

Sermon 2 Lent Year A
 February 16, 2008
 St. John's Episcopal Church
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Spiritual Conversion

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took Sarai and his brother's son, Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered . . . and they set forth to go the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Schechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to hm. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and invoked the name of the LORD. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb. Genesis 12:1-9.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

John 3:1-4

My topic this morning is spiritual conversion, prompted by the two biblical stories of conversion that we've just heard: Abram's decision to obey a call to leave his country and go to a new land, and Nicomedus seeking Jesus by night to ask the questions of his heart. These are important stories for us: Abram's encounter with God marked the beginning of a new spiritual era that Jews, Christians, and Muslims all claim as their own. Jesus' words to Nicodemus are among the most quoted in the New Testament: "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

When I find myself pondering the spiritual meaning of a word, I generally consult a dictionary, to see how the same word is used in other contexts. The word "conversion" has many secular meanings: in mathematics, conversion refers to a change in the form of a quantity, unit, or expression without a change in value. There is similar meaning in finance, where a conversion is an exchange of one kind or class of security for another, or an exchange in currency for an equivalent amount in another. Conversion in law refers to an unlawful appropriation or use of another person's property, resulting in a loss of ownership rights. Conversion in psychiatry refers to an internal mechanism by which emotional conflict takes expression in some kind of physical disability or ailment—conversion hysteria is what Freud called it. In football, conversion refers to the additional one or two points a team can score after a touchdown.

According to Webster's, a religious conversion occurs when a person chooses to adopt the beliefs and take on the practices of a particular religion, making a change either

from a previous position of no faith at all or switching from one faith tradition to another. This is the most broadly-accepted, popularized definition of spiritual conversion. You're living your life in one way, according to a certain set of assumptions, and then something happens, something beyond your ability to fully understand or explain, and you change course. Part of the change involves taking on an allegiance to God according to a particular faith.

Abram's decision to pick up and leave his homeland was a conversion in the classic sense. He didn't know the God who called him, but he followed the call anyway, on a long journey of struggle and promise. In Christianity, the classic conversion story belongs to the Apostle Paul. Paul was an intensely faithful Jew and persecutor of the earliest disciples of Jesus until on the road to Damascus—where he was headed to route out the Christians there—a light from heaven blinded him. He heard a voice speak, "Why do you persecute me?" It was the voice of Jesus. After that encounter he changed from a persecutor of Christians to a follower of Christ, ultimately becoming Christianity's most influential leader in the years after the resurrection.

I've been reading a twenty-first century conversion story this week, entitled, *Take This Bread*, by the journalist Sara Miles. Miles was an atheist, raised by parents who hated everything about their own Christian upbringings and who taught their children to embrace everything good about the world and to steer clear of all religion. Miles went on to become a chef, a war correspondent, a writer, and a single mom, happily partnered with a loving woman after a series of relationships with both women and men.

She begins her book this way:

One early, cloudy morning when I was forty-six, I walked into a church, ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine. A routine Sunday activity for tens of millions of Americans—except until that moment I'd led a thoroughly secular life, at best indifferent to religion, more often appalled by its fundamentalist crusades. This was my first communion . . . It led me against all my expectations to a faith I'd scorned and work I'd never imagined. In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realized that what I'd been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people."¹

There's a lot more to Miles's story of conversion, in both the events leading up to and flowing out of that moment, but the experience she describes is what a conversion experience can be like—a moment of startling awareness leading to a change. Miles became, to her family's confusion, her atheist friends' outrage, and her own embarrassment, a Christian. Hers is a story, she writes, of "an unexpected and terribly inconvenient Christian conversion, told by a very unlikely convert."² Yet in another way, conversion can also confirm for you the path that you're on. As Miles put it, *I realized in that moment that what I'd been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do.*

¹ Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), xiii.

² *Ibid.*, xiv.

I suggest to you that the most important thing to know about spiritual conversion isn't the drama of change that some people experience as the result of it, and certainly not any subsequent change in religious affiliation. That's the most obvious outcome of a spiritual conversion and the most talked about, for better or worse. But as with most things spiritual, there isn't a single path when it comes to conversion. For conversion is, at the deepest level, a change of heart. "Conversion," writes Emilie Griffin, an author whose book on conversion I have come back to again and again, "is not a matter of changing religions, but of a change in oneself."³

Spiritual conversion begins with awareness, either sudden or gradual, that God is real. How we become aware of varies greatly, as does the ways in which God's reality impresses us. The beginning of conversion, nonetheless, is an awareness of God's reality, and not in abstract way, but rather one that affects us personally. Thus awareness gives way to encounter—an experience of God. It needn't be one of visions or voices, although some experience God that way. It needn't be dramatic, although it can be. It doesn't necessarily prompt sudden, dramatic changes in the manner a person lives, although some do change their lives as a result of encountering God. "Conversion," writes Griffin, "is simply a matter of becoming open to God's overflowing and powerful love . . . and in response, to turn over one's life and energies to God."⁴

It sounds simple enough, yet experiencing God rarely comes simply to human beings. To some it does, and for those fortunate people, conversion is not their experience. For conversion usually follows some manner of struggle. For those of us who struggle, with the questions, sorrows, contradictions of this world and our lives in it, experiencing God's love is one of the things we struggle with most. How can it be? How does it work? Why does it matter? What do we have to do? Why us and not others who need it more? The questions are endless, each one important.

We have no choice but to live through our struggles and to ask all our questions. For it is there where the love of God will meet us, not necessarily with answers that satisfy, but with an undeniable presence. When God, at last, breaks through—however we experience God—our questions no longer have the power to keep us at arm's length. God has broken through, and what matters now is our response.

I'll leave the question of our response for another day. For today I'd simply like to dispel the notion that conversions only happen to people who aren't Episcopalians, that they only happen once in a lifetime, and that they always involve some visibly dramatic change in religious practice that most of us would find unappealing. For most people, most of the time, conversion is a gradual, life-long process of becoming one's true self and of knowing God more deeply. It's a long journey, often ambiguous, with, nonetheless, a few clear markers along the way.

Let me suggest two ways that you might experience God breaking through to you, or at least describe the contexts for such an encounter. In keeping with the theme of Sunday Forum today—"How have I struggled?"—and in faithfulness to our biblical texts, the contexts I speak of are marked by struggle, as well as the promise of a new life.

First: whenever you experience yourself on a journey of any kind, and in particular a journey you would never have chosen for yourself or that takes you well beyond your realms of comfort or competency, pay attention. God is particularly close to

³ Emilie Griffen, *Turning: Reflections on the Experience of Conversion* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16

us when we're on a path toward unknown destination. That is why the spiritual practice of taking a pilgrimage, or of traveling to an unfamiliar place or a different culture is so important for Christians. We hear God differently when we're out of our element.

Sometimes it feels as God is the one calling out on this journey, as God called Abram, or as the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. Other times it doesn't seem as if God had any part at all, but there you are, in the wilderness, in the doctor's office, out of work, falling in love or out of love, or wherever on life's journey you find yourself in a dark wood, the right road lost. Pay attention, for even if God isn't the one who propelled the journey, rest assured that God will meet you on it, and in the meeting you will be changed.

On the journey, there will be periods of confusion and disappointment, as well as the excitement, if not terror, of what awaits you on the path. Sometimes we start out hopeful, only to be discouraged on the road. Other times we start off in panic and find ourselves comforted and strengthened along the way. Then there is the element of time. You can't rush a journey like this—you can try, but it doesn't get you very far. That's why I find the last passage from this morning's text from Genesis so reassuring: "And Abram journeyed on *by stages* toward the Negeb." His journey took a long time, and he traveled by stages. As he went, he sensed that something in him was changing, and that something had something to do with God. Only in retrospect could he fully understand what the journey meant.

The second place to look for God, or to be open to a new awareness of God, is in any part of your life that is falling away. "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above," Jesus tell Nicodemus. It is one of many passages in the New Testament that alludes to a process of spiritual rebirth that is at the heart of Christianity. Like physical birth, spiritual rebirth is painful. For it is always preceded by some form of letting go, surrender, and even death.

Sometimes it feels as if God is the one responsible for whatever it is that is dying in or around us. Sometimes the death on its own, or through our actions. Sometimes it is a falling away that we welcome; other times it is one we deeply grieve. It doesn't matter. Whenever we find ourselves living through what feels like dying, God is there. God is there, getting us through the pain of loss and as the midwife of the new life that awaits us on the other side. And when we know that—even for a moment—that God is with us, not abstractly, but in ways we can count on, then we know that we're going to get through whatever it is we're going through, for the sake of a new life. And if we don't know that, then someone else around us does, and that person will be our lifeline.

These are but two places in which our awareness of God is heightened and our capacity to respond enhanced by the circumstances we face—a journey, or a death. They might result in some significant change on the surface of things: we might pick up and move, or begin a new endeavor, or end one, or change churches, or jobs or something else equally dramatic. Or they might, as Sara Miles said, confirm the life we are already living, and elevate it, in the way that we now own it, not only for ourselves but in faithfulness to God.

I want to say that it isn't necessary, a prerequisite of the Christian life, to experience conversion. But nor is it something to shy away from, as if being open to God and turning one's life in response to God were something that only happens to other people, not to you and me.

As you look back on your life, and listen to your life, as we're all trying to do this Lent, you might remember certain moments that were pivotal for you, turning moments, that helped you become the person you are now. God was with you then. And if you're going through a time of struggle now, on a journey not of your own choosing toward a destination you cannot yet see, or as part of your is falling away or being taken from you, remember that these are the places where God is most present, guiding you toward the fullness of life that you long for and that is God's longing for you, too.