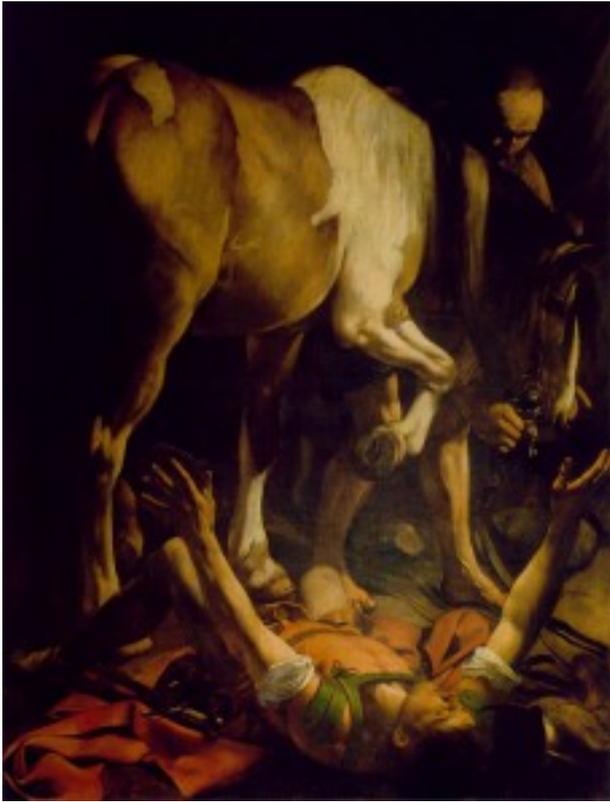


Encounter, Illumination, and Conversion: On the Road to Damascus



Oscar Wilde once wrote, “Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.” The pithiness of the statement doesn’t belie its essential truth, and we see this readily in the story of St. Paul, or Saul, as he was known prior to his conversion. The Acts of the Apostles tell us that Saul avidly persecuted the first Christians, that he was not only present for the martyrdom of St. Stephen, but that “Saul was consenting to his execution” (Acts 8:1). At this point in the story, we would do well to pause and pretend that we don’t already know what happens next. That way, the intervening grace of God will take us by complete and utter surprise all the more.

Saul was party to an execution; he was, for all intents and purposes, an accessory to murder (assuming he didn’t actually assist in the deed itself). And he was hell-bent on continuing his war on the



followers of Jesus in the city of Damascus, as we continue reading in Acts: “Now Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, that, if he should find any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them back to Jerusalem in chains” (Acts 9:1-2). We know how the story continues from there: en route to Damascus, a blinding flash of light knocks Saul from his horse, and a voice from the sky says, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4b). The voice identifies himself as Jesus, and instructs Saul to continue to the city, where he is to be met by a disciple named Ananias.

In one of the most dramatic accounts of the New Testament, Saul encounters the Risen Christ – not in physical form as the Apostles did after the Resurrection, but as a voice resounding from the midst of a blinding light. Since he had taken it upon himself to persecute Jesus’ followers, Saul no doubt had



heard of Him; perhaps he had even heard Him preach in the synagogue in Jerusalem. Yet, until that very moment, Saul’s heart had been hardened to the possibility that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, to the point where he was ready to kill in order to prevent the spread of the Good News. This is hardly the kind of man we would imagine God to want on His team, and hardly the kind of man we would imagine capable of playing for that team. However, “nothing is impossible for God” (cf Lk

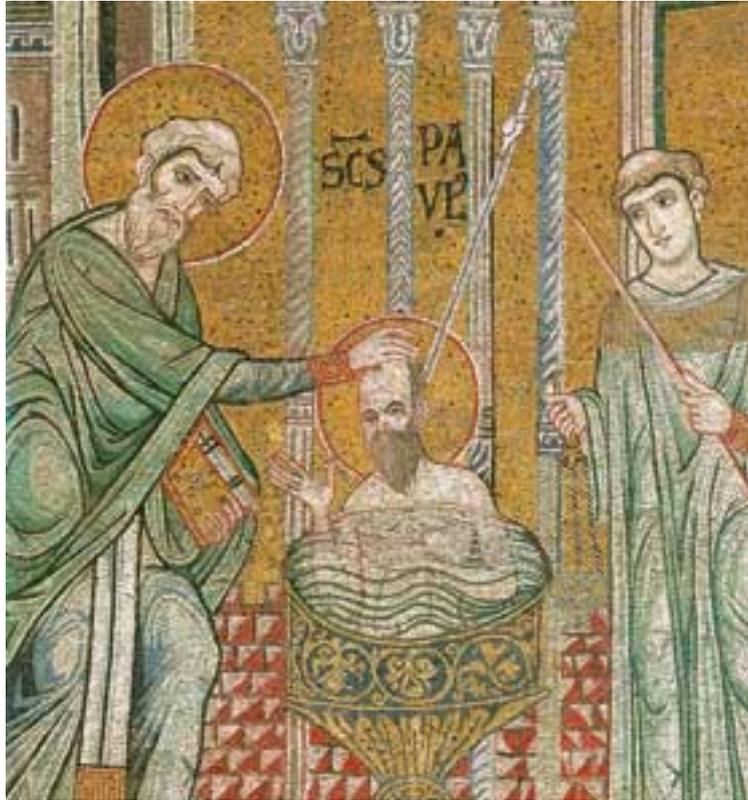
1:37), and the light of grace pierces through what seemed to be an impenetrable darkness surrounding Saul's heart. Physically, Saul enters into the darkness as he is struck blind; spiritually, the illumination of his soul has just begun.

Following the encounter on the road, Scripture says that “for three days [Saul] was unable to see, and he neither ate nor drank” (Acts 9:9). I imagine this time as a period of ascetic penance: Saul demonstrated remorse for the sins he had committed against the followers of Jesus and contemplated how his life would have to change in light of what had happened on the road to Damascus. In his hunger, thirst, and blindness, Saul longed for fulfillment and enlightenment, and slowly came to the realization that they could only come through Christ.



Indeed, it is only after Saul has been stricken blind that he is able to see clearly for the first time. The resounding voice of Jesus on the road serves as a death knell to his former way of life, and the three days he spent in darkness parallel the three days Christ Himself spent in the darkness of the tomb. After three days, Ananias heals Saul of his physical blindness and he emerges from this experience an entirely changed man, one who has been made new in the light of Jesus the Messiah. The scales falling from Saul's eyes symbolize a sloughing off of a former way of life, a casting away of the blindness that kept him from seeing the truth: that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, the One who saves the human race from sin and death. Indeed, he is so far removed from his former way of life that he is no longer known as Saul but as Paul; even his name has been made new in the light of his identity as a follower of Jesus. The light of Christ shatters the darkness of Saul's soul and grants to him a new vision, one that will impel him to spend the rest of his life (and beyond) leading others to Jesus.

Another pause in our story so that we may contemplate the person of Ananias. He had heard of Saul, of the horrible things he had done to the disciples of Jesus, and of the fact that he was at that moment on his way to Damascus to continue wreaking havoc. For Ananias, seeking out this man's company undoubtedly would have resulted in imprisonment or worse. If I had been in his sandals, I would have kept a low profile in Damascus until Hurricane Saul moved on. But such is not the will of God for Ananias. God calls to Ananias, who shows fidelity in his discipleship by responding immediately... until he hears what it is that God actually wants him to do. God wants Ananias to lay his hands on Saul



so that he may regain his sight.

Perhaps Ananias felt that Saul had gotten what he deserved, and that his reign of terror over the Christian people might finally be at its end. Surely he must have thought it a key strategic error to heal the man who had been causing such harm, and he expresses his concerns to God. Nevertheless, God insists, saying, "This man is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites, and I will show him what he will have to suffer for my name" (Acts 9:15b). Again, if I were Ananias and had heard all of that, I still would have been tempted to say, "Really? Him?" Fortunately for Saul, and fortunately for us, Ananias displayed more trust in God, and although he still might have been afraid for his life, he accepted God's will and sought Saul out, healing him of his blindness and initiating him into the Christian faith through baptism. Without the cooperative faith of Ananias, Paul might have remained in the darkness; he might have remained Saul. Ananias, too, underwent a conversion – a turning away from his previous assumption of how God works and an embracing of a new vision, a new understanding that God's ways are not our ways. As Paul would later attest in his first letter to the Corinthians, "God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God" (1 Cor 1:27-9).

In celebrating the conversion of St. Paul, we might be tempted to wish for a blinding flash of light that would knock us to the ground and eliminate our desires for those things in our lives that lead us from Jesus. I know that I've certainly wished for the clarity Paul seemed to have in the immediate wake of his encounter with Christ. However, it's important to remember that Paul's conversion was no one-time-only event; it continued for the rest of his life. As we see from his writings, Paul continued to struggle with temptation, fatigue, frustration, and persecution; yet he continued to turn his face toward Christ, continued to say "yes" to the will of God and "no" to that which clouded his vision, and in so doing, he fulfilled the command of Christ to "proclaim the Gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15), and forever changed the course of human history.

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