

You may not have noticed it, but today we skipped the Sunday readings. Instead, we substituted in the readings for a feast day that happens every year on January 25. Since the feast day celebrates the saint our church is named for, and since this is the day of our annual meeting, it is doubly appropriate that we celebrate today the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul.

Today we heard a couple of different accounts of Paul's conversion. The first was from the book of Acts. Actually, this is one of three accounts in the book of Acts about Paul's conversion. It was such an important thing that Luke wrote it down three times, the first time as a narrative account, and the other two as flashbacks, as reiterations. But we also heard Paul's version of his conversion from the Epistle to the Galatians.

Now, we often think of Paul's conversion as being one of the most dramatic in Christian history. And in some senses, it was. Saul, the persecutor of the Christian movement is confronted by a vision of Jesus Christ while on the road to Damascus. It is so powerful that he becomes Paul, the chief apostle to the Gentiles. And in the writings that have been preserved in the New Testament, he is Paul, the most important proponent of having faith in Jesus Christ.

The turnaround in Paul's life was so dramatic that we often refer to a major conversion as a "Damascus Road Experience."

However, in another sense, Paul's conversion is not as extreme as it first appears. Paul doesn't move from Judaism to being a Buddhist or Atheist.

Paul begins as a fanatic follower of the God of Israel. And after his conversion he is still a fanatic follower of the God of Israel. Only now, he is convinced that the God of Israel did something new, something of earthshaking importance: raising Jesus Christ from the dead.

And because of that conviction, Paul gives up the rather comfortable life he had trained for. No longer was he going to be a rabbi who sat around engaging in long academic discussions about scripture and theology. Instead, he took his life out on the road. He became a tireless missionary, an itinerant preacher, a church planter. And as he did so, he faced great dangers.

In Second Corinthians, ch11, he gives a laundry list of some of the things he endured: "Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked."¹

And then Paul adds something that always makes me smile: "And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my (concern/anxiety) for all the churches."²

¹ 2Cor 11:24-27

² 2Cor 11:28

I just love it that that's one of the big things on his mind: concern for the church. As if being beaten and shipwrecked and in constant danger wasn't enough, Paul has the daily stress of trying to be a pastor to his flock. That verse always encourages me amidst the day to day stresses of being a parish priest.

In the list in 2nd Corinthians, Paul shows us that he endures much for the sake of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. And don't forget, Paul still had another 10 years of ministry after writing these words, with more difficulties, more imprisonments, at least one more shipwreck, and finally, martyrdom by decapitation.

And yet, in his writings, Paul doesn't dwell on such things. With such tough things going on in his life and ministry, we might expect Paul to focus more on them. Yet, Paul has other things he focuses on. These are words and themes that come up over and over again in his writings. And they're wonderfully positive.

Grace—appears 81 times—and it's not just a theological term for Paul, but a part of his favorite day to day greeting that appears numerous times in his writings: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."³

Faith and/or Belief—appears 167 times: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."⁴

Joy and/or Rejoicing—appears 51 times: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."⁵

Thanks and/or Giving Thanks—appears 44 times: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."⁶

Love—appears 98 times: "Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."⁷

Grace. Belief. Joy. Thanks. Love. Those things sustained Paul through difficult times. Those things were Paul's focus as he sought to serve the God of Israel who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

So here we are 1,950 years after St. Paul's death, trying to follow in his footsteps, as a congregation named in his honor, in a country and a culture he could never have imagined. In 2010, we're drawing to a close our first century of ministry as St. Paul's-on-the-Plains Episcopal Church, and we'll be beginning our second century. Are there lessons we can draw from St. Paul, our parish's patron saint?

³ Rom. 1:7, 1Cor. 1:3, 2Cor. 1:2, Gal. 1:3, Eph. 1:2, Phil. 1:2, 2Th. 1:2, Philem. 3

⁴ Rom. 15:13

⁵ Phil. 4:4

⁶ Col. 3:17

⁷ 1Cor 13:13

Well, the lessons are myriad, and could provide material for dozens of sermons. But I'll just suggest two things this morning.

First is a matter of attitude. Paul endured shipwrecks, arrests, beatings, and many dangers and persecutions. Yet he focused on love, grace, faith, joy, and thanksgiving.

Yes, we're in the midst of recession. Yes, we're in the midst of cultural and ecclesiastical change. Yes, the vestry passed a budget for 2010 that is 20% lower than the budget for 2009.

But what's our attitude going to be? Do we regard the glass as 20% empty or 80% full? Do we worry about having to make do with less, or are we thankful for what we do have? Do we bemoan the fact that we have buried the wealthy members who used to subsidize our deficit spending, or are we thankful that the vestry is committed to living within our means, that the pledges are up, that we have a balanced budget for 2010? Do we look backward pining for the way things used to be? Or do we move forward in faith and thanksgiving for the gifts God gives us today, to minister and do his work today?

Can we have an attitude of gratitude? Can we move forward in joy, faith, and love?

If we're going to be effective in our second century, we must do these things. And we can look to St. Paul as an example for us as we do so.

The second thing I would suggest this morning is catching just a bit of Paul's fanaticism. Okay, I know I'm on dangerous ground here. After all, as Episcopalians, we pride ourselves on being anything BUT fanatical about our faith. We're God's frozen chosen after all. We pride ourselves on doing things decently and in order.

Well, to be fair, that's something that comes from Paul as well. After all, he's the one who coined the phrase "decently and in order."

But Paul was fanatical about putting God first in his life. Paul had a vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, and he spent the rest of his life trying to spread the good news of the risen Christ. He gave up everything that was comfortable in his old life to do so.

He looked at his rather prodigious resume, and he said that all of his accomplishments were nothing but garbage when compared to knowing Jesus Christ. He said, "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ."⁸

We could use a bit of that kind of fanaticism, that kind of prioritizing. As we celebrate the conversion of St Paul, we could use a little conversion ourselves.

As I've mentioned previously, this year I'd like us to focus on the basics, in the words of the book of Acts: the Apostle's teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers.

⁸ Phil 3:8

A touch of St. Paul's fanaticism in these areas would serve us well.

Make worshipping the living God a priority.

Draw closer to him in prayer.

Learn more about him in scripture.

Follow the example of St. Paul; follow in his steps.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Amen.