

Sermon Title: "I Woke Up Like This"

Guest Preacher: Rev. Dr. Lester McCorn

Biblical Passage: Acts 9:17-19

Passage Background and Summary

17 So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul[a] 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." 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

~ Acts 9:17-19

Prior to this passage, Saul is on his way to Damascus. He has been persecuting Christians, and he knows that many go to Damascus for refuge. On his way to Damascus, Saul encounters Jesus and is blinded for three days. At the end of that time, Ananias is sent to minister to Saul by God. This passage depicts what happens in that encounter. Afterward, Saul becomes Paul. The man who once persecuted Christians is now a disciple of Christ.

Sermon Points

Today we are living in a world of dynamic change where traditions are regularly being challenged. Rev. Dr. McCorn describes it as "perhaps one of the most important social and political revolutions since the 1960s during the apex of the Civil Rights Movement and the dawn of the Women's Liberation movement." Our modern-day activists are confronting racism, sexism, sexual abuse, and other injustices. In some ways, we have come full circle as the activists today continue the struggles for freedom and liberation of the past. Additionally, in the church, those who once pushed and challenged tradition have become keepers of tradition. They hold near and dear to the things of the past, similar to the resistance present to the struggle for equal rights and citizenship by Black people in the Civil Rights Movement. We want to keep communion on first Sunday. We want to maintain the schedule for the choirs. We may not know why the tradition exists, but we work to keep it. Yet, some traditions in the Christian church at-large need to be challenged. There are groups who embrace hatred of people based on race, class, gender and sexual orientation that goes against the message of the gospel. The only way to change tradition is to truly experience conversions, morally, spiritually, and ethically and the same could be same for the nation socially and politically.

To return to the Biblical text, we find Saul on the cusp of conversion. He was of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin. He was a fierce protector of tradition. So much so that he supervised the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, because Stephen and his kind represented a threat to the establishment. These Jesus followers were challenging tradition in a way that threatened the religious and political powers of the Roman Empire, and the establishment decided that they had to be stopped at all costs. Thus, Saul was on his way to find the Christians who had fled as refugees to Damascus to put an end to it. On the road to Damascus, God confronts Saul, and he is blind for three days. God sends Ananias to minister to him. While resistant at first, Ananias goes. Saul's heart, spirit, and mind had to be changed. Saul was converted, and he became Paul when he "woke up like this."

To wake up like this, we need:

- 1) **A Conscious Mind:** Ananias called him Brother Saul. Even our worst enemies are our brothers and sisters. We have been a reconciling and forgiving people. This represents a consciousness of who they are. They aren't enemies or threats. Ananias raises his consciousness by helping him to see that God had enough grace to send him help. God would use his Jewish sensibility to bring the gospel to the Jews and Gentiles. There are some who are awake but not woke. Being woke reminds us what the gospel is about: being there for the oppressed and downtrodden.
- 2) **A Conscientious Spirit:** Ananias said "Jesus...has sent me so that you may... be filled with the Spirit." There is a difference in being conscious and having a conscience. Those who are conscientious seek to do their assignment right, well, and thoroughly. Saul would need the Holy Spirit to do that. The word of God says "immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again." Thus, Saul received a conscientious Spirit.
- 3) **A Confident Heart:** We can have a confident (not boastful, bragging, or self-righteous) heart about the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Saul probably wondered if he'd have the same zeal. Sometimes when you join the church, people say that you get soft. Yes, we are humble, but we're not soft when it comes to the gospel. God called Saul because he needed that spirit; he needed that zeal. It had been three long days while he reflected. As a sign God had empowered Saul, he got up after three hours. Ananias baptized him with water, and God baptized him with the Holy Ghost. He had a zeal that would lead him into the same persecution he once perpetrated on others.

When you're woke, you know this mess is just a phase because trouble don't last always. You know that there is no progress without a struggle and God will send a messenger to help. We can trust that weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning. We have a reason to hope.

Reflection Questions

1. What are some church traditions you find yourself holding onto at Ebenezer or in the Christian church more broadly? Do you know the story behind these traditions?
2. In your experience, what are some of the church traditions that have been challenged? What has been the response?
3. Do you have a conversion story? If so, would you be willing to share about it?
4. Do you have a conscious mind? Are you willing to interact with those you may not agree with?
5. In your own words, what does it mean to have a conscientious Spirit? What does that look like in practice?
6. Given the social and political context of today, what might it look like to live with a confident heart? How can your zeal empower you to act in the face of injustice?