love to all men. He met opposition. His opponents harassed him, hurt him, falsely accused him, imprisoned him, beat him. Midway in his travels, his health broke - malaria or perhaps epilepsy. He asked God for healing and his prayers were not answered at all in the way that he wanted. But nothing stopped this man. With great persistence, faith, passion and power, he preached the Gospel of God's love for all men where no one had been before. It was Paul who took the event out of Palestine and introduced it to the known world of his time.

At length, he came to Rome. And there the story ends. Tradition has it he died a martyr's death in Rome in the Neroian persecution of 65 A. D.. Whatever the manner of his death, he wrote his own epitaph when he said, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith". Amen

TRANSFORMATION

Now, this is a very brief review of the facts regarding his life. We would do well to also consider the legacy of his life, and here there are two things about Paul - his ministry and his message - which shine undimmed across the years, down to the present moment.

First off, he stands out as a clear example of the transformation that the spirit of Christ brings to a human life. Our forefathers in the faith spoke of this transformation as "conversion". We don't use this term very much in our churches now-a-days. We tend to place our emphasis more on respectability than on redemption. But if you clutch the New Testament by the arm and wonder what it's all about, it will speak to you not in terms of the attainment of respectability, but rather of the gift of redemption through Christ. The One who came into the world to fashion the New Testament where the Old left off promised that he could fashion and shape new lives out of old. And He did. And He continues to do so even today. People can be "born again", and it was on this astonishing claim and conviction that the Christian Faith moved out into the Mediterranean world under Paul's direction.

You can hardly read the story of Paul without wondering what has happened to this claim. Paul reminds us of the power of God to accomplish things - to redeem life, to restore life. "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" asked Paul in the midst of his own inner civil war. His answer, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord". And time and again he points to what God has done in Christ and through Christ and then from his own experience he testifies, "I know" that this is the God who redeems from sin, who breaks the bad habits, who frees from fear, who sets love in motion, who restores sanity to life.

Some present this hour may need to hear that word again, to have it lifted before them. Oh, we're so quick to take refuge in that old cliché, "Aw... but you can't change human nature...". But either that cliché is false or the entire New Testament record is false!....and for one, I'm willing to put my faith in that claim - in Christ - whose spirit changed Paul's life, whose spirit changed Luther's and Wesley's and yes, many others...right down to the present. "Can a man be born again". Indeed, he can.

And hearing this claim for ourselves, we also need to hear of its possibilities for others. And this is what NT Christianity is all about - that process, which William James described in his classic definition of conversion in his book, Varieties of Religious Experience..

"That process...gradual or sudden...by which a self hitherto divided and consciously wrong....inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.."

It happened to Paul....to so many since that day, and it can still happen. "Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think."

APPLICATION

And the other thing that stands out in Paul's life is this. He is a fine example of a man who courageously applied his religious conviction to all areas of life. People who think of religion as a cloistered area of life - walled off - saved and sealed only for Sundays at eleven -

entirely personal and without social implications will find little support from Paul. "Lord, what wilt Thou have me do?" asked Paul in one of his Damascus Road recollections, and he spent the rest of his life witnessing to the Lordship of Christ in every realm of his life.

And it brought him into sharp conflict with the prejudices of his day. "Ye are all one in Christ Jesus" said Paul. "Here there cannot be Greek or Jew, slave and free man, but Christ is all and in all". Many Jews flinched at his words, especially when he said he had been sent to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. That was the spark that set fire to the flame. "Away with this man. He ought not to live" said they. "You are all one in Christ"

Yet, it was not only about race that Paul spoke. He talked about a Christian and his money. He talked about a Christian in his home. He talked about a Christian in his business. A Christian in society. No punches were pulled. It's all there. He was simply applying his faith "in Christ" to all walks of life. In Romans 12 and I Corinthians 13 Paul soars to great heights as he talks about life in "the body of Christ".

Dear Abby had an interesting letter in her column in the Post several years ago. I clipped it and share it with you.

Dear Abby: One of the toughest tasks a church faces is choosing a good minister. A member of an official board undergoing this painful process finally lost patience. He'd watched the PPR Committee reject applicant after applicant for some fault, alleged or otherwise. It was time for a bit of soul-searching on the part of the committee. So he stood up and read a letter purporting to be from another applicant.

"Gentlemen: Understanding your pulpit is vacant, I should like to apply for the position. I have many qualifications. I've been a preacher with much success and also some success as a writer. Some say I'm a good organizer. I've been a leader most places I've been.

I'm over 50 years of age. I have never preached in one place for more than three years. In some places I have left town after my work has caused riots and disturbances. I must admit I have been in jail three or four times, but not because of any real wrongdoing. My health is not too good, though I still get a great deal one. The church I have preached in have been small, though located in several large cities. I've not got along well with religious leaders in towns where I have preached. In fact, some have threatened me and even attacked me physically. I am not too good at keeping records. I have been known to forget whom I have baptized.

However, if you can use me, I shall do my best for you."

The board member looked over the committee. "Well, what do you think?" Shall we call him?" The good church folks were aghast. Can an unhealthy, trouble-making, absent minded

ex-jailbird? Was the board member crazy? Who signed the application? Who had that colossal nerve?

The board member eyes them all keenly before he answered their question. "It's signed" said he, "The Apostle Paul".

CLOSING

Some of you are familiar with the name of E. Stantly Jones, the great missionary to India of the 1930's and 1940's. The name of this great evangelical spirit was in the home where I grew up. Remember his devotional books? Anyway, he once said to Gandhi that he would like to see Christianity a part of the national life of India and he asked the great Indian leader, "What would you suggest that we do to make this possible?" This was Gandhi's reply,

"First, I would suggest that all of you Christians must begin to live more like Jesus Christ.

Second, I would suggest that you must practiced your religion without adulterating or toning it down.

Third, I would suggest that you must put your emphasis upon love - for love is the center and the soul of Christianity."

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels...and have not love..." There was a man whose name was Saul, who one day was "born again" in the spirit of Christ and became Paul.

PRAYER

Our thanks to you, gracious God, our Father, for men like Paul. Touch the restless, unhappy torn and divided lives present this hour. Help them to take firmer hold on the realities of the spirit. Melt us. Mold us. Shape us. Use us, O God, for we hear thy voice calling to us within our hearts.

VISITORS: Sunday, January 20, 1985 / Super Bowl Sunday!

Weather: Snowy, cold and brrr....15 degrees above zero.

Attendance: 121 adults, 18 children. Total: 139

1984: 160	1979: 171	1974: 129
1983: 147	1978: 137	1973: 144
1982: 160	1977: 126	1972: 135
1981: 182	1976: 161	1971: 121
1980: 156	1975: 142	1970: 130

1. IT Miss Lynda Kubiak: 314 West 89th Street  
New York, New York 10025  
Telephone: 496 - 1431

Pink card. Letter. Greeted at door by PC. Young adult, late twenties. Pleasant. May return.

2. IT Miss Jennifer Lee Johnson: 1192 Park Avenue  
New York, New York 10129  
Telephone: 348 -2246

Pink card. Letter. Greeted at door by PC. New friend of Hillary Smither's....coffee hour. Met quite a few folks. She's from Isabell, Minnesota. Late teens, I'd say.

BACK AGAIN

1. Anna Antos
2. Pace Swindell
3. Liz Mori - 6th visit
4. Vera Allick - choir
5. Audrey Baird and daughter, Nancy
6. Stanley Tucker
7. Tom Kaliszewski and Diane Bitting -  
they're members...good to see them.

INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION

1. Cornelia - with Rod Hoover. Minister's daughter, Florida.
2. Tom Kileon - from Chicago - with Rod Hoover. Originally, NC.
3. Marla Patterson - with Donna Hollin

NOTES

Kim Olivadoti - has Scripture already for Sunday, the 27th. Sermon requests: Donna Hollin, December 23rd. Len Williams, January 13th. Send out to them. With us - Mark, Marcie and Gregory Wyrick...Hawthorne, NJ. And Jan Aldrich Solow and Rebecca Caitlin - Brooklyn.

## INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. The day of rest is at hand.

May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life and may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding presence. In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

## MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me. For my yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Comfort ye. Comfort ye my people, saith your God. He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms."

"For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us."

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News: we are forgiven."

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing... you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole"

## PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

Touch with healing, O God, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Comfort the bereaved and the broken-hearted among us. Abide among us as a healing benediction.

Answer the unspoken prayers offered to You on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray:

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."

1. Edna Brown
2. Elaine Tavalocci
3. Ada Kinney
4. Paul Kilborn

5. Ellen Nicholson
6. Mary Donovan
7. Nancy and Thomas Gallagher
8. Robert Russell
9. Larry Holloway