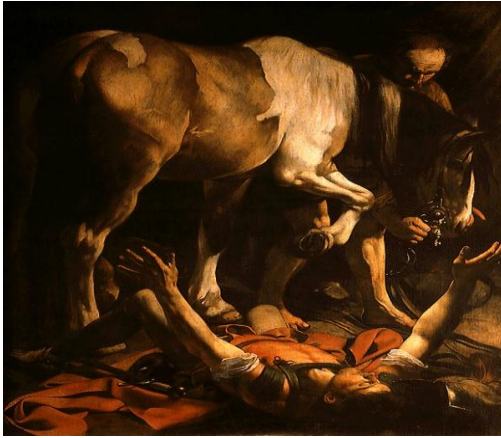


## Chosen Vessels

Third Sunday of Easter; Series C

Acts 9:1-22



Tenebrism is a style of painting common in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries that uses strong, very concentrated contrasts of light and dark. Darkness often becomes the dominating feature in a painting that displays tenebrism. The late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century Italian painter known as Caravaggio is usually credited with the invention of tenebrism and often uses it in his paintings. One of his more well-known tenebristic paintings is *The Conversion of St. Paul on his Way to Damascus (show painting)* (1601). Caravaggio uses the technique to highlight St. Paul's dramatic conversion from his former way of life as a persecutor of Christians to his life as a chosen vessel and proclaimer of Christ.

Caravaggio shows Saul fallen from his horse, blinded, and sprawled out on the ground with his hands lifted helplessly in the air. The zealous persecutor of Christians that we read about in the Book of Acts (7:58; 8:1-3; 9:1) pushes into the foreground of the painting and the viewer's field of vision. Remnants of his way of life as a persecutor lie scattered on the ground. His helmet is removed from his head and his sword is removed from his side. Saul who once rode through the shadowy and murky sections of this painting atop his horse now lies on the ground with the only stream of light on the entire canvas beaming from above and resting upon him.

Saul was on *his own way*, traveling to Damascus to find more belonging to *the Way* so that he might destroy them. Martin Luther once described Saul before his conversion as "a hunting dog that has flushed out the game and now gives furious chase" (Luther, "The Conversion of St. Paul in *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 267). But while he was on *his way* Saul was stopped in his tracks by "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6)—Christ himself.

St. Luke's description of Saul's conversion to St. Paul is written to encourage and console us. For, we behold a wondrous miracle as Christ converts a bitter enemy, one who was willing to wipe out the whole Christian Church. Yet, God even has a purpose for this former enemy of Christ. Even he can be put into service as a chosen vessel for the purpose of the Gospel. St. Luke's account is useful for us not only because it tells of the exceptional conversion of St. Paul but also because it *shows how God converts all of his Christians* and uses each of us as *chosen vessels for service to Christ and the Gospel*.

Similar to Saul, you and I have a former way of life in which we were once separated from God. We are not born trusting in God as our Heavenly Father. As the Psalmist David writes, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps 51:5). We, like Saul, were enemies of God in our former way of life. For some of us this former way of life lasted only a short while until we were brought to the font of Holy Baptism, washed and cleansed with the water and the Word and marked with the promise of God to be his very own. You were then brought up in the Christian faith. The Holy Scriptures were placed into your hands. The seed of faith planted in your Baptism was then nourished by

the regular hearing of the good news of your salvation and the reception of Jesus' forgiveness, life, and salvation in the Lord's Supper.

Others may remember that former life all too vividly. Perhaps you heard the message of the Gospel and were brought to the waters of Holy Baptism later in life. But you also have experienced in a dynamic way the power of the Gospel to change one's life. You know, like Paul, what it is like to be headed *one way* and then to be redirected to "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (Jn 14:6).

St. Luke tells us that Jesus appeared twice to two different men in this conversion account of Saul to St. Paul. He not only appeared to Saul but he also appeared to Ananias, a disciple at Damascus (Acts 9:10). Through Ananias, the Lord converted Saul. Ananias was used as a chosen vessel to convert Saul, another one of his chosen vessels.

It is easy to get sidetracked by the grandiose nature of Saul's conversion. It is easy to lift up Saul's experience as a model. It is easy to assume that the proper conversion experience must be dramatic and emotional. We are captivated by the intense stories of drug dealers, gang members, and convicted felons who are transformed by the free gift of God's grace and the forgiveness of Sin in Christ. We listen to these stories and secretly many of us are envious and wish we had our own jaw dropping conversion testimony to tell.

In certain Christian traditions an emotional experience or a sincere decision is what individual Christians are pointed to for certainty of their salvation. In such traditions much emphasis is placed on the converted person having an emotional experience with Christ. Similar to Saul's vision of Jesus, the person is supposed to feel the power of God and his presence and place his comfort and consolation as a Christian in that experience. Also, in certain Christian traditions, there is great emphasis placed on a decision that a person must make in order to follow Christ. The critical question then is whether or not that person can verbally confess Jesus Christ as Lord. Certainly, we should not doubt someone's experience. Without a doubt the message of the Gospel can stir emotions and often results in bold, declarative confessions of faith. Yet, that is not how the Lord made a disciple of Saul and converted him to St. Paul. The power and effectiveness of Saul's conversion did not rest in his experience of Jesus on the road to Damascus. The Lord used that experience to get Saul to reconsider his way of life and evaluate what he thought was truth. But that was not where God transformed Saul the persecutor to St. Paul the proclaimer. Jesus did not have Saul looking to himself for the certainty of his conversion. He did not have Saul trusting in his own emotions or his own sincere decision. Rather, God led Saul to cling to something outside of himself. He led him to the Word and to Holy Baptism. That is where the power of God is hidden.

The Lord used Ananias to bring the Gospel to Saul. Ananias laid his hands on Saul and preached to him so that he might receive the Holy Spirit. He then immediately baptized him. God used Ananias to give Saul his Baptism and his Gospel, his Word and his Spirit. And then we read that Saul went across the ancient world as the Lord's chosen instrument to proclaim Jesus as the Christ.

God has recreated each and every one of you as his chosen instruments through the same Baptism and the same Gospel, with the same Word and Spirit. You each have your own unique backgrounds and experiences. You all have different paths that led you to Christ. But in order to become God's very own beloved child with the certainty and

assurance of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation with God, you all had to travel to the same Christ, hear the same Gospel message, and experience the same Baptism. That is where the power of God rests. God takes you with all of your history, your colored background, and your past experiences. Through his Gospel you hear of the one who paid the price of death to forgive even you. Through the experience of your Holy Baptism your past mistakes and failures, your unloving words and actions, are washed away—forgiven and forgotten. You are connected to this Christ who died and rose to new life for you. And so you rise from those holy waters renewed and restored. The old self and the old life are gone and the new life in Christ lies ahead. Out of the shadows you emerge with the light of Christ shining upon you. As a chosen vessel you have been refashioned. So rise and go about your daily vocations in the Lord's peace. He has forgiven you. He has baptized you. Now he puts you into service. Amen.