

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on April 18, 2010 (Easter 3, Year C)*

The boxer Cassius Clay became Muhammad Ali; the singer Cat Stevens became Yusuf Islam – though he actually started out as Steven Georgiou; wide receiver Chad Johnson became Chad Ocho Cinco, legally changing his name to his uniform number in Spanish; and Arnold Dorsey, for reasons I cannot comprehend, became Engelbert Humperdinck. This morning we hear the dramatic conversion of how Saul became Paul; how a vigilant persecutor of Christians became the single greatest Christian missionary.

Saul, quite literally, sees the light. And his heart turns from “breathing threats and murder against the disciples” to joining them in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. A conversion so profound and so complete that it makes the theatrics along the Road to Damascus – the light, the vision of Jesus – almost pale in comparison. Almost.

Now, the concept of a name change is an ancient practice. It’s still prevalent in Islam where taking on a new name, like Muhammad Ali, is symbolic of being beholden only to God. And in the Christian tradition monks and nuns will sometimes take on new names when they take their final vows. Which is why there are boatloads of nuns named Sister Mary Margaret.

And Paul isn’t the only one to have his named changed in Scripture. Abram became Abraham; Sarai became Sarah, Jacob became Israel, Simon became Peter. And while it’s hard to know precisely why God changes some names and not others, all of these examples have to do with a change in call, a change in outlook, a change in mission. Abraham means “father of multitudes;” Sarah means “mother of nations” – and it was from these two that God kept his promise to make their descendents more numerous than the stars of the sky. After wrestling with an angel, God changes Jacob’s name to Israel as a sign of blessing, the name meaning something along the lines of “one who engages with God.” And Peter means “rock,” as Jesus proclaimed that it would be upon this rock that he would build his church. In other words, a major change in identity has taken place in the lives of all of these people. And no one had a greater change in outlook and identity than the man born Saul of Tarsus.

Some of you may remember your own conversion to Christianity. Perhaps there was a single defining moment that, like Paul, you can point back to. Maybe it was a dramatic, Road to Damascus-like experience. But if you’re like me you don’t remember the precise moment you became a Christian because what makes a person a Christian is the sacrament of baptism. And I was baptized as an infant at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in Milwaukee (or M’waukee as us natives pronounce it; okay I only lived there for the first year of my life so I don’t exactly qualify as a true Midwesterner). But oddly enough I was baptized in the very same church where our Interim Rector, Peter Wenner, later served as rector. The Episcopal Church is a small world. Did

I mention I also went to the same school in Baltimore as our former rector Robert Edson? We didn't overlap, however.

After baptism we then spend our entire lives living into the baptismal promises that we either made or that were made on our behalf. That doesn't mean that there aren't dramatic moments when we feel especially connected to God but the life of faith is often something that we are simply living into. No bright lights, no voices from heaven, no visions of Jesus. Just a slow walk up the Road to Damascus that is our individual spiritual journey. It's often uneventful and sometimes inspiring; it can be lonely, especially in those moments when we don't feel the presence of Christ even though he is surely with us; it can be joyous; it can be crowded, as we become aware of our fellow companions on the way. But no two spiritual journeys are alike – you have a unique relationship with God, different from anyone else's. We share much of the journey with one another, with family members, with friends, with spiritual mentors, with the various communities of faith in which we've worshiped. But your road, your path, is uniquely yours.

I talk a lot about Jesus' presence in our lives and this is precisely what both the Road to Damascus and the post-resurrection appearances point to. We really do get two great narratives this morning. Besides Paul's conversion we hear about Jesus' beachside appearance to the disciples. The detail is exacting: after he tells them to toss their nets on the *right* side of the boat, we hear they caught 153 fish. Not 152 or 154 but 153. Peter was evidently fishing in the nude because when he hears it is Jesus who has appeared he suddenly jumps into the water. Certainly reminiscent of the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve suddenly discover they're naked and use those fig leaves to cover themselves up. And then they eat fish for breakfast so Jesus can prove to them that he was indeed resurrected bodily and not in ghost form.

Think about the difference between Peter's call to follow Jesus and Paul's. Jesus simply looked at Peter, who was at the time named Simon, and said "Follow me." No flash of light, no blindness. Just two words spoken that changed a life. Peter's response of dropping his fishing nets and actually following Jesus is no less dramatic than Paul's response.

Most of us don't have such dramatic religious experiences as that which Paul had on the Road to Damascus. And most of us don't drop everything in a single moment to follow Jesus like Peter. For most of us, God works in more subtle though no less powerful ways. But neither is it any less dramatic than the moment we are baptized in water and the Spirit. All of these moments begin the unique journey and relationship that we all have with the risen Christ.

So you don't have to go out and change your name. But I do bid you to remember that we worship a God who calls us each by name. And thereby initiates that distinctive relationship that marks our lives as people of the resurrection.