

Over the past few weeks we have been reading through the New Testament book called “Acts.” We have been reading through Acts because Acts gives witness to how to start afresh. How to build or rebuild.

We have been reading Acts to give us guidance to how to be a church that is at a place of new beginnings and we have also been reading through Acts to show us how to make appropriate changes in our own lives. To allow Acts to give us guidance in how to be transformed both as a church and as individuals.

In last weeks’ reading, we heard the story of Stephen. Stephen responded to the call that came through the apostles that the poor and widows were not being cared for. So Stephen and 6 others responded by caring for the poor and the widows.

But Stephen also gave a controversial sermon to his listeners in Jerusalem that they were rejecting God’s will. Stephen ends up being killed by that crowd in Jerusalem and is considered the first Christian martyr. His life ends and we are told in Acts that Saul, whose name would later become Paul, watches this killing and approves of it.

I share that story to set in context what we are about to read about the person who is named Saul and whose name will later be changed to Paul. The story of Stephen and this story we are about to read about Paul marks a big transition in the life of the early church.

Up until these stories, the focus on the church has been in Jerusalem. The center of Jewish life and the place where the Christian church took root. But in these stories of Stephen and Paul and the story we will hear next week, the church changes direction.

Rather than being focused internally in Jerusalem, the church moves outward and begins to focus on the wider world. The church stops looking inwardly and begins to focus outwardly.

Read Acts 9:1-31

You may have noticed some changes outside when you arrived. For the past couple of weeks Pete Lynn and Doug Pryor have been trimming bushes. Not just trimming bushes but seriously cutting them back. Now I don't have a clue about what to do when it comes to landscaping.

Anyone who drops by my house and sees the moss overtaking my front yard can tell that I am not a very good landscaper. That is why I am thankful for people like Pete who maintains the church grounds and for volunteers like Doug. I trust that they know what they are doing. I am pretty sure about Pete. Doug, not so sure but he was out there volunteering. I did notice that Doug did not have the power tools in his hands which would be like me if I was volunteering.

As I was watching Pete and Doug work around the church over the last couple of weeks a thought came to me. I wondered if these bushes that surround the church are a good model for us of what is happening to us at Allison Creek and I wonder if their work is a good model for us as individuals?

As I watched Pete trim away branches down to the core of the bush, I began to wonder if God is not doing the same to this church? Has God been trimming us here at Allison Creek so that we rediscover what is at the core of our faith and the reason that we exist as a church? Do we need to be trimmed so that we are open to God's new call of ministry in our changing world? I wonder.

There were a couple of dead bushes that Pete and Doug removed. I wonder what that may say to us? I remembered how a few months ago that Nate Morrison generously volunteered his company to trim several very large tree branches that he said needed to be done so that the trees would survive and also not become dangerous. I wonder what those actions may teach us?

I wonder if this church was the dead branches to some people who have been a part of this congregation. I wonder if some people needed to discard their relationship to this church so that they could discover what God was calling them into. Kind of like a marriage that needs to end so that both partners can seek out new relationships that are life giving to both partners. I don't know. I raise the questions.

Pete said something to me as I was looking at these bushes out here which I thought was pretty insightful. Pete said, "They don't look like much right now but in a few weeks you will see new life emerge from them." (Repeat) That is transformation.

The story that we read from Acts is a story of transformation. Many of us have heard about Paul's Damascus Road experience. But there are four observations that I share about this story. The first observation is that many Christians focus on the conversion of Paul and not his calling from his conversion.

Paul's calling as a Christian was not completed on that road to Damascus. Paul's barely mentions his conversion experience in his own writings. Paul's conversion was an invitation to Paul by Jesus to serve and to share.

A second observation about this story of Paul's conversion is that it is Jesus who calls out to him. Paul is not converted by a person. Paul is not convicted by some powerful preacher's words or by the actions of any person. Paul is changed by Jesus. It is Jesus who speaks to him and calls him out.

A third observation is that Paul does not give up his Jewish heritage. Paul remains a pious Jew. Conversion does not mean you have to deny who you are. Conversion is a reinterpretation of who you are. Conversion is about being set free from whatever binds us.

And the fourth observation is how the Christian community welcomes Paul into it. This was very scary for these early Christians. Paul was a persecutor of Christians but the Christians respond by looking beyond the past and into the future.

I wonder though if Paul's conversion story actually works against personal transformation sometimes for us? We read and we hear about Paul's story and we think that transformation into being what God wants us to be requires some type of radical departure from who we are now. And that becomes overwhelming and scary to us.

I am going to show a video. I have shown a video from these two Behavioral Science or BS guys before. I think this video shows that transformation doesn't have to be that hard or that dramatic for real transformation to occur.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYyvmylqiGk>

All that these teenagers had to do was to sign a pledge that they would be honorable. And with that simple act they lived into transformation.

As we leave this place today, pay attention to the bushes out here and pay attention to the trees over here. I invite us to pay attention to these trees and these bushes and see what is happening to them over the next few weeks and months.

And as you look at these trees and bushes, ask yourself if these trees and bushes are calling out to us as a church and to you as an individual. Is God doing some trimming to us so that we have a chance to discover who God wants us to become? Did this church have to be trimmed out of some people's lives so that they can become who God wants them to become?

Is God inviting you to be transformed as a person in order to call you into more faithful service? What simple changes do you need to make to be more faithful and transformed? That is a question whose answer is different for each of us.

But I do know that I am going to be watching these bushes and these trees over the next few weeks and months and looking for the new life that emerges through them.

Thanks Pete and Doug for seriously whacking away on some bushes so that new life can emerge through them. AMEN.

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-Given: Feb. 8, 2015 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

-Observations from Willimon, William, Interpretation:Acts, JKP, 1988 and IDB (info to come)