

Acts 9:1-22

There were no laboratories in Saul's day equipped with the latest modern technology with which scientists could make tests the way they do today. But imagine for a moment a CSI Jerusalem, or a CSI Damascus--a forensics team that could analyze the scales which fell from the eyes of Saul when he regained his sight. I would not be surprised to learn that these scales were that of a reptile. More specifically, a snake, a serpent, the same serpent that tempted Eve in the Garden.

For many years Saul had lived as a blind man. Oh he could see his way from one place to another. He could see to read the Scriptures. He could see his way to the doors of the church. But he was blind, for the scales of the devil himself had covered his eyes. When Saul read the Scriptures, he read God's Word as instructions for how he should live. When Saul made his way to church, he listened for Divine commands telling him how to live a godly life, a life by which to please God. And now Saul sees his way to Damascus in order to please God by binding all in that city who are Christians and dragging them back to Jerusalem to stand trial.

Now we might think that Jesus stopped Saul before he reached Damascus because He was protecting His Christians there. And yet these Damascus Christians would be persecuted for their faith even with Saul out of the picture. Jesus wanted Saul. He had chosen Saul to be His instrument to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles. Saul would become one of His apostles--perhaps the greatest of all. Jesus did not choose Ananias in this way, or any other Christian in Jerusalem or Damascus who clearly saw Jesus as the Christ. He wanted Saul. He chose a blind man, a man who was against Him, against His church, a man whose eyes were covered with Satan's scales.

Just as God wanted Saul, so He wanted you. You were chosen by God before He laid this world's foundation. Chosen, not to be an apostle; chosen in Christ to bear the fruits of faith in your life. Now I think it is safe for me to say that none of us have had a "Damascus road experience." We cannot look back to a day in our life when we were blinded by the light of Jesus, fell off our horse, and could not see for three days. But that's okay. We do not need such an experience somewhere in our life.

Even for Saul, this was not the crucial point in his life. Oh, this event stood out for him. It affected him deeply. For three days afterwards he did not eat or drink. He was meditating and he was praying. Everything in his life had been wrong! He had been going in the wrong direction. He had believed he was serving the one true God with all his heart, and soul, and strength, and mind, but he saw now that he had been working against God. He had been believing a lie and serving a lie. His whole life had been going 180 degrees in the wrong direction.

But this experience on the road to Damascus was not Saul's conversion to the Christian Faith. If it was, then we all should pray fervently for such an experience so that we, too, can become Christians. No, Saul rose from his spiritual death the same way Jesus rose from the grave...three days later. God sent Ananias to Saul, he laid his hands on him and spoke to him the words God gave him, Saul regained his sight--the scales of Satan falling from his eyes--and then the most amazing thing took place. It had now been three days since Saul ate or drank. He would have been literally dying of thirst. His stomach would have been angry with pain wanting something to eat. But Saul does not eat or drink. Not yet. The first thing Saul does after rising from his bed, after regaining his sight, is to be baptized! This was Saul's conversion. His baptism. This was the turning point in his life. This is where the Risen Jesus, who had appeared to Saul on the road, forgave him his sins and gave to him a new life--a life now going in the right direction.

What about you? In which direction is your life headed? I can tell you where your life was headed before you were baptized. The same direction as Saul's life. You and I, too, before we were united to Christ in Holy Baptism, were working against God as His enemies. We were spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins. We were blinded from seeing the truth because Satan's scales also covered our eyes. But those scales fell off in your baptism. In baptism you were given new life in Jesus Christ. You were declared forgiven of your sins. You were reconciled to God and given a place in His family.

The turning point in your life was not some spiritual experience you had. It was not your Confirmation Day. It was not a day when you made a decision to be a better Christian, a better follower of Jesus. You and I cannot turn ourselves around. Those who are blinded by Satan and dead in their sins cannot do any kind of turning at all. Your turning point, and mine, is when God, therefore, turned you as He turned Saul in Holy Baptism.

For Saul, Jesus' appearance on the road to Damascus was the accusing Law, not telling him how to live right, but showing him that his life was all wrong. And his baptism into Christ, three days later, was the comforting Gospel where Jesus, who had forgiven him, would now begin leading Saul in the way he should go.

But even the baptized can and do go in the wrong direction. Later, as an apostle, Saul, now Paul, cried, "*The good that I want to do, I do not do, but I do the evil I do not want to do.*" Your baptism into Christ removed the scales of Satan from your eyes. Yet how often don't we close our eyes to the truth of God. We know what God says in His Word, but we close our eyes to it and believe a lie instead. We know God's Word is powerful medicine for our soul. We know it is the antidote against Satan's poison. Yet we close our eyes to this truth and keep God's Word closed within our home and hesitate to study it with the congregation. We know the Lord's Supper is a great gift from Christ to His church. We know how life-changing it is when we poor sinners come up to receive it. Yet we want it not as often as we can have it, but only when it fits in with our time schedule.

God, through our baptism into Christ, is leading us in the way, and the truth, and the life that is only in Jesus. But we become stubborn because we do not like to be led, and we turn away from Jesus to a life of spiritual laziness. We turn away and follow instead the path of temptation.

But let me point you to the mercy of God. The turning point in Saul's life and in yours was when Jesus turned toward you in your baptism, showed you His nail-pierced hands and said, "I died for you. You are forgiven." And because we keep turning away from our Lord, every time you are in His Word, in His House of Grace, at His Table of Mercy, He turns toward you, not in anger, but in love. He turns toward you with pardon and peace in His hands for you.

If Jesus could turn Saul, who was so stubborn against Him, into a vessel of His grace, into an ambitious apostle, into an instrument to carry Christ, then can He not turn you? There is no one who is beyond help, no one for whom there is no hope anymore. We cannot do the turning, but Jesus does.

In our Divine Service it is significant that at the very beginning, after we confess our sin, your pastor turns from the altar toward you and in Jesus' stead forgives your sins. Throughout the service whenever the pastor is turned toward you--in the reading of God's Word and the preaching of His Word--you are to see Jesus turned toward you giving you His rich words of mercy and grace, words which are for you the way, the truth, and the life. And at the conclusion of the service the pastor turns toward you one last time...one last time before you head back home, one last time before you face the trials and tribulations of life...and in turning toward you, Jesus' words of benediction are given to you.

And the very last word you are given from your God--your God who is turned toward you with a face of love, with hands and side pierced for you--His last word to you is "peace." You can go in peace. You can live in peace, for Jesus was, and is, and always will be the turning point in your life. Amen.