

“Our Spiritual Autobiographies”

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
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The Second Reading this morning from Galatians contains a partial autobiography by Paul – an account of his conversion. A more complete statement can be found in 2nd Corinthians where Paul records some of his experiences in following Christ and proclaiming the Gospel. He writes that he has endured “countless floggings, often near death. Five times I have received...the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was ship-wrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea...in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles...in toil and hardship...hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked” (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). Quite a life!

We have to take Paul at his word regarding his personal experience in the faith. As far as we know, he was well educated, loyal to the tradition in which he was raised, confronted by a vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, changed dramatically, yet still zealous, persuasive, committed, and faithful. Through it all his faith journey encompassed many hardships and difficulties. His path was no easy road. Nevertheless, he was a devoted messenger of the Gospel, a writer of a significant portion of the Christian Scripture (New Testament), and one who gave significant formulation to the faith of Christ Jesus.

We study and appreciate his words, such as Romans 3: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law” (Rm. 3:28). And further in Romans he wrote, “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rm. 5:1). His teaching on baptism remains foundational in the Church’s understanding of that sacrament and is incorporated in many funerals and memorial services reminding us of God’s unending promise of resurrection. It reads, “Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:4-5).

He gave us great guidance, for instance in 1st Corinthians 13, the chapter on love, and in a passage we’ll read two weeks from today from Galatians, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Rm. 3:28).

When we encounter Paul, it’s not just that which happened in his life that’s important but also his thought, faith, and witness. So I have given a smattering of quotes that tell some of his written understanding of the faith. His chronology and his correspondence both are important. His biography tells quite a story, for it describes his spiritual history. We echo

in our faith the last line of today's reading: "They glorified God because of me" (Gal. 1:24). We thank and praise God for the Apostle Paul.

What is your spiritual history, my spiritual history? Would our stories produce a response like what Paul experienced: they glorified God because of me. If we were to write our own spiritual biographies, where would we start? When did we become spiritual? Would we say, "Faith was part of my heritage from my birth. I've always been a Christian." Or would we point to our baptisms when the Lord showered us with promise, grace, love, and power? To what role models would we point? Who were our guides, teachers, and examples? Sunday School teachers, pastors, parents, spouses, friends? Has church participation always been in our routines, or was the influence of a mate, neighbor, relative, or friend crucial in our faith journey? Maybe some life crisis drove us to seek help, guidance, support, and love, and the church provided a community of care so badly needed at that crucial time.

And how would we write about our maturing in the faith? What role did early education in the church play in our faith development, maybe church camp, a choir experience, confirmation, or perhaps it was adult Bible study that opened our eyes and propelled growth and understanding.

Who contributed to your faith, what church ministries were important, what role did personal needs play in our faith development? I wish I could hear all your faith stories and learn of your spiritual biographies, your witness to the power of the Holy Spirit at work just as the Spirit acted the life of Paul.

The recent news coverage of rattlesnakes biting family dogs brought to mind this story.

About a century ago a fictional farm family, members of a congregation but quite inactive with a spiritual history reflecting no commitment, involvement, or faith appreciation, experience a unique crisis. The pastor over time had called on them with some frequency but with no change in their pattern. They remained somewhat spiritually dead. One day son Sam had been working in a field and a rattlesnake bit him in the back of his leg, right in the calf muscle. The family called for the doctor to come, and after learning of the situation (remember, this was before modern medicines were available) the doctor simply shook his head and said, "There's nothing I can do for him. All we can do is pray." So the panicky father sent for the pastor, saying, "Can you come over a pray for John?" What a breakthrough, thought the pastor. And he replied, "Certainly, I'll be right over."

When the pastor arrived – and it could not have been a Lutheran Pastor – he was taken to Sam's bedroom where he lay on the bed, very affected by the venom of the snake. He knelt down next to the bed (that's how you can tell he wasn't a Lutheran), and began to pray:

Dear God, you know how hard we have tried these many years to interest Sam and his whole family in you, in the faith of Christ, and the Church he established. We thank you, who, in your infinite wisdom, did send this rattlesnake to bite Sam

thus accomplishing through this snake, what we have been unable to do – awaken him and his family to matters spiritual. We praise you that for the first time in years this family wants to speak to you in prayer. O God, we ask that you would send another rattlesnake for Jim, another for Bud, and another for the ol' man. Send bigger and better rattlesnakes, O God. Amen.”

Sometimes an emergency crisis does create a new direction in life, a direction based on matters spiritual and includes faith in Christ Jesus. Perhaps you have a pivotal point in your life that fits that description. Others have a life long history in the faith, one that makes a spiritual biography cover many more years. All of us have a story to share, a witness to give, and much thanks to lift up. All of us hope and pray that through our lives, with Paul, we can humbly say, “They glorified God because of me.” Amen.