

Show of hands: How many of you would identify as cradle Episcopalians—that is, those who've been Episcopalian since birth?

How many would identify as belonging to another church denomination?

How many would identify as having converted from another denomination—or from no faith tradition?

How many would say they're somewhere in between?

I ask these questions not to make sure you're awake this morning. I ask because thinking about where we've come from can be helpful in informing where we're going.

Before being accepted as a candidate for ordination, those aspiring to become clergy must write a spiritual autobiography: a reflection of the key influences and milestones in our faith journey.

As a writer by profession, I should have found this an easy exercise. But in reality, it can be challenging to step outside our present experiences and identify the things in our past that shaped who we are and who we might become.

On a simple level, this exercise might include detailing the churches you belonged to and the ministries you performed. Or noting the date of your confirmation or reception into the Episcopal Church. Or the occasion of your marriage, the birth and baptism dates of your children, and all of those important milestones.

On another level, it might be recalling experiences that can be harder to describe: A specific memory of a favorite Sunday school teacher. A word of kindness from a fellow parishioner at a time when you especially needed it. An epiphany you experienced during the singing of a particular worship hymn.

Whether we've grown up in the church, converted from atheism, or something in between, reflecting on our spiritual journey can help us recognize influential moments in our faith.

If he'd sat down to write it, St. Paul would have authored an amazing spiritual autobiography. This morning we hear the story of his conversion—perhaps the most famous conversion in history. From earlier passages in Acts, we know that Paul—then Saul the Pharisee—led a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, going from house to house, dragging off men and women and imprisoning them—and scattering the apostles throughout Judea and Samaria. In Acts 9, we meet Saul as he heads down the road to Damascus, “breathing threats and murder,” on a mission to capture any disciples he finds along the way.

How could this same man become one of the most important figures of the Apostolic age, spreading the Good News throughout Asia Minor and Europe, authoring a series of epistles that became foundational in the Christian faith?

If our beloved worship hymns had been composed at the time that Paul lived, I like to think he would have identified “Amazing Grace” as one of his favorites. I imagine he would have especially related to the infamous verse, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

I like to think, too, that had Paul been a songwriter himself, he may have tinkered with composing a present-tense version of this hymn, something along these lines: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saves a wretch like me. I’m often lost, and always found. Oft blind, but then I see.” For while Paul’s conversion is certainly amazing, I think he would agree that the saving, the finding, and the seeing are not a one-time event—nor do they happen by any of our own doing. Rather, that as we continually wander off, God continually finds us, saves us, and helps us see. God performs miracles. God changes lives.

On his journey to Damascus, God asks Saul, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul finds himself struck blind. God directs Ananias to go to Saul, explaining that Saul is “chosen to bring [God’s] name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.” Ananias lays hands on Saul, and “something like scales [fall] from his eyes, and his sight [is] restored.”

We all experience Damascus Road encounters of some kind: moments when God steps in to change our hearts and minds. Do actual scales fall from our eyes? Are we converted from persecutor of the people to one of the most influential apostles in Christianity? Most of us have nothing so dramatic in our history—we don’t think of our faith journey in terms of miracles.

But if we dig a little deeper, perhaps we might recognize miracles in *everyday* moments of transformation. The times in our lives when God takes us from unseeing, to seeing.

I experienced such a moment about 20 years ago that has stayed with me to this day. As a Naval officer stationed at Fort Meade, I found myself in a toxic work environment, stressed more than I realized. I also had a newborn,

and so between sleep deprivation and dreading going to work each day, I was not in a particularly good head space. I say this to provide context, not to offer an excuse for what I share next.

One morning I walked into the cafeteria at work, ordered my breakfast sandwich, and went to pay for it. The cashier rang me up, and I pointed out that the price was wrong, as the sandwich was on special. The young woman responded it was actually yesterday's special, not today's. And I argued, well the sign that's posted this morning says this is the special. So, you overcharged me for my order.

We went back and forth on this for a few moments, and I could see the cashier assume an attitude I perceived as rude. As I continued bickering over what amounted to all of about a one-dollar cost difference—I grew more and more agitated. My tone became disdainful. I was the customer. She was the cashier. What right had she to be rude to me?

I finally paid what she asked and left. But I fumed about this incident for hours: what poor customer service I'd endured, her wrong in overcharging me. At some point later in the day, I even called the supervisor of cafeteria services to complain.

That night as I slept, I found myself wandering down my own Damascus Road. I can't say I recall a voice in my dreams or anything like that. But I do know when I awoke in the morning, I felt utterly ashamed of how I'd behaved the previous day—like Saul, my own version of breathing threats and murder.

The reality is, I didn't know what that young woman might have been going through. I didn't stop to think that she may have had her own stresses that

influenced the encounter. I did not consider how our differences in socioeconomic status and race may have played into the situation. I failed to see the possible effect of my own privilege.

That morning, I walked back into the cafeteria looking for the young woman. She stood behind the food counter, and when she saw me approach, she retreated to the kitchen. My face flushing red, I asked her co-worker to please pass on that I'd like to speak to her: that I wanted to apologize.

The co-worker obliged, and the young woman ultimately came out from the kitchen and stood before me, arms folded across her chest. I said, "I'm sorry for how I behaved yesterday. That is not how my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ calls me to treat people."

She looked at me, perhaps a bit surprised, and then nodded once, turned and went back to the kitchen. I'm not sure if she'd actually accepted my apology. Even so, I walked away feeling as if I'd been to confession—and been forgiven.

What burdens do we need to carry down Damascus Road? What injurious behaviors or thoughtlessness do we need our sight restored to see? What moments of transformation in the simple and every day, can we open ourselves to?

The simple and every day, like in John's Gospel today, when Jesus sits by a charcoal fire on the beach. He eats breakfast with his disciples. He asks, "Do you love me?"

After the empty tomb, despite encountering the risen Jesus several times, the disciples seem a bit stuck. In fact, they return to doing what's familiar — fishing. And as Jesus comes among them, breaking bread, teaching about love, they begin a transformation—from confused and grieving, to energized and purposeful.

Grace takes us from blind to seeing, from lost to found, from adrift to aspiring. There is no situation God cannot convert to good—no failing he cannot transform to love.

For in Easter's story, we are transformed from the people who shouted, "Crucify him, Crucify him!", to the disciples Jesus spurs to action.

In the Eucharistic feast each Sunday, we are transformed from Saul the tormentor, to the apostle who lifts up communities in the name of Christ.

In the muck of everyday life, God looks to transform us. As we open ourselves to those experiences, we can respond in kind to Jesus's question, "Do you Love Me?", and live into our mission to tend his flock—and help heal a broken world.

Along our various roads, Jesus walks with us, urging us forward in the hope of the resurrection.

Theologian Thomas Merton captures this journey in this favorite prayer:

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.

nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this
you will lead me by the right road
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always
though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

May we be led by the right road—and allow the resurrected Christ to work
transformative miracles in and through our lives.