

Scripture Reflection for May 12, 2020
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA

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“You will never be a priest.”

That's what he told me. “You will never be a priest. You don't have what it takes.”

When I was growing up in Pennsylvania, my family and parish community helped me to understand that God had a plan for my life.

They helped me understand that the question is not only “What do I want to be when I grow up?” The question is, “what does GOD want me to be?”

I wrestled with that. Finally, I sensed that the reason I was born, the reason God had created me, was to be a monk.

I wanted to serve the Lord. And the Gospels promise that those who serve the Lord will be blessed.

So I joined a monastery in Pennsylvania in 1985. And I *loved* it. I loved the prayer life. I loved the community life. I even loved the food! I happily planned to spend the rest of my life there.

And then, a new abbot was elected. The abbot is the priest who is in charge. This abbot was different than our previous leader.

And after about a year, the new abbot called me into his office. He looked at me and said, “You'll never be a priest. You don't have what it takes.”

With that, the rug was pulled out from under me. What do you do when the world you have created suddenly crumbles? What do you do when you have spent years trying to serve God, and you're now doing what you thought God wanted you to do, only to be told, “No. You can't. You got it wrong.”

What do you do? What did I do? I cried. I raged. I yelled at God in prayer.

“I told you that I want to serve you! And I've done everything I thought you wanted from me! Then you let this bozo to become the abbot and now what do I do?”

It took a year for the emotional and spiritual dust to settle.

Then I decided to take a chance on prayer again. And God's gentle whispers led me to the Diocese of Richmond, where I would be ordained in 1993.

God has been faithful to his promises. Christ had led me to precisely where he wanted me.

But in order for me to arrive in Virginia, I had to experience the painful, confusing, gut wrenching experience of letting go of what I THOUGHT was God's plan... letting GO of *my* dream... to discover that God's dream was even better... that God's plan was outside my comfort zone. The boy from Pennsylvania became the priest in Virginia.

20 centuries ago, there was a zealous young Jewish man named Saul of Tarsus. From an early age, he was taught that God had a plan for him. God had a dream for his life. God had made promises – not only to him, but to the whole people of Israel.

God had promised to lead them, to be with them. And ultimately God promised to send them a savior.

What God asked, in return, was that people like Saul should serve the living God, pray, learn the Torah, follow the Law, feed the widows, and be zealous for God's people and for the temple in Jerusalem.

Saul loved God. So he loved the temple and the land and the people and the law.

And because he loved all that, he understood that a certain rabbi named Jesus, and the people who followed his teaching, were *dangerous*.

Jesus seemed to be asking people to change too much, to let go of too much, to leave behind the very things that helped to identify the Jewish people as God's people. Jesus did not seem to respect the Law, the sabbath, the kosher rules, the temple.

So Saul knew how he could serve God. He must resist this group of "Jesus people" and resist the changes they were making in the Jewish way of life. These "Jesus people" were a threat to the very worldview on which Saul had built his faith and life.

And then, one day, Saul's world fell apart. The rug was ripped out from under him. According to the accounts from Saul himself, he was on the road to Damascus and was literally knocked to the ground by God.

He had an encounter on the road. And this zealous, faithful, devout Jewish man tried to wrap his brain around a truth he could not at first comprehend. Yes, God WAS STILL being faithful to his promises. God was fulfilling everything that the prophets had foretold. God was saving his people. God was showing his people how to love him and serve him. God was leading them.

And God was doing all that ... in the person of Jesus! This rabbi, who had suffered. Who had died. Who had risen.

Paul encountered the Living Christ on the road.

And in that moment, Paul's world got turned upside down. Everything changed. Even his name. No longer "Saul" – now he would be called "Paul."

In that moment on the road, Paul begins the process of conversion. I call it a "process" because it will take time for Paul to fully understand and embrace the fact that Christ was asking him to leave behind what was familiar to him. Jesus asked Paul to leave his comfort zone, to leave behind most of the things Paul was sure of.

When he met the Living Christ, Paul had to begin a journey of rediscovery. He would now discover that God was still God, but God was asking Paul to serve him and love him and be with him in ways that Paul could not have expected. God was still God, and Paul needed to follow him. But this led Paul away from the familiar temple and the certitudes of the past. There were new things to learn. New things to be tried. New ways of loving and living and serving. New ways to be faithful.

And as we hear in today's reading – Paul would also discover that following Christ would lead him to towns and villages he had never visited, and it would also require that Paul himself would suffer, just as Jesus had suffered. Being a follower of Christ means sharing in his cross. We cannot follow him to the resurrection without first following him to crucifixion.

And Paul was able to do this, willing to do this, because he had met the Living Christ. The New Testament tells us that Paul left the familiar confines of his home territory, and he traveled all over the known world, even to Rome, to share the power of the life-changing love of Christ. He wanted other people to know how deep are the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God. He wanted us to know that love, God's love, never fails.

We sometimes speak about St. Paul's conversion as if it happened all at once, on one day, on one road.

But as we read about Paul in the Acts of the Apostles and in his own letters, we discover that God is never finished with this zealous young Jewish man. Serving the Living Lord required that Paul must embrace a lifetime of letting go of what WAS, so that he could embrace all that God knew COULD BE.

God was never finished with Paul. And God is not finished with us. Today, thanks to a pandemic, many of us feel as though our world has been turned upside down. We feel as if some of our certainties are no longer certain. We even wonder if we can count on the surest aspects of our faith as we move forward. It feels like the rug has been pulled out from under us.

But please remember: the Lord who led that boy from Pennsylvania to Virginia is the same God who led that Jewish boy name Saul from Jerusalem to Rome. God is always inviting us forward in faith. God is always asking us to let go of some of the things we thought we were sure of, so that we can be amazed by the life that God has planned for us. Newness of life – that is what God promises. That is where God is leading us. Always.

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