

Blogging toward Sunday

By [Walter Brueggemann](#)

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In this new series, authors offer reflections on the Sunday lectionary texts. Feel free to join the discussion by adding your thoughts.

It is easy to be jaded about Paul's "Damascus Road experience" because we know it so well. The narrative report of that confrontation is so pivotal that it is referred to two more times in the Book of Acts and must have been known and celebrated across the church (Acts 26:6-16; 26:12-17).

It would be possible, of course, to come at this text generically and generalize from Paul's narrative to make it a defining narrative for "every person": in a generic way, the narrative attests to the inexplicable force of God's epiphany (theophany), to the power of God crashing in upon us in life-changing ways. Or it is about how a conversion leads to vocation, since we are all, along with Paul, recruited for a new world.

My own inclination, against such a generic approach, is to focus on the particularity of Paul. It is his narrative. A sermon might reflect a long while on Paul before moving to any generalization. It is important to attend to how Paul is narrated both *before* and *after*—before as a resister to God's newness, clinging to old, settled patterns of certitude and authority; after as one who had his sight restored and his strength regained for a different life (vv. 18-19).

My attention is drawn, however, not only to the change in Paul but also to the change in faith enacted by the spirit through Paul. Indeed the church is always running, even yet, to catch up with Paul in his radical, daring newness in the gospel. A sermon focus might be, not on the psychology of transformation and vocation, but on Paul's transformed articulation of the gospel. My focus would be on the remarkable intent of the gospel indicated in verse 15:

—The name of Jesus is to be brought before *gentiles*, those who are radically other, unlike us, impure and without “our” disciplines or inheritance. This is at the center of Paul’s articulation of the gospel. Paul is so familiar to us that we easily miss the dangerous point of his conversion. The radicality of grace in Paul’s thinking and proclamation shatters all of our attempts to limit, tone down and domesticate, a shattering attested to in the “reptile dream” of Acts 10:10-16.

—The name of Jesus is to be brought before *kings*; perhaps this is a reference to underling kings who had submitted to Rome. But eventually even the theological claims of Rome will be addressed by the church. The narratives that follow in the Book of Acts show the apostles frequently in court before the authorities. The gospel via Paul is profoundly public, everywhere challenging settled authority with the new authority of the “Easter king.”

—The name of Jesus is to be brought before the *people of Israel*. As is well known, Paul never finishes with what became the issue of “Jews and Christians.” A rich and complex mix of wonderments gathers around the rubric, but the issue cannot be avoided. In Paul’s horizon, Jews, like gentiles, are invited to be alongside the early Christians. There is immense irony in the fact that the story concerns a Jew who persecuted Christians; in the long history of the West, it is Christians who have persecuted Jews. This entire process, with its deep irony, requires reconsideration.

The move of the name of Jesus to these three publics is breathtaking. Whenever Paul is dated, it will be “after Easter.” But the narrative indicates that Easter is not a one-time-only event. It is rather an ongoing counternarrative that challenges “things as they are.” It is because of this risky challenge that the Gospel of John concludes with an allusion to crucifixion, to being taken “where you do not want to go” (John 21:18-19).

Neither Paul nor anyone around him expected the newness of the world under the God of life to be easily received amid systems of death. But it is precisely such an “impossibility” that Easter enacts, an impossibility beyond all our “possibilities” (see Mark 10:27). Karl Barth notices that Paul’s experience was not in a vacuum, but was only completed in the church; that is, with Ananias. Beyond the church, however, it is the Easter power of new life that broke the world open. Easter is not done yet! They *ran* to the tomb (John: 20:4). We run after Paul. The Easter church has much “catching up” to do with the truth given us through Paul.