Swift Kick or Gentle Nudge

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Acts 9:1-19

October 21, 2018
There are two ways to wake up from sleep. One way is to use an alarm. There is nothing subtle about an alarm clock. Its persistent sounds arrest our sleep cycle. Each Saturday night, I set two alarms to insure that I do not oversleep.

The other method is to wake up slow, the natural way. I prefer to get up when my body clock tells me I am good to go. In the first few moments of wakefulness, an internal debate takes place inside of me. Am I waking up or still dreaming? This will sound familiar to some of you.

Waking slowly or quickly provides a useful way to talk about conversion. I titled this sermon *Swift Kick or Gentle Nudge*. Some of us have had what I would call alarm-clock stories of conversion, along the lines of St. Paul. People like Paul can identify the day and time of their conversion.

Others of us wake up to Christ slowly and gradually. We experience conversion more as a process than a one-time event. Later in this sermon, I will return to this matter of coming to faith all at once or gradually over time, but first the story.

Paul’s awakening to Christ is the most celebrated conversion in the annals of biblical history. Luke not only records it in considerable detail in Acts 9 but Paul refers to it twice in subsequent sermons. It represents a pivotal moment in Acts. Previously in Acts, the story centers on Peter’s mission to the Jews. With Paul’s conversion, God is calling him to carry His gospel to both Jew and Gentile alike.
Paul is actually his Christian name. His birth name, Saul, is used throughout this Acts 9 story. His name first surfaces in Acts 8 as the person responsible for the stoning of a disciple named Stephen. In the opening verses of Acts 9, Saul carries letters of extradition from the high priest Caiaphas to arrest Jewish Christians who have fled persecution in Jerusalem. Saul carries an arrest warrant for any people who belong to “the Way.” The first followers of Jesus were not initially called Christians. They were called people of the Way, no doubt, because Jesus described himself as the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). This is instructive. Following Jesus is not merely a set of beliefs, but a way of life.

We pick up the action in verse 3. Paul travels 150-miles from Jerusalem to Damascus to arrest people of the Way. A bright light blinds him and knocks him to the ground. A voice speaks, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (9:4)

“Who are you, Lord?” Saul answers. He already has a premonition that the voice is from God.

“I am Jesus who you are persecuting” (9:5). Technically speaking, Saul is not persecuting Jesus. He is harassing his followers. Yet, Jesus identifies so closely with his followers that persecuting them amounts to persecuting him. Jesus directs Saul to proceed to Damascus. There he will be told what to do.
Do not miss the irony here! Saul is on his way to arrest Christians when Jesus arrests him.

His servants lead Saul by the hand to Damascus. More irony. Saul, who was once so full of himself, now must be led by the hand like a little child.

Meanwhile, in another quadrant of the city lives a disciple named Ananias. God calls Ananias to go to a house on Straight Street and ask for Saul. The street is aptly named since it runs straight through the city from east to west.

Ananias reminds God of Saul’s reputation as a persecutor, as if God needs the reminder. God assures Ananias that Saul is His chosen emissary to proclaim His name to Gentiles (9:16).

Ananias does as instructed. He finds Saul in a house on Straight Street. “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (9:17). Luke describes the moment as scales falling from Saul’s eyes, enabling him to see again.

Jesus describes his mission at the outset of Luke’s gospel as “opening the eyes of the blind” (4:18). I was reading in Psalm 18 this week, “God turns our darkness into light.” It reminds me of the opening stanza of the hymn Amazing Grace, “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

There was a time in my life when I was blind to the things of God. God was working, yet I did not have eyes to see
him. Jesus asks, “Do you have eyes but fail to see?” (Mark 8:18). Once I opened my eyes to Christ, I saw him everywhere.

People sometimes tell me they have never had a Damascus road conversion experience. Neither has anyone else, for that matter. The only person who even comes close is Joan of Arc. When she was 13, she experienced a bright light and voice from heaven, calling her into the Lord’s service.

Some Christians have sudden, alarm-clock conversions like Paul. Martin Luther was struck to the ground by a lightning bolt. St. Augustine heard a child’s voice telling him to take up and read a passage from Romans that changed his life. Teresa of Avila came to faith while walking by a statue of the suffering Christ. John Wesley described his heart as strangely warmed one evening at a church on Aldersgate Street.

Yet, countless other Christians throughout history awaken to Christ gradually. Their names are less known to us, since gradual conversion stories do not garner the headlines. Some of you as believers may feel somewhat inadequate because you do not have a dramatic conversion story to tell.

Megan Hill is editor of the Gospel Coalition, a network of churches and ministries that hold to classic essentials of the Christian faith. The headline of one of Megan’s articles caught my attention, My Boring Christian Testimony. She writes, “I have no memory of becoming a Christian. I did not pray a prayer or walk an aisle or have a eureka moment. I don’t remember a time when I didn’t love the Lord Jesus. My Christian

My Boring Christian Conversation
Megan Hill

I have no memory of becoming a Christian. I did not pray a prayer or walk an aisle or have a eureka moment. I don’t remember a time when I didn’t love Jesus. My Christian testimony—the story of how I came to faith—is downright boring.
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Megan testified that she was raised in a Christian home. Church-going was the weekly rhythm of her childhood. She prayed and read the Bible with her family. She cannot recall a time when she didn’t believe in Jesus. She attended a Christian school that in morning chapel featured a steady diet of dramatic conversion stories. She began to question whether she was saved, since she did not have a dramatic story to share. She came to realize later, as she writes in this article, that “there is nothing inferior about the way God saved her.”

We come to the so-what moment in this sermon. What difference does this sermon make in my life? I have two applications to today’s sermon.

My first application corresponds to the title of this sermon. Some of us need a gentle nudge from God. Others of us need a swift kick.

Let’s start at the beginning. Some of us need a gentle nudge. In the story of Elijah, after God’s dramatic deliverance from King Ahab and the prophets of Baal, God and Elijah debrief the experience. God does not appear to Elijah in earthquake, wind and fire. God comes in a still, small voice, what some translations call a gentle whisper.

Sometimes God whispers like a teacher, who speaks in hushed tones to silence a noisy class. We need to quiet
ourselves enough to listen, as God whispers and the world is loud.

Others of us need a swift kick from God. I was one such person. God had to drop-kick me into the kingdom of God. I was so self-absorbed and full of myself that God had to knock me off my high horse to get my attention.

Southern novelist Flannery O’Connor once said, “I reckon that God knew the only way to make a Christian out of Paul was to knock him off his horse.” To clarify, there is no horse mentioned in this story. Artists like Caravaggio assume he is traveling by horseback, although we read nothing about his mode of transportation. Just the same, O’Connor’s quip is right on target. God needs to knock some of us down a peg to attract our attention. We need a push, a slap upside the head to get us to sit up and take notice.

You may be here today because God has been nudging you to begin a life of faith. Maybe God has been none too subtle about getting your attention. I reckon the only way God can make a Christian out of some of us is to knock us off our horse. You can be a Christian for years and still God is nudging you, pushing you, kicking you, if that is what it takes for you to pay attention to what you need to address.

Now, for my second application. I want you to pay particular attention not only to what Paul is saved from but to what he is saved for. We talk so much in Christian circles about Jesus saving us from sin that we never get around to talking much about his saving us for something. Paul’s
conversion is virtually indistinguishable from his calling. His conversion from sin flows naturally into his commissioning to take the Gospel to Gentiles. God not only saves from sin, He saves us for work in this broken world.

Last night, I officiated at a wedding away from our church. Often at weddings, I become aware of people’s longings and struggles: So many people who run to the bar after the ceremony, seeking a social lubricant to aid in conversation; so many people with vacuous expressions; so many millennials without direction and purpose.

This morning at 6:30, I pulled into the parking garage across the street from the church. As I exited my car, the figure of a man from ten feet away stopped me in my tracks. A man draped in a raggedy blanket, whom I suspected as homeless, standing with his back to me. I am not easily frightened, yet his silhouette in the darkness terrified me. My first thought was that he was dressed for Halloween. In a span of 12 hours, the enormity of human need became clear to me.

There is so much need for Christ’s work in this world. We are talking All-In this fall. We are asking everyone to take one giant step forward in making three commitments to the person, body and work of Christ. Acts 9 has all three commitments in spades: Commitment to the person of Christ, as Paul’s conversion makes clear; commitment to the body of Christ. In the latter portion of this 9th chapter, Barnabas stands up for Paul, when everybody else was afraid of him. Finally, there is commitment to the work of Christ. There is so much work Christ wants us to do in this broken, hurting world.