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First Presbyterian Church
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Acts 9:1-20
Easter 3

“Teaching An Old Dog New Tricks”

I had a dog once named Roxanne. I loved that dog. I got her on my second day of seminary. I'd never lived alone before and didn't want to come home to an empty apartment. She was the best roommate I ever had. She didn't leave dirty tissues lying around and she didn't bring home any strays, and I'd had previous roommates who'd done both.

It was a hot summer day when my sister and I drove over to the Humane Society in Shively, Kentucky, a hillbilly suburb of Louisville, to pick out a dog. I wanted a female dog, and there were only 3 to choose from-2 of them were spunky little dogs that had a shrill bark, something I knew would never fly in a tightly quartered apartment building. And then there was Roxanne, who was working it hard trying to convince me to take her home. She was the funniest looking dog I'd ever seen. Folks were always trying to guess what she had in her. I heard people guess everything from beagle to terrier to dachshund to German shepherd. She was black and tan like a beagle but had the body of a basset hound; her left front paw turned out and her hind quarters were higher than her head. She had the face only a mother could love, and I did.

Roxanne was a runner. If I left the door open for 1 second she'd run right through it. In her younger years she was fast, too. I can remember running like a crazy woman after her. You'd have thought I was sprinter the way I went running after her across the seminary's campus. Even in her later years, she'd manage to sneak out-but of course by this time she was slow. Someone would leave the gate open, and Roxanne would go walking right through it. And I would still go after her.

I tried taking her to obedience school. The first couple of times we dropped out; it was clear that Roxanne was not going to pass. She could not and would not master the “Come” command.

They say you can’t teach an old dog new tricks, and with Roxanne a truer statement was never uttered. Experience teaches us that it’s hard to get dogs *and people* to change their ways. When I was younger my Dad used to constantly remind me that I *cannot change people*. When it came to choosing a spouse, my grandmother used to give the advice that you cannot change them. In fact, they only get *more so* over time.

But you know, nothing is impossible with God. And God shows us today that an old dog really can learn new tricks. I’m talking here about the story of Saul’s conversion *and* Ananias’ conversion. Saul’s not the only one in this story who’s taught new tricks; Ananias learns some, too. We usually forget that because the story of Saul becoming Paul is so spectacular.

It’s larger than life. Numerous paintings throughout history have depicted Paul falling off his horse, blinded by the light that flashes from heaven. Flannery O’Connor once wrote, “I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.” (Even though the story never mentions a horse.)

Luke is a master storyteller of few words. He begins our story stating simply but dramatically: “Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder . . .” The resurrection has happened, but Saul’s still at it, arresting any follower of Jesus he can get his hands on, men *and women* Luke points out, bringing them bound in handcuffs to Jerusalem. Saul is the county sheriff, jury and judge all rolled into one.

But then, *it happens*. A light flashes, Jesus speaks, Saul questions, and the command comes quickly to get up and go to the city and there Saul will meet someone who will tell him what to do next.

Never mind whether a voice actually spoke to Saul or not, the amazing thing is that Saul actually listened *and obeyed*. But Saul would never have gone on his accord. He would never have decided on his own, “Hey you

know what? I think I'll become one of those followers of the Way. I think I'll follow Jesus." Back in chapter 7, when an angry mob stampeded Stephen, dragged him through the city, and stoned him to death, Saul was right there congratulating the killers. Trust me, Saul would never have become a follower of Christ on his own accord.

This is all God's doing. But most good conversion stories that hold true are God's doing, because only God can change someone's life in such a dramatic fashion because by and large people are change averse. We don't like learning new tricks. We get set in our ways and routines and habits, we get *more so*-as my Mimi used to say. Saul was set in his ways, and he was only growing more so-more hateful, more spiteful, more deadly. So this is when God said, "I don't think so." And knocked him blind. I do believe that God is in the business of changing lives, so if you hear a small, still voice that keeps nagging at you to change your ways, you might want to pay attention. It could be God. If you keep ignoring it and you get knocked off your proverbial horse, well you'll know it was God.

Now, the silent partner in all of this is Ananias. Ananias doesn't get much credit in this story because we're so taken with the story of Saul's conversion; because Ananias' conversion is different. I imagine him to be just like us. His relationship with God was conversational. When God told him to get up and go look for Saul, he asked "why". Unlike Saul, he didn't need to ask "Who's talking to me?" His knowledge of God had grown over time. He was practiced at talking with God.

Yet, Ananias was pretty scared at the thought of going to talk to Saul. Ananias had heard of **him**, and he didn't want to go. He knew what Saul had done to Stephen. And he knew what Saul would do to him! "Are you sure about this?" he asked God. "Yes," God answered. So Ananias went, but probably with some reluctance -- because, after all, you can't teach an old dog new tricks. Experience teaches us to be cautious about a person's ability to change. Ananias didn't believe for one second that Saul, Christian persecutor numero uno could or would change.

And yet, Ananias went-but not of his own accord. Like Saul's conversion, Ananias' too, was God's doing. In fact, he received the same exact message

Saul did: get up and go. But unlike Saul, he got an explanation: go because Saul is the person **I've chosen** to bring my message to the people. Well surprise, surprise. That's a new one. If Ananias had had a horse, he surely would have fallen off it. His address to Saul: "Brother Saul," announces his change of heart, his conversion, if you will, from thinking 'There's no way this old dog can learn new tricks," to believing that with God, all things are possible. And then he baptized him.

Like Ananias and Saul, we sit here today as ordinary people; as people whose relationships with God are affirmed at our baptism, that moment when God graciously acts through water and words to eternally declare we are a part of Christ's family. And like Ananias and Saul, God will not always be content to let us rest on laurels. God will sometimes intervene in our lives and change them forever. Our task is to remain open to what God is doing in and around us, even when we feel uneasy like Ananias did, or believe without a doubt that the path we're on is the right one, like Saul did, because sometimes God has other plans for us.

If you're on Facebook, you know that Facebook has a feature called "On this day", which looks back at things you've shared or posted "on this day" one, two, three or more years ago. I always enjoy my "on this day" reminders in May because I get to see pictures of my boys and their high school prom dates, the kids' end of year concerts, or their graduations, among others things. Why just this week, I was reminded of an orchestra banquet with Henry 3 years ago, a night of percussion with Julia two years, and Tommy's prom from one year ago. There was even a picture from two years ago of chicks Charlotte brought home from school that we "babysat" for the weekend. I'd forgotten about that.

This week, a wonderful memory popped up from just a year ago – closing on our home here. There we were, standing in front of the sold sign – looking just like an HGTV show! Now if you had told me 3 years ago at that orchestra banquet, or two years at the night of percussion, that the Lord would send me to Fort Wayne, Indiana, I probably would have said, "Fort Worth! I'm not moving to Texas!" A little like Saul I would have been entirely caught off guard, not to mention corrected that it was Fort *Wayne*, not Fort *Worth*. And I would have found myself like countless people in the

Bible and real life who are going along, happy with their life path, only to find God come along and change it up.

There are a whole lot of religious bumper stickers with bad theology-but there's one I saw recently that is trite but true: God isn't done with me yet. God wasn't done with Saul or Ananias, and God isn't done with you. God is at work in your life, and perhaps-just maybe-God is trying to open your eyes to see the light in a new way, veering you from one path to another, and trying to get you to change.

They say you can't teach an old dog new tricks, and with Roxanne, a truer statement was never uttered. She definitely had a mind of her own. But you know what they say-the 3rd time's a charm-and by her 3rd time at obedience school (yes, I took her to school 3 times!) she passed. When I called "Come, Roxanne," she came. She came slowly, she stopped at every dog along the way to sniff them, and she may even have stopped to rest (since by that time she was 10 or 11), but she came-and she passed. *And I was the proudest mother in the room!*

The day Roxanne died was one of the saddest. When Terry and I left the vet we were the saddest and sorriest looking couple you could meet. On the way home we stopped at a garden center near our home in Kirkwood to look around. We weren't in the mood, but we stopped anyway since it was a beautiful spring day: sunny, breezy and warm. After walking around for a bit I spotted a garden ornament of a dog, curled up, sleeping-and it looked just like Roxanne-which was really hard to do. I decided to take it home and use it as a marker when we buried her ashes. It was heavy to lift, and I was visibly upset of course, from the day's event. "Can I help you?" the clerk asked. Her nametag said, Roxanne.

When the change in our lives is difficult, God walks with us, takes us by the hand, and gently leads us. I think God knows the change thing is hard for some of us old dogs. New tricks don't come easily. But, we don't go it alone. God walks with us and leads us in a new way to a new day.

Amen.

Sources:

Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, Third Sunday of Easter

www.workingpreacher.org, commentary on Acts 9:1-6 (7-20), James Boyce