First Sunday in Lent (Mar 9, 2025) –First in a three-sermon series  
          on the Life and Theology of Paul  
Sermon Title:  Paul: Crusader or Rabbi?  
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:1-16  
Theme: Will the real Paul please stand up?  Follower of Gamaliel or zealous Pharisee?  
  
  
**[2]** Was the Apostle Paul a Crusader?  The dictionary defines a “crusader” as one who campaigns for religious change (for a cause or against abuse) with zeal and enthusiasm.  If the only description we have of Paul were taken from the Book of Acts, we might be led to think of him in this way. He approved of the stoning of Stephen, where witnesses laid their coats at his feet. If we think of Saul and Paul being the same person, (Note: Acts 22:1-21 suggests that Paul and Saul are the same person) certainly we are led quickly to such a conclusion. Saul hunts down the people of the Way, the disciples of the Lord, across the countryside of Judea and Samaria, going house to house using his legal authority to bind any followers he found and drag them out of their houses, taking them to prison in Jerusalem. The **[3]** book of Acts 9:1 describes him as “breathing threats and murder” against the disciples of the Lord, both men and women (Acts 8:3). If this is Paul, then we would have to describe his basic personality as a man on a mission, over-zealous and crusader-like.  Our tendency, sometimes, is to extend this personality to his Christian mission as well.  But, did he simply change loyalties and keep the same “persecuting” personality?  I DO think this is a mis-reading of Paul’s life. I believe that in his post-conversion years, Paul became more like Stephen whom earlier he had watched being stoned to death. The spirit of Stephen as reflected from Jesus himself was that we should “forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Stephen: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”)   
  
**[4]** The Book of Acts portrays his conversion experience in a radical way, with a bright light flashing around him, forcing him to the ground, as if he were struck by lightning, blinding him with his eyes staring wide open, in a way that scared those around him speechless.  In early paintings of this experience, we find Paul “falling” off a horse on which he has been traveling.  But, I cannot find any reference to Saul being on a horse, even though he is described as falling to the ground.  You may remember that Ananias, one of the disciples in Damascus that  
followed the Way, was scared to even come near him.  Such was the reputation that preceded  
**[5]** Saul/Paul from Jerusalem.  The blindness lasted three days, and perhaps would have lasted longer if Ananias had not helped him.  Any experience like this would certainly have humbled Saul immensely.  It would have turned his world upside down; it would have shattered his confidence.  Dare I say, it would have shaken his identity to the bone and removed his soul from his heart.  If we were there, all we might see are two eyes wide-open staring into space; and, since he had no desire to eat or drink, perhaps his tongue could not even form any words that made sense.  Saul’s mission is laid out to Ananias:  “He is a chosen instrument to bring the name of the Lord before Gentiles and Kings, before the people of Israel.  But, then, just when we think he is being charged with a crusade for Christ, the vision changes in midstream:  “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name (Acts 9:16).”  The words “Crusader” and “suffer” just do not seem to go together very well, do they?  If Saul and Paul are the same person, and we are trying to make him a Crusader, we will stumble head over heels in this  
prediction of suffering.  Crusaders win by changing minds and hearts. Crusaders win by converting people to new loyalties.  Crusaders win by inspiring followers with the victory that lies ahead.  But, suffering does not inspire.  Taking up a cross to follow Jesus does not win very many converts.  I have trouble picturing Paul as a Crusader.   
  
**[6]** He was not a “fiery” orator or preacher.  In his own words, he says in his Corinthian letter that he proclaimed the mysteries of God without lofty words or wisdom, in weakness, with much fear and trembling (1 Cor. 2:1-4).   Some translations say he was not ‘eloquent,’ in his speaking.  In his own words, Paul is a reluctant preacher. Paul would rather not, but he must.  He calls preaching an obligation: “necessity is laid upon me, woe unto me if I do not preach the gospel, (1 Cor 9:16).”  In Corinthians, Paul does not sound like a Crusader.  In Acts, we are told that Saul had to escape Damascus by being lowered in a basket over the wall. He has been proclaiming boldly the name of Jesus in the synagogues, calling him the “Son of God,” and even proving that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ of God.  In the Acts account, Saul becomes very powerful very quickly, leading to plots to kill him and to his need to escape.   Saul goes to Jerusalem and attempts to join the disciples there, with Barnabas speaking up for how he has changed, but when he speaks boldly, he again stirs up trouble and provokes a desire to kill him, and so he is again carted off to Caesarea and then Tarsus to protect him.  In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul gives us a different account, that he decided to retire into Arabia, and then return to Damascus, and after three years going to Jerusalem to visit Cephas.  It is a much more silent Paul, not the powerful Saul stirring up trouble, but the silent Paul, who tells us that he was still “unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ” (Gal. 1:21). The rumor was spreading across the empire that “the one who formerly persecuted Christians is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy,” (Gal. 1:23).  In Paul’s words, they did not make the connection to him as this one described in the rumors.  Somehow, we are left wondering how the powerful and bold Saul became the weak and retiring Paul. Where did the Crusader go?  What changed him?  Did he hide in Arabia or escape to Tarsus?  Will the real Paul please stand up? 

**[7]** There is the sense we get from the Acts account that while Saul was in Tarsus, or away in Arabia, as the case may be, that the churches throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria were able to develop in peace, increasing their numbers day by day. With the disappearance of Saul’s harsh persecutions, they finally were given an environment in which they could grow without fear. (Acts 9:31).  Religious sociologists have estimated that the early church grew at a rate of about 6.2 percent during the time of Paul, going from about 150,000 Christians in 180 CE to 3 million during the time of Constantine.  Given the size of the house churches of Paul’s time, no more than about 35 or 40 could have gathered at any one time; their largest rooms were about half the size of our rooms.  Acts suggests that during the first Pentecost, some 3,000 persons were baptized and added into the fellowship at Jerusalem, people from all over the world, Parthians, Medes, Elamites; people from Libya, Cyrene, Asia, Cretans and Arabs, Romans and many others. But, then as Pentecost subsided, and reality settled in, with people dispersing, we get the  
sense from Acts that day by day, these “broke bread” in their homes with glad and generous hearts, and each day adding to their numbers.  In his Letters, Paul appears more like the pastor than the evangelist or the crusader; as he says in his letter to the Thessalonians, “So deeply did we care for you, that we gave you not only the gospel of God, but also my very selves, because you had become so dear to us” (1 Cor. 2:8).”  Some scholars have even suggested that it was not the preaching that brought so many into the fellowship in the early years, but the pastoral care, letter by letter, house by house.  Those who could not be present at meeting were included in the holy meal; some of the meal being saved back and taken to those who were absent.  In Paul’s letters, we only get a small glimpse of a ministry much larger than the New Testament Letters could ever fully contain.  If all were to be written down, no book could ever contain all the stories. This suggests that we might think of Paul as a “rabbi,” a teacher, a nurse or we might say “coach,” and a pastor.  Yes, Jesus was considered a rabbi; Mary called him “Rabbouni” or “Teacher” in the Garden. Paul, in his Letter to the Philippians, describes himself as a Hebrew born of Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee, as to righteousness under the law, blameless (Phil. 3:5-6).  He writes in Galatians 1:14 that “I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people **[8]** of the same age, for I was zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.” Acts 22:3 tells that Paul sat at the feet of a rabbi named Gamaliel, one of the best of the Jewish teachers, grandson of  
the famous Hillel the Elder.  He was known to belong to the most liberal wing of the Pharisees. Acts also tells us that Gamaliel stood up for the apostles and their claims that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 5:34-42), reasoning among his colleagues, that if this movement is only human, it will fail, but if God is in it, no one will ever be able to stop it. (Acts 5:38).  If Paul learned at the **[9]** feet of Gamaliel, how did he turn out to be such a persecutor of the movement? Why would he not be as sympathetic to the movement as Gamaliel?  Those who have looked closely at Paul’s arguments describe that he follows the same midrash that Gamaliel followed.  They cite 1 Corinthians 10 as an example of this form of argument.  This includes, but is not limited to, a reasoning from lesser to greater, drawing analogies through link words.  Two passages may seem to conflict until compared with a third.  A general principle may be restricted by another verse, or a particular principle may be extended into a general rule.  The total context must be considered in any interpretation.  Yes, it is reasonable to think of Paul as a rabbi, even though we find Jesus warning his disciples not to call themselves “rabbi” (or teacher), but merely “students,” the greatest among you must be servant, not exalted ones. (Matt. 23:8-12).”  But, we do find Paul calling himself a “father,” dealing with his children (urging and encouraging and pleading) (1 Thess. 2:11), even though Jesus warns about calling ourselves “father” (Matt. 23:9) in the same sentence in which he warns about calling ourselves “rabbi.”  But, I do think we  
might consider Paul more of a rabbi than a crusader, more of a pastor than a preacher, more like a nurse or father or even mother (Gal 4:19 experiencing birth pangs as Christ is formed in them) to those in the churches he has established, than a wandering evangelist.  My personal image of Paul is as one standing in a small group, teaching and listening and reasoning with his hearers.  It is the image he presents in his letters that holds my attention, as he pleads with Timothy to  
remember his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, and to rekindle the gift of God that runs in his family, as he pleads with Philemon to free his slave Onesimus, calling himself an “Ambassador in Chains.”  God has chosen the weak to expose the pretensions of the powerful; God has chosen those who count for nothing, to expose those who are “full of themselves.” Paul tells us that he claims to know nothing except Christ Crucified, because the folly of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than the great Roman empire, the  
Ambassador in Chains stronger than the Ambassadors in Rome.  Like Stephen before him, and Christ before Stephen, Paul can say: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them; they know not what they do.” (Acts 7:60; Luke 23:34).   
  
**[10]** But, we would be remiss if we did not consider the crusade quality of Paul’s message:  It is a world-transforming message to the nations, to the Gentiles, to the kings of the nations beyond the Jewish homeland:  “It is pretentious speech that empties the power of the Cross.” If we are to take credit for anything, we are the lesser for it, except as we take pride in what God has done in Christ Jesus to transform the world. The most special gift of God is to discern what God has  
generously given us.  It is not for us to have the mind of God, but it is for us to have the mind of Christ Jesus, who emptied himself of any claims to divinity and took on the form of a servant, that the glory of God might be embodied in flesh for all to see.  Paul is a bit of a crusader in this regard.  He believes that God will work a miracle through his message to transform the world in the name of Christ.  But, we only know Paul through his weakness at his own request, a reluctant rabbi and a suffering servant in the crusade for Christ. Alleluia! Amen.