

SERMON
EASTER III
APRIL 14, 2013
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RECTOR
ALL HALLOWS PARISH, SOUTH RIVER
DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our lesson from the Acts of the Apostles today, we have a snapshot of the conversion of St. Paul, when he mystically encountered the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus where he would persecute Christians. The verses immediately following this incident go like this:

"The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank."

Then God sent a disciple named Ananias of Damascus to restore sight to Paul.

"[Ananias] laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength."

So, the impairment of the physical vision is likened to the impairment of his spiritual vision when he persecuted the church. As he himself recalled recall later in the Letter to the Philippians that he was a persecutor of the Church of Christ. And the restoration of his eyesight coincided with the sloughing off of his leaven of malice. As the famous hymn, Amazing Grace goes, "I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see." How aptly does that describe the conversion of St. Paul!

To know the Risen Lord means the reformation of our lives. So it is the case of St. Paul on the road to Damascus. Knowing the Risen Christ turned Paul's world upside down. He had been a hater of the church. Now he was a lover of the church. He had been a persecutor of Christians. Now he was a disciple of Christ. Now he was a fisher of people. Many thought that he had gone crazy. In fact, the Christians were still scared of him initially, because his reputation was far-reaching.

Although we are not given a description of Paul's state of mind at the time of his conversion, we can safely say that his conversion must have transposed him into a

state of eternal joy - a type of joy that assisted him in resisting evil and temptations, a state of joy that helped him sing and praise God while bound in chains in prison. We have certainly heard of accounts of the joyful conversion stories of countless followers of Christ through the ages. That still happens today. Many of our parishioners have shared the joys they have experienced in their faith.

And I recall how, during a special visit by area clergy to learn about the Jennifer Road Detention Center, the chaplains on staff told us stories about the conversions of the inmates who found forgiveness and joys in the study of the Bible. And though neither we here in the church today nor those who found Christ in prison can claim to have been made perfect by the experience, we have been given a new vision. And that new vision is a foretaste of heaven and eternal joys.

No, they have not been made perfect. None of us are. But by faith, some of them have become given a new vision - a foretaste of heaven and eternal joys.

The Collect for All Saints proclaims our belief in these happy things:

O ALMIGHTY God, who hast knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of thy Son Christ our Lord: Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys, which thou hast prepared for them that unfeignedly love thee...

My friends, do you want to experience those unspeakable joys? If we do, we need to acquire the vision to see the Risen Lord. We need to grow into the full stature of Christ.

For these unspeakable joys are the gifts for a converted souls, for hearts and minds that are turned toward God in Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, in the baptism liturgy, the parents and godparents vow to help the child they present will grow into the full stature of Christ. For anyone to grow into the full stature of Christ, we must stretch beyond our comfort zone. Jesus said, "if any want to follow me, let them pick up the cross and follow me." Growth in Christ requires some pain. Yet, this is the road that will lead us to unspeakable joys and bliss.

Growing in Christ means individual spiritual discernment and purification. Growing in Christ also means envisioning a future that God will take us to as a church. Vision is the parish-wide version of our individual spiritual discipline.

Father Frank Dunn, a consultant who worked with our Vestry, stated in his mutual ministry report: 'Vision, however, is only as good as it carries a parish beyond where it is. A vision that would essentially only extend its present reality is not truly a vision. It is rather the resistance of a vision. It would be better for a parish to spend a year or two talking in various venues about what it wants to be and to become than to put together a "to do" list of course corrections (or less) and let it pass for a "vision statement."'

Father Dunn's words challenge us and invite us to compare our stories with the story of St. Paul. God helped Paul change the course of his life. God induced a new vision for him. His change was 180 degrees. His change could be called a "metamorphosis" through and through.

My friends, what will All Hallows' look like as we grow into the full stature of Christ? What will All Hallows' look like when we experience the joys of seeing the Risen Lord like the St. Paul, like the disciples? What will our congregation look like? What will our facilities look like? What will our services and programs look like?

And let us remember, the power of God working in us and through us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

Think big.

Cast your vision on our common future.

Amen.