

**God's Vision of Mercy  
Acts 9:1-20  
Ann Hatfield**

I remember when I switched from texting by pecking with my index finger to texting SO MUCH faster with both thumbs. Talk about a life-changing conversion!!

Conversion means change and transformation. Conversion experiences range from light-hearted to life-saving. Some people recall when they switched computers from a PC to a Mac; or when they realized they actually LIKE eating Brussels sprouts; or found the courage and strength to attend an AA meeting for support.<sup>1</sup>

Saul's conversion experience is radical and life-saving. On the road to Damascus, a sudden, radiant light causes Saul to fall to the ground. He hears a voice ask: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." The people around him are speechless. And when Saul finally gets up, he cannot see. It is a very dramatic event.

Saul's encounter with the risen Lord is a life-saving experience, because of how it changes him. Up until now, Saul has been defined by violence. Breathing threats of murder, he is traveling to Damascus intent on persecuting people who confess Jesus as Messiah. Saul intends to round up followers of the Way, and bring them back to Jerusalem to be imprisoned, tortured, or worse.

BUT the risen Lord shows up. It's as if the love of God grabs Saul's fist in mid punch to stop him and to end his violent ways. The power of God's love and forgiveness rescues Saul from a life of hatred and violence<sup>2</sup>

Some of us may have expected – or even cheered – if God struck Saul down and NEVER allowed him back up. We might wonder if Saul is getting off too easily. After all, he was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." So, let the surprise and wonder of this story grab your attention. Let it stop you in your tracks. Saul's encounter with the risen Christ provides a life-giving message for us: We worship a God of great mercy. During Holy Week and throughout the Eastertide season, we are reminded again and again of this truth. God loves and forgives betrayers, doubters, skeptics, and even God's own enemies – like Saul.<sup>3</sup>

On the road to Damascus, Saul is knocked down, blinded, humbled, and brought low. Perhaps – just possibly – you and I don't want God to get OUR attention in such frightening ways. Even so, hear the good news in this story for us. Saul's rescue from a life of violence is so radical and outrageous that it can only be the work of an extravagantly forgiving God. And if God can forgive Saul, then imagine what God can do for you and for me!

Although biblical scholars call this a conversion story, they also see it as a commissioning or call narrative. While Saul's conversion is an extraordinary event, his story is made worthier of sharing because of what he does afterwards.<sup>4</sup> Saul's career as a zealous persecutor abruptly ends. Saul is no longer the church's enemy number one, he becomes, instead, one of its foremost leaders.

Christian writer Anne Lamott observes, "I do not at all understand the mystery of grace, only that [grace] meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us."<sup>5</sup> Thankfully, the risen Christ meets Saul on the road to Damascus, but does not leave him there. Saul's transformation is not an individual matter. It does not happen in isolation. As the African proverb asserts, "It takes a village to raise a child." It takes others to lead Saul by the hand when he is blind. It takes Ananias responding to Saul as "Brother." God uses people as instruments of grace to transform Saul from persecutor to apostle.

In *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott relates a story about Ken and Ranola, two people from her congregation. Ken is dying of AIDS. Even though his body is thin, weak, and frail, Ken comes to church every week. He is no longer able to stand up for the hymns, but he sings along with his whole heart. One Sunday, Ranola, a large, devout woman in the choir – who never has much time for Ken – is looking at him sideways. It's as if she wouldn't have to see Ken at all, if she doesn't look at him head on. Then, while singing "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," Ranola does something unexpected and surprising. She leaves the choir, goes to Ken's side, bends down, and lifts him up – holding him like a ragdoll. Ranola holds Ken up, as they weep and sing together.<sup>6</sup>

Lamott suggests, sometimes the miracle is not hearing a voice from heaven or scales falling from blinded eyes. Sometimes, the miracle is our willingness to help a fellow human being.

Not many of us will be stopped on the road by a blinding light. Or hear the voice of Jesus calling us by name. BUT we can be transformed in the ways Saul was transformed. We, too – like Saul did – can relinquish any prejudice or hatred we might harbor in our hearts. You and I can realize we are forgiven and loved by a merciful God. We can allow grace to get hold of us – possibly even leading us by the hand like a blind man or scooping us up like ragdolls – to carry us along the road of transformation on our journeys of faith.<sup>7</sup>

The promise of Easter is one of joy, surprise, and wonder. When you and I encounter the risen Lord on the road of life, we too can be changed, transformed, and made new. Our Good News is this: Transformation is not something you and I do; rather, it is a miracle God works in us – and often in spite of us.<sup>8</sup> Thanks be to God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ meets you and me where we are, but DOES NOT leave us there. Friends, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Cathy Caldwell Hoop, *Connections*, “Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World,” p. 220.

<sup>2</sup> Cathy Caldwell Hoop, *Connections*, p. 220.

<sup>3</sup> Cathy Caldwell Hoop, *Connections*, p. 220.

<sup>4</sup> “Saving Saul,” *Christian Century*, April 11, 2001, p.15.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, Pantheon Books, 1999, p. 143.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, pp. 63-66.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Schertz, “Turn in the Road,” *Christian Century*, April 20, 2004, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> William H. Willimon, “Surprised by God,” *Pulpit Resource*, April 18, 201