

First Sunday in Lent  
February 21, 2010

Dr. Luis Palau

Good morning everybody. How are you? My name is Luis Palau. So you gonna detect a little accent. Just to get that out of the way, I'm from Argentina in South America and I was invited to give the sermon today. I was very excited when the Dean called me up and said would you give the sermon on the first Sunday of Lent and I said how many minutes do I have? He said, "twelve" and if the Holy Spirit really speaks to you, you might agree on "sixteen", but otherwise, keep it to twelve. So I think I'll keep it to twelve to get along with him. We Hispanics, you know when we give a talk, it takes about twelve minutes just to break the ice with the audience, you know and I'm supposed to break the ice and do the whole thing in twelve minutes, so you are blessed this morning. I was born in Argentina, in Buenos Aires. My dad wanted me to learn English so he sent me to a British prep school. When I was a boy he said English is the language of the future, therefore I'm sending you over there. You know, going to boarding school is like a prison. I don't know if you know that, but this thing is falling and that will shorten the sermon even more or prolong it, but anyway, so then he sent me to a British college, St. Thomas College and it was all Anglican as we call it over there, Episcopal over here and our church was called Holy Trinity, so I said I have to go to the Cathedral. It's only **Trinity**; I belong to a Holy Trinity, but I'll go anyway and so here we are today and you know in Latin America we have Lent also, but before Lent comes what we call **carnaval** – carnival in English -- Mardi Gras if you live in the south and it's not the holiest of times, I'll tell you that, in fact everybody says man – whatchyacallit – is coming and we're gonna have to repent, so do it up big-time because we got forty days to repent and confess and go and get clean for Holy Week, you know. It's not the way to look at it, but that's the way it happens, so I figured many of you have come with a conscience that needs a little alleviation, but I want to talk to you about a staggering event. When the Dean said to me, "Luis, bring the servant" I instantly thought I am going to speak on the conversion of St. Paul and then he said to me, "there are four readings and one of them is a reading from Romans, which was used in my life when I was a boy in Argentina at a summer camp, one of the teachers at our boarding school

took the kids out and we went to summer camp. All boys – no girls around – a very peaceful thing and the counselor sat me down and used Romans stanza which was just read a few minutes ago to help me experience the most staggering event a person could ever have which is to meet Jesus Christ the risen Son of God. Now Paul, the apostle used to be called Saul of Tarsus, that's where he was born in southeastern Turkey. I'm sure some of you have been there – and he was a very distinguished person, he had a first rate education, he studied under the most famous university professor of his day, his name was Gamaliel. He graduated and that means he came from a very affluent family, he obviously was well connected. Most people think he was a member of the Sanhedrin which was the seventy top leaders in Israel in its day. So he came from a ruling family, a wealthy family; he had political power and also he was a business man; he had the ability to make money in no time; he manufactured what we would today call R.V.'s – in those days it was tents, because tents were the R.V.'s of that day. You know, you packed it up and took it along with you. So he was a businessman; when he was short of cash, when people weren't donating money, he just built a few tents and carry on -- deposited at Wells Fargo and moved on to the next town, you know. And so Paul was a distinguished man, very famous, very authoritative and he had permission from the high priest to do pretty much whatever he wanted because he was also very religious. He says in one of the Epistles as far as spiritually, he was faultless; in other words he was a very religious man, so here you have a man who was highly educated, well connected, in a high position in the nation, known by everybody, successful business man and on top of it all very religious. But something was missing in the life of Saul of Tarsus and there was a dark side to his personality and that was he was revengeful, he was bitter, he was a ruthless soul, he was an angry man and he had tremendous hatred, seething inside and he went on campaign for some reason he did not like Jesus Christ. He hated him and his followers were fair game for him. So here you have a highly educated, well connected, powerful politician, excellent businessman with a first rate education and an excellent family, but there was a dark side and the dark side was what needed dealing with and so you read in Jeremiah 17, you remember what the prophet says "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can understand it is beyond cure." And the Lord says, "I the Lord know the heart." And Lent and Holy Week and the work of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is to remind us that all of us have a dark side to us and that all of us need to deal with that dark side of our personality, the hidden thing that sometimes pops out but we manage to keep

under control, so he was breathing murderous threats against the followers of Jesus Christ. It says in the Book of Acts Chapter 9. He says I did everything to oppose the enable Jesus, I'm quoting from his own words, He said I was a blasphemer and a violent man and he said when people were punished I tried to force them to blaspheme and the thing that burdened the Apostle Paul later as he was called was that he forced not only men, but even women to blaspheme Jesus Christ or else throw them in jail, besides torturing and punishing them. And you know to top it all off Saul of Tarsus was a murderer; he led the gang that stole the first Christian martyr, his name was Stephen, we call him St. Stephen now, he was a follower of Jesus Christ, a powerful man; they stoned him to death in front of a massive crowd. And the leader of the gang that stones him to death was no other than Saul of Tarsus. So Saul needed some staggering encounter with Jesus Christ and he says in First Timothy Chapter 1 "This is a faithful saying that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst." Some of us would argue with Paul and say "No, Paul, I'm the worst". In heaven we'll have an argument with him, but we'll see who wins, but he felt he was the worst of sinners because he said; "I persecuted the church of God, I forced people to blaspheme, and I even killed some of them". So he was a violent man despite of all of his positions, but one day he's on a campaign, he didn't just stick with Israel, he got permission from the high priest to go to Damascus, the capitol of Syria even today. As he's going to Damascus to bring men and women to jail or to try and punish and force them to renounce their faith in Jesus, suddenly you remember the story in the middle of his way to Damascus from Jerusalem bright light struck him at noon; he fell off his donkey and on the ground he heard a voice – what a dramatic moment, what a staggering experience; he hears the voice that says: "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" And he said "Who are you Lord?" And the Lord said "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Second question: "What shall I do, Lord?" and the Lord said "Go to Damascus, wait there and you'll be told what to do". And he opened his eyes; the scripture says he was blinded because of the light. So the men who were with him, the party that was accompanying him, took him by the hand into Damascus. They heard the sound of the voice, but they didn't know or they didn't hear what was being said – these people around him. And so when he gets over to Damascus for three days he neither ate nor drank, he just sat there waiting for God to speak to him again. One day another man by the name of Ananias was sent by the Lord and he said go and talk to this man, lay hands on him, heal him from his blindness, baptize him, and tell him that his sins are forgiven. So Ananias, a man that is only mentioned

once and never again, just a regular fellow in Damascus went and said but Lord, I've heard many things about this man; he's coming to Damascus to imprison us and the Lord said, "Go! He's a chosen instrument of mine and I have a plan for him to spread the Good News all over the world." So Ananias went, laid hands on him and said: "Brother, Saul, Jesus, the Lord, who appeared to you on the way has sent me to lay hands on you, heal you of your blindness, assure you that your sins are forgiven and baptize you. And so, Saul of Tarsus got up, his eyes were healed and it says in the scripture: -- I wrote it down -- 'that scales came out of his eyes, and he was able to see again, he was baptized in water and from that day on Saul was changed. The encounter with the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ absolutely revolutionized his life. And here we are in Portland, Oregon, 2,000 years later, we are celebrating the resurrection of Jesus within a few weeks, the crucifixion before that and this is Lent when we have to search our hearts and ask ourselves "How is my relationship with God? How is my soul? Is my conscience clear? Am I walking in the light with God? Are my sins *really* forgiven?" As we were praying a few minutes ago, "Lord have mercy upon us". I was thinking he has had mercy upon us, he has offered forgiveness and the passage in Romans that was read a few moments ago said these words that I'm sure you remember: "If you confess with your lips, Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved, because you believe in your heart and you are justified before God" In other words, your sins are all forgiven and legally and morally you are all right before God and then you confess with your lips and that brings the assurance of eternal life and that we are truly saved by Jesus Christ. So the question for us today is this: Saul in a sudden encounter with the risen Christ became aware of his sinfulness, his anger, his bitterness, his mean spirit, that he never faced before; he obviously repented, he was forgiven because of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, and he met the living Christ. And from then on his name was changed; he was called Paul, no longer Saul. He was a new man. It's interesting in the scriptures that often when God touches a man or a woman, he changes their name just as an indication that you are the same person, but in a sense you're not the same person. You are the same person forgiven, changed, transformed, forgiven, a child of God, reborn and you live a new life for Jesus Christ. And this happened to me. Last Sunday was Valentine's Day, remember -- February 14<sup>th</sup> and somebody wrote me a little note in my staff and said: "Happy birthday, 63<sup>rd</sup> birthday". He remembered that in 1947 (he wasn't there, he's only 26) but in 1947 at age twelve I experienced the same thing that happened to Saul of Tarsus. I was only a twelve year old boy, but I knew I needed Jesus Christ and

my counselor, a Britisher said to me "Luis, if you die today, are you going to heaven or hell? Imagine asking a sweet boy such a question – I wasn't so sweet and I said "I'm going to hell and he said "why?". I said I got a foul temper, I swear and I beat up on my five sisters – but you'd be angry too if you had five sisters -- but that didn't justify things, did it? So he said "You're going to hell. Do you really want to go there?" And I said "absolutely not!" And then he said "Do you know what you have to do?" I said "yes". So I surrendered to Christ because I knew it, but I needed somebody to help me and from that day – sixty-three years and one week ago, I've had the forgiveness of my sins, I've been a child of God, I know I'm going to heaven, I have the assurance of eternal life. So three things happened to the apostle that day before he became an apostle: 1. the sins of the past were all forgiven, his conscience was clear, his heart was clean: he was reconciled to God. 2. The second thing that happened, he received the Holy Spirit, because that's what happens when you receive Christ. The Holy Spirit comes into your life and that's why you become a new person. Things begin to change. Saul of Tarsus began to change; he loved people, he told them the Good News, he served people, he would do anything for the sake of people because of Jesus Christ and then the third thing is: 3. Not only the past and the present but the future – and you remember Jesus Christ said in the Gospel of St. John Chapter 16 "I give them eternal life. You will never perish and no one can snatch you out of my hand. The father who gave them to me is greater than all and no one can snatch them out of my father's hands." That's what is absolutely staggering about meeting Jesus Christ. So the question as we go to communion, Holy Eucharist this morning, have you had that encounter? Can you look back on your life and say "Yes, there was a moment when I, like Saul of Tarsus opened my heart to Christ. I knew that my sins were forgiven, I received the Holy Spirit and I have the assurance of eternal life. Have you had that experience? If you haven't yet, this would be a wonderful moment as we have our moment of silence before we partake of the bread and the cup for you to say "Lord, Jesus, come into my heart, forgive me, give me your spirit, change me and please give me the assurance of eternal life." Let's bow in prayer as we wait for Holy Communion.