

Lent 5, Year C
April 6, 2025

Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old, we hear from the psalmist; forgetting what lies before and straining forward to what lies ahead, says Paul. Those who went out weeping while sowing the seed will return with joy to gather the harvest. Don't look back, but keep moving forward. I am about to do a new thing, says Isaiah; Now it springs forth, do you not see it?

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?

Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?

Something happened to me, but I can't really describe it except that it has changed my life forever. I would guess this – to some degree – is in the vocabulary of experiences of everyone sitting here this morning. For some, it is a “someone” who happened to me; for some it might be an unfortunate accident which created a physical challenge. At the very least, we all understand that difficult-to-describe occurrence which alters forever the lens through which we see.

The Apostle Paul had an experience which forever changed his life, known in the Christian Church as the Conversion of St Paul, as he travelled the road to Damascus on a mission to round up members of the new Jewish cult for arrest. Our second reading this morning from Paul's Letter to the Galatians doesn't describe the actual experience, but the fruits of it: my background is flawless; I am well-educated, a Pharisee and no more religiously observant a person you will find anywhere, born into a most prominent family, zealously fighting to bring down this new brand of Judaism which threatens the very laws given to us by Yahweh, even awarded citizenship by the legal authorities of Rome.

And yet everything Paul has accomplished he counts as nothing. Why? Because of his encounter with the risen Christ.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, 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 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.

I used to wonder why Paul felt he had to justify himself so many times, no fewer than 3 in the Book of Acts and scattered several times in his letters: I wasn't one of the original twelve, I've never seen Jesus face-to-face, but his call to me, his message to me is just as authentic as any of his other followers. I'm beginning to realize his

witnessing in this way was for the rest of us: we – like Paul – were “not there,” and yet Jesus’ call to each one of us is no less authentic than his call to his disciples to leave their lives, their families, their homes to follow him.

Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known?

Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

I wonder why we don’t listen to Jesus’ call: I have a husband, a daughter, a mother, cousins; we gather together for holidays, we play together, we laugh together, we cry together. I don’t want to leave all that. What will my family do without me? I support my family, I work to give them what they need to live. I thought God is supposed to love us and that God wishes good things for us. Why do I have to give all that up to follow something I’m not even sure I believe in? What does God want from me anyway? How about if I write a check every week, sit in the pew, sing the hymns, pray the prayers, say Amen?

Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?

Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?

And what is this Lent thing? Holy Week? Every day I’m supposed to be in church? Maybe not every, but Sunday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday....

I formed you out of the dust. I knew you when you were still in your mother’s womb. My hand will lead you and my right hand hold you fast. I will not leave you comfortless. *Can you not keep watch with me one hour?*

I see us all onstage, living our lives as best we can, trying to keep our heads above water, trying to care for those closest to us, fighting back the tears of our hearts when life’s obstacles get in the way. And I see a figure backstage, waiting for us, calling to us – never demanding, never judging, never favoring one of us over another, not asking us to leave those we love behind but to see them more nearly and love them more dearly. It is Jesus, the risen Christ, prompting and encouraging each one of us to keep going, holding us up in our struggles, never abandoning us, always inviting us, reminding us that the death he suffered was for us and that his rising from death means we need not fear death: that love is the final answer, not death.

Christ, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.

Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.