

Welcome, Announcements, and Land Acknowledgement

As we come to worship in Jesus' name we acknowledge with gratitude and respect the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ – on whose traditional and unceded territory we gather. We commit ourselves to just and respectful relationships within our congregation and our neighborhood.

Celebrations / Joys and Concerns

*God's blessing on you. God's blessing on you.
God's blessing, dear friends. God's blessing on you.*

➤ *Don't be afraid (repeat)*

Call to Worship [verses from Psalm 30]

I will extol you, O LORD, for you have lifted me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me.

O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

Sing praises to the LORD, O you faithful ones, and give thanks to God's holy name.

The Lord's anger is but for a moment; the Lord's favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me! O LORD, be my helper! You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.

O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

Gathering Prayer and Words of Hope

Eternal God, as you have met us in many places, we pray this morning that you would meet us again – here and now. We come in this time of worship confident that you are present with us – in one another – in our music – in our prayers – in the scripture – in our sharing and in all we do as your gathered community. Help us to encounter Christ in our worship today so that we may find our lives transformed and renewed.

We recognize our need of you, O Lord, and come seeking your courage – your mercy. Yet we can grow suspicious of our own behaviour. We notice ways that we avoid confrontation and speak differently before those we fear or mistrust. Remove from our senses, our minds, our hearts those things that keep us from loving and including those we do not understand. Recreate us, O God, and fashion us to be free from sin – free for living as you would have us live. We pray in Jesus' name. **Amen**

God has turned our mourning into dancing – taken off our garments of sadness and clothed us with joy. We will praise God forever!

➤ *I danced in the morning / Lord of the dance*

250

† Prayer for Understanding

We meet you, O Christ, in many places – in the ebb and flow of our lives – in the faces of those we encounter each day. This morning we pray that we will meet you in the revelation of scripture. May your Holy Spirit help us to hear your voice, trust your call, and lead us to walk with others in your Way. Amen

Scripture

Acts 9: 1-20 [NT 127]

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, 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?”

He asked, “Who are you, Lord?”

The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.”

He answered, “Here I am, Lord.”

The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.”

But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.”

But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

Revelation 5: 11-14 [NT 248]

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message

The story from Acts this morning is one some of us know well. We’ve heard of having a Damascus Road experience – we have heard people speak of having scales fall from their eyes so that they can suddenly see clearly that which was previously murky. And because it is perhaps a well-known story it may be easy to rush through in our hurry to see Saul turning to God.

But Saul was already on God’s ‘side’ – on God’s team. Saul already knew God. Spent time with God. Was faithful to God. Except that in his eagerness to be a champion for God, Saul shoots off down a road that literally blinds him to what God is doing. Saul's vision is narrowed by his focus on getting other people to do things in the way Saul thought they should.

Saul might be better known to you as Paul – apparently the change from one to the other is more like calling someone named John by the nickname Jack – calling Elizabeth Betty or Liz. Paul is the more formal name and Saul the nickname – at least that’s what I read. I always thought it had to do with his conversion like Abram becoming Abraham – but I digress...

Saul/Paul is depicted by Luke as a persecutor of Christians. According to Luke he was standing by in support at the stoning of Stephen, one of the leaders of the emerging “Christian movement”. He is chasing down Christians who have fled to Damascus in Syria. He wants to encourage synagogue leaders to join in the suppression of the movement. Saul/Paul is committed to stamping out the new movement – even stating in his own later writings to the Corinthian church that he “persecuted the church of God”. Clearly Luke perceives him as an enemy to members of the Way – the Christian movement – resistant to God’s newness, clinging to old, settled patterns of certitude and authority – an enemy of the church. Even though Saul/Paul sees himself as doing God’s work until suddenly he encounters the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus.

God interrupts the journey to Damascus with a blinding flash of light. So abrupt and powerful is God’s intrusion that Saul falls to the ground. Into Saul’s program to save Judaism from the sweeping enthusiasm of the Christ movement comes the question, “*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*”

The light, Saul’s falling to the earth – these details tell us that something quite extraordinary – something divine – is happening here. God is at work. The question sounds so much like God’s call to Abraham and Jacob and Moses. It accentuates the close relationship between the risen Christ and his disciples – to persecute a follower of the Master is to persecute the Master.

Since Saul and members of the Way represented two groups within the same religious tradition in the first century, Luke likely would not have seen the turn of events on the road to Damascus as a conversion in the modern sense of the term. And we need to be careful not to interpret this as a story of Christian triumph against a Jewish persecutor, but more like different ways of following the same God. It was a change in direction for Saul/Paul – a new understanding of God and his relationship to the people. A transformation of thought and purpose.

The change in Saul/Paul as a result of the encounter is striking – he is helpless. He opens his eyes but cannot see. He is led to Damascus by the hand and is unable to eat or drink for three days. The one who was so active going to and fro, seeking letters of introduction, pursuing believers all the way to Damascus has now become passive, feeble, like a little child.

The one who once persecuted the disciples is now helped along by one of those disciples – the one named Ananias. His story too is one of transformation. Like the rest of the dispersed Christian community, Ananias has good reason to mistrust Saul. Yet on the Damascus Road, Saul has been approached by God – has been converted, turned. So now Ananias is challenged to turn also as he is encountered by God – challenged to go and bring healing to Saul/Paul, this former enemy. He is the model disciple but nobody special. At the end of this scene in Acts, Ananias disappears from the record – just an ordinary follower of Christ faithfully responding to an encounter with the divine. He could be any one here today. The enemy becomes his brother because of God’s will and God’s power. It is divine desire.

Saul's/Paul's transformation is complete as he is baptized and receives food. He is now one who had his sight restored and his strength regained for a different life. Saul/Paul – the proud and faithful man of God – the one who knew all the boundaries and guarded them jealously – is called to be God's messenger among the Gentiles. He is called to recognize as sisters and brothers those people he has shunned all his life – those he regarded as pagan. He is sent out to proclaim Jesus as Lord.

Saul's/Paul's encounter is transformational as well as mystical. He encounters the risen Jesus and becomes a new creation. He gets his spiritual-ethical-theological marching orders even though after the experience, he can't yet see one step ahead of him. The one who sought to persecute the Christian movement now becomes the most ardent proclaimer to God's people of all races and ethnicities. He receives both a revelation and a vocation, evangelist to the Gentiles.

All of this has come to Saul/Paul as a gift – a peculiar gift perhaps because it will involve suffering. He joins a long list of reprobates (like Jacob), murderers (like Moses), and odd characters (perhaps like you and like me) whom God has chosen as vessels for God's work. Remember, this conversion or call – the radical change worked in Saul/Paul – is something that Christ does, not something we do. *"You did not choose me, but I chose you."* [John 15: 16]

We hear this story as the church today and marvel at the power of God to transform the enemy into the brother. We need to be ready to be continually surprised by God's transformation of our enemies into our brothers and sisters. Who knows what God has in store? Who can say whom God will choose?

The account of Paul's conversion serves to remind us that the appearances of the risen Lord were not – are not – confined to Easter Day. Not only does the Lord appear to Saul, but to Ananias as well. In fact, the whole book of Acts is filled with dramatic visions. Easter is not limited to a single day – it is not even that we remember each Sunday as a mini-Easter – the risen Lord continues to be the energizing force throughout the church – throughout the world.

The church is so often perceived as an immovable institution that champions the unchangeable. Many church buildings look like fortresses where nothing changes – even the seats are bolted to the floor – yes, the very pews you are sitting on! The fact that the church is so often seen this way, and so often sees **itself** this way, shows just how totally Christianity has abandoned its roots.

The foundational stories of our faith – like the story we read today – are stories of radical change, of reevaluating traditions, of breathing fresh life into tired structures. One of the major reasons the authorities wanted to kill Jesus was that he advocated such radical change in the way God and faith were perceived and that threatened the authority of those who bolt pews to the floor.

The story of Saul's/Paul's conversion is a favourite because it speaks of the dramatic change in a vehement opponent of Christ-followers when he encounters the risen Christ. It is a story of extraordinary disruption, of sudden freedom and the overturning of certainties. The church is always struggling to catch up with Paul in his radical, daring newness in the gospel.

What Saul experiences on the way to Damascus is absolutely shocking for him. Saul/Paul thought he was doing what God wanted – thought he was defending God and God's ways and here is God asking why he is persecuting the One Saul/Paul claims to love... God. "Me? Persecuting you?!" You can almost hear the horror in Saul's/Paul's voice.

In the faithful obedience of Ananias, and Saul's/Paul's dramatic conversion and call to be God's instrument, we see God's passion at work. We see the God who breaks open concrete minds and breathes life into hearts of stone. Today we celebrate the God who has converted us, and we seek to open ourselves to the radical power of the divine that will eventually transform us in the image of Christ.

Deep in our hearts there is this story of a man who gets knocked down – blinded by light on the Damascus Road. A story that challenges all characterizations of the Christian life as a pleasantly continuous progression from "point A" to "point B" with no jerks, jolts, lurches to the left or the right along the way. There are all sorts of uncomfortable questions in relation to this passage around how we, as Christians, treat those of our fellow Christians, who think differently from us. Are we so intent on pursuing our own interpretation of the Christian life that we are 'blinded' to other possibilities of what God is doing? Sometimes, by the grace of God, while we're on our way, suddenly a light surprises – God gets to us – grabs – jerks – jolts – blinds us and we do change. The resurrected Christ continues even now to encounter us, to transform us and to call us to radical ways of being in the world. **Amen**

➤ *To show by touch and word*

763

† Offering Invitation

Our lives overflow with God's blessings in Christ and in creation. With gratitude for all that we have received, let us present our offering to God, trusting that God can do a new thing with our gifts – and with our lives!

➤ *Praise God from whom all blessings flow*

306

† Offering Prayer

Gracious God, you have given us life and furnished it with much beauty and blessing. In Christ you have given yourself to us. So, we offer to you a portion of what we have received to share in the work of your kingdom. Use our energy and ability for your purposes for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord. Amen

Vine and Branches¹ - an affirmation of faith

We believe in God, the Root of all living, Creator of all things.

¹ Methodist – General Board of Discipleship

We live in Christ Jesus, God's Son, who loved all people and who makes us one in his love. He suffered, died and was raised to new life. In his death and resurrection, we are also raised to life that is transformed. Christ is our Vine, and we are his branches; and without him we cannot live.

We live by the Holy Spirit, flowing through us so that we may bear fruit for God, the fruit of love. In the Spirit we are one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.

We trust in the one holy church, the communing of saints, the forgiveness of sin, the mystery of resurrection, and the grace of eternal life.

Gathering at the Lord's Table

For those who need, the bread waits. For those who long, the wine lingers.

For those seeking transformation, the table beckons.

All are invited... not because we have faith, but because we trust;
not because we understand, but because we long;
not because we know, but because we are loved;
not because we are well, but because we know our need.

The table waits, and heaven's host calls. Our place is here.

Come now to the table of our Lord.

➤ *Canticle of the turning*

God be with you.

And also, with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to God.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is good to give God thanks and praise...

Gracious God, we praise your holy name, giving thanks with our lips and our lives...For the power and mystery of your Word by which you created us and called us to yourself, we give you thanks. For the power and mystery of your Word by which you took flesh and lived among us through your Son, Jesus Christ, we give you thanks. ...Therefore, with all your faithful people from every time and place we join with the whole creation to lift our hearts in joyful praise...

O holy, holy, holy God, O God of time and space. All earth and sea and sky above bear witness to your grace. Hosanna in the highest heav'n, creation sings your praise. And blessed is the one who comes and bears your name always!

Faithful God, we offer you our praise and thanks as we return to you these holy gifts of bread and wine...Remembering that on the night of his arrest Jesus sat down to eat with friends.

During the meal, he took the bread, said a prayer, broke it and shared it with everyone at the table, saying: ***“This is my body which is for you. Do this to remember me.”***

At the end of the meal, he took a cup of wine and raised it, saying: ***“This is God’s new covenant, made possible because of my death. Drink this all of you, to remember me.”***

We ponder, O God, the mystery of his promise that in this meal we are joined to him and to one another as a holy people. We offer you our praise and thanks for Jesus, who took flesh and lived among us, was baptized for our sins, taught us your way of truth, loved us in our lovelessness and died that we may have life. ...We celebrate with great joy the resurrection of Jesus, his presence with us in this feast, and his promise of a new creation as we affirm the mystery of faith:

Sing Christ has died and Christ is risen, Christ will come again! Sing Christ has died and Christ is risen, Christ will come again!

God of grace and power, you invite us to share in mysteries that are beyond our understanding...
...in simple trust we seek the transforming power of your Spirit us and upon this bread and wine. By the miracle of your grace may they be for us your body – vibrant with your life, renewing and making us whole. And as the bread and wine which we now eat and drink are changed into us, may we be changed again into you – bone of your bone – flesh of your flesh, ...loving and caring in the world.

In Christ, with Christ, through Christ – by the power of the Holy Spirit – all glory is yours, now and forever and so we sing...

Amen, amen, O Holy One! Hosanna and amen! Amen, amen, O Holy One! Hosanna and amen!

Sharing Bread and Wine

The one who was buried but rose from the dead is now present for us in this bread

The one whose wounded hands were offered to the unbelieving now reaches out in this cup.

The bread of life – the cup of grace – we remember and share with thanksgiving these gifts in which God comes to us so that we may come to God.

Those in person have received a pre-sealed communion package. Everyone consumes the elements together in their own space...

† Prayer after Communion

Living and loving God, what a great world it would be if we all kept our lives grafted to you and produced bountiful fruits of the Spirit.

What a great world it would be if we cared for the sick and disabled, the diseased and the mentally ill – if we sought the lost and bewildered – restored their dignity and hope, as Jesus did.

What a great world it would be O God, if we opened our hearts to misfits and outcasts, and our arms to the untouchables – if we practised forgiving our enemies, and doing good to those who spitefully abuse us.

What a great world it would be if we let others borrow what we have, and gave gifts without looking for reward – if we created a new community out of disparate types of people, as Jesus did with his disciples.

We give you thanks loving God, for the holy mystery of communion in which you give yourself to us. Bind us close to Christ and let his Spirit flow within us, healing us and enabling us to produce the fruits of love both in and out of season. We pray together singing...

➤ *Our Father in heaven (The Lord's Prayer – no repeats)* 469

Blessing

By the power of the Holy Spirit, we go forth into the world, to fulfill our calling as the people of God, the body of Christ.

Go in peace – love and care for one another in Christ's name; the blessing of Christ Jesus, the one who traded good for evil and love for hate, be upon you.

May the abundant grace of Jesus Christ, the generous love of God, and the continuing support of the Holy Spirit embrace us all. Amen

➤ *Sing amen* 264