

Saving Saul: Sunday, April 29 (Acts 9:1-20)

by [Heidi A. Peterson](#) in the [April 11, 2001](#) issue

Before my children were able to read they knew several stories by heart. The stories were picture book favorites that we read to them again and again. When I dared to skip a page or change a word, they would protest, “Mom! That’s not what it says. Read it right.”

The conversion of Saul is such a story—so familiar and pivotal that even those who have never read it often know it by heart and take it to be the paradigm of religious conversion. In a surprising reversal, the person who had been the most ardent antagonist of the young church became the church’s chief protagonist.

It was a surprising time. Sick people were being healed merely by a shadow passing over their bodies. Dead people were getting a second chance at life. The gospel was being spoken even to gentiles. By the power of the Holy Spirit the church was taking shape, bearing witness in farther and farther corners to the grace of God revealed in Jesus. Day by day the church added to its numbers and became central to the lives of more and more people, including Saul.

Saul was building his career on the church. In the itinerant persecution of Christians he spared no effort to stifle the spread of the gospel. Saul was schooled by Pharisee moderate Gamaliel, but Saul was driven to excel in his duty. He was a worker who took the initiative and went far beyond the letter of his job description. Even before he entered the city of Damascus he had procured papers for those he wanted to have murdered. He worked overtime. In choosing Saul—“an instrument to bring my name before gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel”—God chose an intense personality bound to work overtime at whatever mission he undertook. Saul knew his mission. But God knew Saul. God knew that Saul was confident, in charge and not particularly curious about God. Capturing Saul’s attention required drama.

On a rainy Saturday I stood on the front porch of a Habitat for Humanity house with a man I had never met before. We were volunteers who had come to unroll sod, plant bushes and sweep a driveway to make the front yard of a new house look more like a home than a construction site. As we waited out the weather under the

shelter of the porch roof he began talking. He observed that, although its timing was inconvenient for the work we had planned, we sure needed the rain.

Then, not bothering with a segue, he went directly to his main concern and asked me if I was saved. When I told him that I believed I was, he asked for the date, time and description of my conversion. It is for moments like these that I think about making up my own version of the Saul-on-the-Road-to-Damascus story. But it wouldn't be true. I was baptized as an infant, raised in a faith tradition I was taught to love and respect, and gradually grew into the theological convictions I strive to live. Every day the conversion continues as I am changed by human encounters, the natural world and countless experiences that provide new insights into the nature of God.

My fellow Habitat volunteer was an outspoken pacifist, a good neighbor and a self-avowed Christian who knew with certainty the moment Jesus called his name and entered his heart. He knew where he was, what he was doing, what he was wearing. He was not impressed with my metaphor for the converted life. (If you consider a flower unfolding petal by petal over days, how can you mark the precise moment at which the bud "converts" to being a flower?) It is no match for the spectacular and unmistakable sound of the Lord's voice from heaven. I doubted neither the man's religious experience nor his claim that since that moment his life had been infused with meaning. It was his easy dismissal of a conversion of a different sort that bothered me.

The story of Saul's conversion is not told as the normative faith experience—it is the extraordinary one. Even within the narrative of Saul's conversion there is another model of the converted life.

Ananias was a convert to the faith, and a person who lived close to the divine. His relationship with God was conversational. Unlike Saul, he had been growing in the knowledge of God over time, and when the Lord called his name he didn't need to ask, "Who are you?" The voice was a familiar one, and he responded as might a child who is being called by a parent from another room. "Here I am." Unlike Saul, Ananias was not struck speechless, sightless and appetiteless. He talked back. Being in dialogue with God was not something new to Ananias. He was practiced at it. When Saul spoke with Jesus, the power of the experience immobilized him within the darkness of his own being for three days. Not Ananias. Ananias got up, went to the house of Judas and delivered the message that God had entrusted to him.

God's means are tailor-made. Saul's traveling companions didn't see the light because the call was not for them. Some with subtler personalities than Saul's, and some who are lifelong learners, come to know God by different ways because it is not as difficult for God to get their attention. But the lasting mark of conversion is not one date circled in red on the calendar, but the whole story of one's life. In the end, Saul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus is worth telling only because of what he did afterwards.