

"His Story, Our Story"

In Acts, chapter 22, the Apostle Paul shares the story of his conversion to Christ with an angry mob. This is not the only time he tells people how he came to trust and follow Christ. He shares his conversion story with King Agrippa (in Acts 26). He also writes about his spiritual journey in his letter to the Philippians, and to the Galatians. For instance, he says this: "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus" (Galatians 1:13-17).

What's your faith story? How did you come to believe in Christ? How has He changed you, and what's your spiritual journey been like since you came to faith in Christ?

Maybe you've never thought about writing it down, or organizing it. Perhaps you feel it's just so ordinary and nobody would care to listen. But I think hearing someone's faith story is not only interesting, but can teach and inspire others if we're willing to share it!

Today I'd like to say some things about my conversion to Christ, my journey with Him, my "faith story". I do this with some hesitation. Why is that? Well, for one thing, I don't like to talk about myself. (I've heard some testimonies over the years that have seemed very self-centered – someone talking on and on about themselves). I hope what I say points to *Jesus* and His mercy, not to anything special that I am or have done.

I also am hesitant because *my* faith story involves my being called to the ordained ministry. Please don't think that this calling is any higher or more important than how God has called you to do what you may be doing in life. In Galatians 1:15 Paul mentions how God "set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace". God has set *you* apart for some important task in life! Every follower of Jesus has a calling to serve the Lord where God places us.

I also share my faith story with some reluctance because it's not extraordinary or spectacular. Maybe yours isn't either. But every story of how we've come to Christ and what our spiritual journey has been like is unique and important! Maybe in some way or ways you will be able to identify and connect with mine.

So let me get started! I didn't go to church at all in my earliest years of childhood. My parents were loving parents, but they just didn't go to church. I did start to go to Sunday School during my elementary school years (partly because our back yard was adjacent to the churchyard). I would hop over the fence to go to church. I went to Vacation Bible School. Somewhere around, maybe 10-11 years of age, I began to think more about God. I went to the confirmation class and joined the church when I was 12 or 13, but even then I didn't go to church regularly. I have many fond memories of spending many Sunday mornings and afternoons fishing on the Chesapeake Bay (our next door neighbor had a brother who owned a nice cabin cruiser).

But my longing for God began to grow, and I became more and more involved in the church. Much of it was because of the influence of the young pastor of our church. Jim was tall and skinny, and he had two qualities that I loved. One, he liked to go to Hershey Bears' hockey games. So did I. And the other was that he liked to play baseball. I did too. He even played wiffle ball with us neighborhood kids in the church yard. I just never thought preachers liked hockey or baseball or normal stuff like that! *Isn't it true that Christ draws us to Himself through our relationships with other people?*

I began to grow more hungry for God. ***Was I a Christian then?*** I don't know. I can't recall that I had ever consciously turned my life over to Christ. My faith was kind of vague. But I wondered about God and the meaning of life.

I was saddened to learn one day that our pastor was being appointed to another church, and we were getting a new pastor. Our new pastor's nickname was Rocky – Rocky Riedel. He had been in show business. He had been in a band called the 101 Ranch Boys, who played on national radio. He had his own program on WGAL TV. He had been a stunt man for the Cisco Kid. He was a character!

He was also an evangelistic preacher. His teaching and preaching were very Bible based. He talked about being "saved", that it wasn't enough just to believe in God, or be a good person, or go to church. He said Scripture tells us that all of us have sinned, and our sins separate us from God. But Christ came to forgive us and bring us back to God.

In the Fall of Rocky's first year at our church we had a week of revival services. I had no clue what revival services were like, but when he asked me if I'd play my accordion for special music at one of the services, my answer was, "I guess".

As far as I can tell, it was sometime during those services that I made a conscious decision to commit my life to Christ and trust Him to save me. But to be honest, I can't say for sure. God was working on me, but I can't pinpoint the minute, or day, or even year that Christ came into my life. But at some point I know I crossed the line and became a Christian.

I wasn't a bad kid. (I wasn't as good as my mom thought – I was sneaky!). But I wasn't really bad. Yet, I knew I was a sinner, and needed God's forgiveness and a new life. And my life began to change: I began to have a new sense of God's presence in my life. I had an increased desire to go to church and read the Bible and pray. I felt a new love and compassion for people I never had before. I began to feel that God had a plan and purpose for my life that I needed to discover.

Of course, this didn't mean that everything was rosy - just peachy-creamy! It wasn't. *And still isn't!* Conversion – the point of our commitment to Christ – is only a beginning, the start of a lifelong process of trying to become the person God wants us to be.

For instance, my high school days were not the happiest years of my life. Somewhere during Junior High School my self-esteem and self-confidence took a dive. I felt inferior. I was quiet

and shy. You had the popular kids in school, the outgoing ones. Then you had those at the bottom of the pecking order – the "nobodies". That was my group!

Thank God for the church at that time! Ross Street Methodist Church. For me that was a place of belonging. The people at Ross Street church surrounded this shy, adolescent "nobody" with love and affirmation that helped give me a future and hope.

Following my conscious surrender of myself to Christ, it wasn't long before I began to have this feeling that God was calling me to some church-related vocation. Some years before, my former pastor, Jim Morris, asked me one day, "Harry, have you ever thought about going into the ministry?" I said, "No, I could never preach." He replied that preaching was only a small part of what a pastor did. His question planted a seed within me. And now, probably when I was in 10th or 11th grade, I couldn't shake this quiet, inward sense that God was calling me to full-time church related work.

I think it was the next Fall that we had revival services again. One night I went forward to the altar and told my pastor that I felt God calling me to a church-related vocation, and that I was offering myself to God for this.

A side note here: A lot of people have a negative view of altar calls. They are not the "in" thing in most churches. But my conscious decision to follow Christ, and my decision to answer the call to Christian ministry as my vocation, were made kneeling at the altar of a church.

Now even though I had said yes to this call, I didn't want to be a *pastor*. I could never get up and preach! I could never get up in front of people and talk! So I thought about becoming a Director of Christian Education. I guess I naively thought that working in Christian education would not require me to speak before a group of people!

I'll never forget one day in high school. We had a panel discussion in Social Studies class. I was chosen to summarize the arguments on both sides of the issue. I was a nervous wreck. I got in front of the class and started, then I couldn't think of a word I wanted to say. I just stood there, it seemed like an hour. The class members sat there staring at me awkwardly. I was humiliated. *And I vowed to myself never again to get up in front of a group of people and talk.*

Then one day the pastor asked me to preach. He said, "Harry, the only way to find out if God wants you to preach is to try it." I tried to think of an excuse to get out of it, but I couldn't think of any! So I very reluctantly agreed to preach the sermon in my home church on a special Sunday they called "Student Day". Rocky helped me put the sermon together.

When the Sunday to preach came, I was petrified. As I got up to speak, my legs were shaking. I noticed a bird flying around in the back of the church – the balcony. I'd like to think it was the Holy Spirit descending on me in the form of a dove, as the Spirit descended on Jesus at His baptism, but it was just a plain old sparrow. The first 30 seconds or so I literally was shaking. My voice quivered. But after that half-minute or so, God calmed me down. It wasn't the greatest

of sermons, but I knew by the grace of God that I could preach. With God's help I could become a pastor.

Please, again, remember – this doesn't mean that unless God calls you to be a pastor or missionary, that you don't have an important calling from God. Every Christian has a calling to live our life for God's glory! God calls us to be carpenters, brick layers, computer technicians, sales people, secretaries, teachers, homemakers – and these callings are just as vital to God's kingdom as that of pastors.

I graduated from high school and started college. My home church in Lancaster tried to start another church in Lititz. It met in the old rec center, and I preached twice a month at these services. Then at the age of 19 I was appointed to my first church – in Halifax, PA, up along the Susquehanna River beyond Harrisburg. I served that church that last two years of college. Truthfully, those were not happy years. I was homesick. Lonely. Immature. Going to school fulltime and pastoring this church, when most kids my age were just out having fun.

In many ways, I was afraid of people. As a Christian I was narrow-minded, judgmental. Looking back, I doubt that I did much good for the people of Halifax Methodist Church.

After I graduated from college, I left that church, and enrolled at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. I went there because it was a United Methodist seminary, but I hated it. During that year I did preach each Sunday at New Holland Methodist Church, filling in for their pastor, who had had a heart attack. But after that first year I transferred to Lancaster Theological Seminary, and was appointed to serve two churches up in the coal regions (Tower City and Wiconisco churches).

During those years I was single, very busy, and very lonely. I lived alone in a big parsonage. I lived on TV dinners and hamburgers at Brownies, the only eatery in town. Then, after 3½ years there I was moved to Mount Pocono United Methodist Church in the heart of the Poconos! And the best thing that happened there was that I met my wife Nancy. I did something that's a "no-no" these days – Nancy was a member of the church, and I dated her. And somehow I convinced her to marry me.

We got a dog, within a year we had a son. I had an effective ministry there. Yet after 3 years there I fell into a terrible frame of mind about the church, and being a pastor. I thought, "*I just can't do this anymore!*" I couldn't imagine being a pastor for the rest of my life. I was confused. Depressed. All those years I had studied and worked to be a pastor. But after getting there, I discovered it wasn't where I wanted to be. So, at age 30, I left that church, and got a job at Fulton Bank here in Lancaster, in the Trust Department.

After working there for 6 months, I got a whole new perspective on things. I felt drawn once again to pastoral ministry. I contacted the conference and asked for a church. At that time, there were few openings. It was getting close to Annual Conference time, when appointments are finalized. It was Memorial Day. That evening, Nancy and I prayed, "Lord, if you want me back

as a pastor, provide a church. If not, OK. Your will be done." We finished praying, and the phone rang. It was the District Superintendent. A church was available in the Poconos – actually, *three churches*, out in the country, on a three-point charge. Three little churches – it was like being sent down to the minors. But we took it, and had 5 pretty good years there (and left after that with 2 more kids!).

That was a long time ago. A long time ago! And here I am, still preaching. I went back to school when I was 47 to train to be a Marriage and Family Therapist, once more feeling a calling from God.

Over these years there's been much joy, and a lot of pain. It hasn't been easy for Nancy, being a pastor's wife. But she's stood by me.

Life is a journey. Our Christian walk is a journey, with ups and downs, laughter and sorrow. I can look back over my life and see the hand of God, and how some things have fit into place. But, honestly, there are other things that have happened that *don't make sense*. Even Christians live with ambiguities of life, the unanswered questions.

But I believe that the God who has been so faithful throughout my life will be faithful in the time I have left on this earth, and even beyond that, in heaven, working out His will and purpose in our imperfect lives.

My story isn't earth shaking, and dramatic. It doesn't have to be. ***Your faith story*** is important, too! Don't be afraid to share it!

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