

They called it “The Way,” these earliest followers of Jesus.

This is before there was much that could be referred to as “Christianity,” before anybody really knew what was going on. Many of them – most of them – were still observant Jews, who went to synagogue and worshipped at the Temple, but they also gathered in homes together, to pray and sing together and remember the stories and teachings of this man they had known, or had heard about: Jesus, this charismatic rabbi who operated outside the Temple system, who upset the Pharisaic-Roman political alliance and got killed for it – this teacher who, his disciples said, did not stay dead. They came together to eat and to pray, and they experienced Jesus as being with them. This is pre-theology, before anybody had really begun to think through exactly who Jesus was and what his relationship was, exactly, to the God of Abraham, the God they worshipped, the God whose name was so sacred that it could not be uttered. They knew that in Jesus, they experienced the presence, the power, the healing, the force, the glory of the God they knew, and they knew that their experience of God through Jesus

made a lot of people angry. So it must have had a great deal of power, what they experienced, because it got them in trouble.

Whatever they were experiencing, those who followed the Way, it inspired a kind of incredible backlash in people like Saul of Tarsus, the bright golden boy of the Pharisaic movement, the kid who had sat at the feet of Gamaliel, who knew Torah like he knew his name. He was their great hope, this kid, and he was filled with a kind of zeal for the purity of the Temple – the Temple that Jesus had said he would overthrow and raise up again, the temple he had defied and defiled. Saul knew that, however quiet these crazy Way people were at present, they weren't going to stay quiet. They represented a threat to the purity of the religious system that he had staked his very life on. A pretty significant threat. And when legal means didn't work – when hauling them before courts and before magistrates wasn't swift enough for Saul's tastes – he wasn't above inciting a kind of lynch mob to stone them to death, as he had with Stephen. Stephen got under Saul's skin, and the magistrates and the chief priests, they just stood there while he preached this blasphemy

against them, he had to go. So Saul had arranged a lynching party, they'd stoned him to death, let's see what his supposedly resurrected Lord would do for him once his brains had been bashed in and his blood was pooling on the pavement. And that was just the beginning. He was out for blood, was Saul. He was unstoppable, filled with the kind of mad religious zeal that would not cease until he had seen them stamped out, utterly obliterated, these followers of the Way.

And then something incredible happened on the road to Damascus. So incredible, so out of the ordinary, so past the bounds of human understanding that even Luke, who narrates it three times in the Book of Acts, doesn't describe it the same way each time. Luke is describing an experience very much like the experience that Ezekiel narrates in the reading from Hebrew Scripture that we read tonight. That's Luke's idea of a radical conversion – voices and lights, strange visions, a divine commissioning, something that's more along the lines of a Disney fireworks show, this is Las Vegas version of Paul's conversion. Paul himself, when he refers to his

conversion in his writings, is far more circumspect, which I interpret to mean that Paul himself didn't quite know how to talk about what happened to him, except to talk about the Glory that was revealed, and the effects that it had on his life. And it think that's where the power in this story comes in – not in the pyrotechnics and the heavenly voices and Saul falling to his knees struck blind. No, the power in this story is the incredible reversal that takes place in Saul, so incredible and so earth-shaking that it requires a name change. Saul is literally not the same person anymore – it's like if Sarah Palin suddenly became the president of the ACLU. This is not just a conversion experience, this isn't simply a new commissioning, this is a complete reversal. Paul himself isn't able to articulate exactly what happened on the road to Damascus. All he can say is, I am not the same person. "I was so enthusiastic about the traditions of my ancestors," Paul says in his letter to the church in Galatia, "that I advanced head and shoulders above my peers in my career. Even then God had designs on me." "What actually happened," he says, "was this: I identified myself completely with Christ. Indeed, I have been crucified with him."

What Paul is describing, I think, is not just a reversal of opinion, a change of mind. And it's not just a conversion as we might refer to conversion experiences, a conversion from one religion to another, for instance. Indeed, as near as scholars can tell, Paul remained an observant Jew for the rest of his life, although he certainly advocated for the relaxing of Jewish law for Gentile followers to the Way. He knew there was something new going on. But I don't think Paul would have described himself as a "convert" – in fact, he doesn't use that term to talk about his own experience, or the experience of others who have begun to follow the Way. Paul isn't thinking of a kind of intellectual assent to a different set of religious propositions, a change in theology, or even a change in religious practice. His language is more radical. He's talking about dying – being crucified with Christ – and being resurrected, a totally different person. He's talking about metamorphosis – that's literally the word he uses. It's transformation, it's resurrection, it's a process that inhabits the world of mystical experience, not the world of intellectual exchange.

Paul's experience – call it conversion, commissioning, reversal, transformation, metamorphosis, whatever you want – has become the kind of icon for Christians in terms of talking about what it means to have a kind of death-to-life experience of God, a kind of radical conversion, an almost literal “born-again” experience. And because it's a way of understanding the Way that's been largely co-opted by one segment of the Christian experience, I think it carries a lot of baggage for those of us who, in one way or another, feel like refugees or survivors of Evangelical Born-Again Christianity. But this is maybe one of the pieces of our tradition that we, in our comfortably intellectual, sophisticated, dare I say domesticated Anglican tradition – this is maybe *the* one piece of our tradition that we need to come to terms with. And I suspect that it will not happen as a result of thinking through what conversion means, what it looks like, how we can best understand the psychological and spiritual dimensions of religious conversion, of what it means to be “born again.” In other words, sermons actually aren't much use. We're talking about experience, the primal data of

religion, what it feels like to have your world torn apart by an experience of God that you do not understand.

And that's why we're here. I think. There are all kinds of good presenting reasons for doing a service like this one – it's an experiment in alternative liturgies, it's a chance to hear different music than we normally hear in church, it's fun, it's a little wild, it's different, it's funky. At some level, though, I suspect, most of us are here because we are desperate – we're crying out – for the kind of experience that Luke is narrating in the book of Acts. Whether it involves voices and visions or not. We're longing for an experience of God that shakes us to our core, that overwhelms the volume level of our own interiority, everything that's going on up here, and strikes us in a totally different place. We sang about it, this desire: I wanna run, I wanna hide, I wanna tear down the walls that hold me inside. I wanna reach out and touch the flame where the streets have no name. No name because nobody's walked them yet, they're not on our maps, they're not part of our nameable, boxable, comprehensible world of sense. Streets with no names

is nonsense. But I think that's where we want to go – where it's new. Where everything is new.

The newness is the crucial piece, especially for traditions like Anglicanism which are grounded so critically in tradition. And I'm not knocking the tradition, please don't get me wrong, my soul soars when I hear the old chestnuts, when I get to sing them. The only thing I knew about the Episcopal Church the first Sunday I set foot inside was that you guys sang hymns, and I needed that. We need to sing words that have been around for centuries, to hear music that our ancestors have been singing for thousands of years – that's what it means to follow the Way, right? It is a Way – it's maybe not The Way, I'm not sure I'm ready to say that – but we're not just making this stuff up, right? The words we say today, the pattern of our liturgy, this is the Way for us. It's our link to those earliest followers of Jesus, huddled in homes and around campfires, fearful of people like Saul of Tarsus at the gate, but experiencing Jesus, their risen teacher and companion, experiencing him in an incredible and visceral and powerful way

– an embodied way, a physical reality that was past the bounds of their understanding or their experience. That’s the Way. Not just a body of teaching, not simply a few rules about how to play well with others, not Chicken Soup for the Ethical soul. No, we’re followers of The Way – the Way of Jesus, the Way that attacked Saul on the road to Damascus, the Way that Bono describes: “You’re on the road, but you’ve got no destination. You’re in the mud, in the maze of her imagination. You love this town even if it doesn’t ring true – you’ve been all over and it’s been all over you.” That’s what it’s like, trudging along the Way. It doesn’t always ring true. But we walk it, because it’s what takes us to that place where the streets have no name.

It’s ancient, this Way, and it grounds us. But our faith isn’t about protecting the tradition, it’s about making the tradition new – making it live. Or not making it live, as if it’s up to us to force it into some kind of relevancy. No, letting it live. Providing space in which it can live, providing a place for our tradition to actually be The Way for us – the Way to God, the Way to wrench

us open and allow us to be present for an experience of God that shakes us to our core. We can spend our whole lives preparing for an experience like that – it's why we show up at worship on Sunday morning, it's why we experiment with services like this one that seek to articulate the Way in different ways, in language that's just as grounded in the tradition but provides a different space for it to live. The whole point is to help us, guide us, maybe push us – pummel us, if we need it – hound us down this road, down this Way, because what we're longing for is to see Jesus, like his disciples did on that early morning on the beach. They've been fishing all night, it's lost all of its charm, they keep coming up empty, and suddenly there's this guy on the beach and he suggests they try the other side of the boat. Try the same old thing, but try it different. Shake it up just a little bit – and suddenly their nets are teeming with fish, and it's not just some crazy guy on the beach, it's Jesus! And breakfast has been laid out.

It's that place where the same old tired thing has become the same old tired thing, right? Which is actually, I think, what the season of Easter looks like, once the pomp and circumstance has died down and the flowers are beginning to droop a little bit and it's pretty much just rain everywhere you look. What the resurrection actually means, then, is not simply that some guy got resuscitated, was raised from the dead started walking around and finding all his old friends – what it means is that in the middle of the same-old-same-old tired old patterns that they fell right back into as soon as Jesus was up out of the tomb – there, at the dustiest and driest part of the road, there's something different. There's a net teeming with fish, and breakfast is waiting. There's the glory of God so powerful that it can knock a man senseless. There's a well, where there used to be just dry desert everywhere you looked. There's something new. That's what we're about. That's where the Way is leading us – down the same dusty dry roads we've been travelling for thousands and thousands of years, but we shake it up just a little bit and open our eyes a little bit wider – there is something new here. And suddenly that dry and dusty dead-end street – it has no name. Amen.