

March 22, 2012 - Fifth Sunday of Lent – Cycle A  
Ez 37:12-14                      Rom 8:8-11                      Jn 11:3-45

For the past two Sundays, and again today, we are confronted by conversion stories. Stories that explain how encounters with Jesus are life changing. Two weeks ago we heard about the Samaritan woman at the well. Last week it was the man born blind. And today, the resuscitation of Lazarus! Three people, three circumstances, three encounters with Jesus, and three lives forever changed. The Samaritan woman is given new hope. The man born blind is given new vision. Lazarus, four days dead, is given new life. All three, and even their communities, come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God.

The three stories, powerful as they are, only begin to inform us how Jesus touches people. As the stories show, conversion may be direct, or mediated through other people. Conversion may be quick, or painfully slow. Regardless of how or when, the end result is an unshakable belief that Jesus is Lord. We all know about St. Paul's white-light conversion on the Road to Damascus. That was quick, and perhaps some of you have had a comparable experience. Yet, such white-light spiritual experiences seem to be rare. More often than not, religious awakening and conversion seem to happen slowly, and need time. That second kind of spiritual growth is what the psychologist and philosopher William James called "a religious experience of the educational variety." These educational religious experiences are no less powerful or life changing, they just take longer to mature.

The three conversions in John's gospel occur pretty quickly. But they have something we don't. The benefit of direct contact with Jesus in truly human form! Taken collectively, the three stories seem to show a progression of sorts. Jesus gives the woman at the well the gift of hope. The man born blind is given new vision. And Lazarus is given new life. Yet it's not only the three gifted ones that come to see Jesus as Lord. So do their communities. Conversion is not solely for the benefit of the individual. The converted go out and tell others what happened, so that the community at large also enters more deeply into the belief that Jesus is Lord! So based on John's gospel, three things seem necessary for our ongoing conversion – New hope! New vision! And new life! But they don't necessarily come all at once.

As I reflected on John's conversion stories, and how they relate to us today, three men came to mind. Two were inmates at the Martinsburg Correctional Center, and the third was an ex-convict I met on retreat. The three men seemed to be living examples of individuals who needed new hope, new vision, and new life to be made whole. The first was an inmate I can only describe as living in utter despair. His crime was violent physical domestic abuse. Proof that he did it was overwhelming, but he had absolutely no memory of his actions that day. That's because he was in a drug and alcohol induced blackout. He didn't deny his guilt, but was tortured by the fact that he had lost his family for doing things he couldn't remember doing. None of his family members would accept his calls, and no one had come to visit him in the nine months since his arrest. One of his cellmates suggested that if he turned to Jesus and was baptized, he would be forgiven. We made plans to prepare him for baptism, but he was sentenced and transferred to prison before that could happen. He's currently doing 30 years in a maximum-security prison for violent offenders. Is he on the road to conversion? I don't know for sure, but he has met with the prison chaplain there. He also commented that he had been moved to protective custody because his cellmate had been murdered for his religious beliefs. He happened to be Muslim. Despite all this, he wrote that since he had started his walk with the Lord and that gave him hope.

The second man was a drug dealer. Throughout his incarceration, he worked with the chaplain, and attended every religious service available to him. He routinely asked other inmates to come with him. He confided that he felt called to become a certified facilitator for Celebrate Recovery, a Christ-centered 12-step program that would allow him to help other addicts. He was sentenced to 4 years in West Virginia's minimum Security Prison for and earned early parole. Is he on the road to conversion? I don't know for sure, but he was definitely given a new vision of what his life might be rather than what it used to be.

The third man was a former drug dealer from Baltimore. Back in the day he literally had tons of money, more than a few guns, and routinely traveled back and forth to his condo in Bogota by Lear jet. As his life degenerated, he described himself as feared, afraid, and paranoid, all at the same time. Afraid of being betrayed, he shunned everyone he knew, and was shunned in return! Ultimately, he was arrested and

sentenced to 15 years in prison for drug trafficking. While there, he started attending Twelve Step meetings. The meetings gave him a little help and a little hope, but he struggled with any kind of conventional belief of God. Nevertheless, he pulled together a vision for a drug-free, crime free life. After release, he found common work at far less pay than he was used to, met a woman and married. However, he remained angry and resentful. Then the unexpected! His wife became pregnant, and choking, with crocodile tears running from his eyes, he said that in the delivery room, for the first time in his life, he experienced overwhelming unconditional love. For his daughter, for his wife, and for God! He had literally and figuratively received the gift of new life!

Few of us can claim first hand knowledge of jail, felony crime, or prison life. We may also question the sincerity of conversion stories from convicted felons. But Jesus came to save sinners. If Jesus is willing to say to us “your brother will rise” who are we to say no? If Jesus is willing to say to us “I am the resurrection and the life” who are we to say no? If Jesus is willing to say: “untie him and let him go,” who are we to say no? John’s conversion stories emphasize hope, vision, and new life. The inmate’s stories emphasize hope, vision, and new life. And that’s exactly what Jesus offers to us, time, and time, and time again.

As we continue our Lenten march toward Easter, it’s worth taking some time each day to contemplate three simple questions: Where do I need Jesus’ gift of new hope? Where do I need Jesus’ gift of new vision? Where do I need Jesus’ gift of new life? The answers will come when we’re ready to hear them. And when they do, we’ll realize that conversion takes a lifetime of prayer, meditation, and action. Its east to fall into thinking that “eternal life” starts after we die. But for those who believe, eternal life has already begun. As we turn to the table, we have yet another opportunity for Hope, Vision, and New Life. These gifts are waiting for us, prepared by the One who raised Christ from the dead. What more could we possibly need?