

Acts:

A Life of Witness

Week Seven: Acts 9: 1-31 *The Witness of TRANSFORMATION*

Opening Question: Have you ever had to face a fear that ended up not being as horrible as you thought it would? Or, do you have any funny/interesting/irrational fears now?

CONTEXT

A quick look back: Over the past weeks we have learned that we can bear witness in our everyday lives through shalom, proclamation, engaging conflict, and suffering. What has stuck with you from these weeks? Which do you find easiest? Hardest? How is it that we are even equipped to be witnesses, and why does that matter?

Today's Passage: Last week, we met a man named Saul who was part of Stephen's persecution and death. Today, we witness the dramatic transformation of his life. Saul was a young, well-educated, highly-esteemed Jewish leader who had a deep love for the tradition of his ancestors. Saul was not just some evil villain- he was genuinely convinced that this new group of Jesus followers- called The Way- threatened everything that was true. He believed that the people of God were supposed to stay separate from the world. To show their devotion by continuing the traditions and rituals given to them in the Law. So the fact that Jesus' mission reached into the Gentile, non-Jewish, pagan world made Saul fear that Judaism would just be swallowed up by the culture around it. He is, in essence, blinded by his own surety. But Jesus will use his blindness to change the course of his life forever. And in a twist that only God could write, the very inclusion that Paul most feared becomes the center of his life, as he is changed from Saul to Paul- the great missionary to the Gentile world.

CONTENT

Read 9: 1-31 out loud and then pick ONE of the following ways (Option A, B, or C) to help your group engage with this passage.

Option A. Notice/Wonder: Ask everyone to read the passage again quietly on their own. As they read, ask them to make a list like the one below. Remember that what people notice or wonder can just be small, simple things.

What do I NOTICE about this text? What do I WONDER about?

Once everyone has had the chance to make their list, come together as a group to share and discuss your observations, writing them in a place where everyone can see the list as it develops.

Option B. Creative Engagement: Give everyone paper and drawing supplies. Have everyone read the passage again on their own, then invite them to spend some time illustrating the passage (or a part of the passage) in whatever way they want- concrete, abstract, colors, images, lists, words. When everyone has completed their art, come together to share and discuss what you drew and why.

Option C. Guided Bible Study Questions:

1. What role (if any) does Saul play in his transformation? Talk about this observation.
2. Saul's conversion is as much about those around him as it is about him. Look through the story and name all the people who end up being witnesses to his encounter with Christ and transformation. What do you learn about the witness of transformation?

3. Ananias is called to do an incredibly hard thing- walk right into the presence of his most feared enemy. Look at the details of that interaction in vs 17-19. What does Ananias call Saul? How does he interact with him? What does this tell you about Ananias? About his relationship with God?
4. What is promised to Saul in vs 17 that repeats a pattern in Acts related to witness?
5. What role does Barnabas play when Saul arrives in Jerusalem?
6. How does vs 31 connect with the theme of Acts as articulated in 1:8?

APPLICATION

How does all of this connect to our lives? Here are some questions to help guide your discussion. Choose one or several.

- Ananias plays a vital role in Saul's story, but after this passage, we never hear of him again. By all accounts, he was a very regular person who had enough relationship with God that when God spoke, he knew His voice and trusted it. Even when the command seemed absurd. Have you ever had a time when you sensed with some clarity that God was asking or leading you to do something particular, perhaps in a way that felt totally surprising or absurd?
- Barnabas plays a key role in integrating Saul with church leaders in Jerusalem. He seems to see something true and right and beautiful in Saul that the others cannot see. Perhaps most importantly, he believes the truth of Saul's transformation. Is there anyone in your life who is particularly good at seeing and naming the true and right and beautiful things in you? Who perhaps even helps you see things about yourself that are hard for you to see?
- Many of us have times in our lives where we feel too far from God, too unfaithful, too disinterested, too rebellious to even imagine that God would want anything to do with us. Look carefully at this story, at Saul, at the person of Jesus. What does it tell you about the things you have told yourself about who you are and who God is?
- As soon as Saul is converted, he begins to preach. All those years Saul spent as a Pharisee- studying and devoting himself to God's story- are now being used in a way he could have never imagined. Have you ever been able to use something from your past- perhaps even something you wish hadn't happened- to help those around you or bear witness to God's work in your life?

PRAYER

Close your time together in prayer using one of the ideas below

- Use words/images/themes from the passage to guide your prayer.
- Raise up your "wonderings" from the notice/wonder section to God in prayer
- Take prayer requests and pray over each other as a group or in small groups
- Use this written prayer adapted from www.tmumc.org/prayer:

God, we pray for transformation in our lives.

Help us to grow and change in ways that reflect your love and grace.

Guide us to let go of old habits and patterns that no longer serve us, and to embrace new ways of being that align with your will.

Help us to see the potential for transformation in every situation, knowing that you can bring good out of even the most difficult circumstances.

*May our lives be testimonies of your transformative power, only and always pointing to you. We pray this in the name of Christ,
Amen.*