

“Coming to Faith” 2016  
Ezekiel 36:25-29 Romans 10:8-14

### Do you remember when and how you become a Christian?

I don't mean how does someone come to faith in general, but you in particular, what are the details of your journey-of-faith-story... and what was the process by which you came to have a saving-faith in Jesus Christ? Was it a dramatic and highly emotional experience for you? Or was it more intellectual and reasoned out something like fitting pieces of a puzzle together? For those raised in the church and Christian family, you may have simply absorbed your faith over time the way a sponge absorbs from the water it's sitting in... and so you may not ever recall a time before Jesus Christ was a part of your life. If, on the other hand, you became a committed Christian later on in life, then you probably can point to a particular **moment of faith**, maybe through a conversation or a conversion experience in which, spiritually speaking, the Gospel finally made sense and connected with you.

### How did you become a Christian?

Typing that question into Google, in less than a second, comes back with 330 million websites. I didn't take the time to check all those sites, but I did enough to identify one fairly consistent theme. Almost everyone explained how someone or a group of people were instrumental in helping them respond to God's grace. Generally speaking, nobody comes to faith **all on their own**, but there is almost always someone, some special influence that reveals the Good News about Jesus Christ to them. **So, what happened --- that Jesus our Lord did come into your life? Who or what were the important influences that led you to a saving faith in Jesus Christ?, ... and what is it that actually makes someone a Christian?** The Apostle Paul, writing about coming to a saving faith in Christ explains it this way,

vs. 9-10, 13

“if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

... For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” In the Greek, the word, “confess” is more than just talk. It means to be in full agreement, literally, “the same word”. So to say “Jesus is Lord” is a declaration that God's word is the truth by which I live. When Paul wrote this, every Roman citizen and slave was expected to say the phrase, “Caesar is Lord”, indicating loyalty and submission to the rule of Rome. So it was an act of rebellion to proclaim, “Jesus is Lord”, because that was to declare that Caesar and Rome are not. **And so it comes down to us, that if indeed Jesus is our Lord, than other things and desires of this world, are not.** If Jesus is Lord, then my success in this world, the stuff I accumulate are not. Indeed, being faithful with all the resources God entrusts to me, matters a great deal more than all the pleasure or security that having wealth or personal success might bring me. If Jesus really is my Lord, then my life, and my time and effort are about more than just doing whatever I want or desire, and my obedience and my loyalty to Jesus Christ, that matters most, **and that supplants all else.** \* To say I believe in my heart that Jesus truly is my Lord is far more than just reciting the right words or phrases. It is an impossibly high standard that describes a life committed entirely to living out that truth. “believe in your heart” is another phrase that means far more than first appears.

In the Greek, “to believe” is to trust without reservation, and means much more than just intellect and reason, or recognizing and accepting certain facts as truth. The heart was believed in the ancient world, to have control over our emotions, intellect, will, desires and reasoning, so what I believe in my heart guides & defines everything. \*\* **To believe in your heart** refers to the core truth or value that most defines and determines how I live in the world. The specific Greek verb tense that Paul uses in these

verses indicates that “to confess, to believe, and to be saved” are all ongoing actions that are still in process, that started sometime in the past, **but are still progressing ... inferring that as we confess and believe more and more, we are still being saved and transformed more and more, by the power of the Holy Spirit & grace at work in us.** \* This means, the way that we function and operate in the world most accurately reflects what we truly believe in our hearts as we gradually grow more faithful and Christ-like as we increasingly live into God’s grace and Spirit. **Our faith is a living and constantly changing thing, either coming closer to Christ or drifting further away.** And yet, if we are Christians with integrity, then we know that despite our best efforts and intentions, we still stumble and fall, we fail to be faithful.

**The history of Israel as it’s written in the Old Testament, of sometimes being faithful to God and other times not, is a matching narrative to our own spiritual journeys.** The passage we read from the prophet Ezekiel was written during a down-time of suffering, defeat and hopeless shame. They were living in exile in distant Babylon for having failed and having turned aside from God in every imaginable way. But these are not words of harsh discipline or condemnation. They are hopeful words of reconciliation and restoration... that despite all their sin and failures God had not given up on them, but continues to invite them back into a healing relationship of promise and grace.

vs. 28

“you shall be my people, and I will be your God”

Speaking through the prophet Ezekiel, God recognized that even on their best day, Israel could not get it together, and that the nation was completely unable to be faithful... and so in an act of wonderfully healing grace and mercy, **God would accomplish what they had been unable to do.**

vs. 25-27

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you.

Notice how many times God promises “I will”, not once, “you must”. It’s all grace as God promises to restore the relationship destroyed by human sin... **and with the coming and sacrifice of Jesus Christ that promise has been wonderfully & entirely fulfilled... and that is the Good News that we are called to proclaim.** Yes, the phrase, “Jesus is Lord” is **an impossible standard** that we are unable to achieve or faithfully/consistently fulfill. The point is, that **by grace alone** we are invited and drawn into a relationship with God. It is God’s grace that starts us out on that journey toward faith, and it is God’s grace that guides us every step along the way, and eventually, it is God’s grace that will lead us home. **So when and how did you become a Christian?** Ordinarily, God brings special people into our life who somehow make us aware of the Good News of Jesus Christ. I was going through some boxes of stuff stored in my office, and came across some old address books recently. Thumbing through them, names and memories of my distant past, I was stuck by the many and remarkable ways each of them had contributed to my spiritual journey, toward the growth and development of my faith. **How did I become a Christian?** it was because somebody helped and guided, somebody told me about Jesus, and others have shown God’s grace & truth along the way... **people who influenced me because Jesus is their Lord. I am so very grateful for all the faithful mentors of my life, whose own faith journey with God was visible and authentic, and who affirmed & challenged me to examine my own walk, and to long for something more real, better and deeper.**

I am reminded of when I used to hike in some of the “old growth forests” of Washington State. In an “old growth forest” sometimes you will come across a perfectly straight line of trees all of similar size that may extend a couple hundred feet or more. That straight line of trees marks where a tree fell long ago.

And as it slowly decayed and decomposed into soil, seeds germinated and were nurtured into seedlings by growing along what is called a “**nurse log**”. That “nurse log” provides nourishment for the next generation, until it disappears entirely and leaves behind that straight line of trees. That line of trees in the forest is the legacy of a tree; with its influence and nurture still visible, having made a long and lasting difference. Now, think about your own life, when you were young, who was influential by taking an active interest in you, and helped shape your character and the person you eventually became? \* **Who were the “nurse logs” to you and your faith development? Who did God send to help you learn to dream, to imagine and reach for the top shelf of faith?** Nurse logs are similar to the way that faith, a living personal knowledge of God, gets passed down through the ages and the generations, and is interwoven into the very fabric of our lives. So too, we need more knowledgeable and experienced Christians to teach us how to live out our faith and respond to grace. Certainly one of the huge advantages of regular church attendance and being an active participant in the life of a congregation is to place ourselves within a Christian environment that will help and encourage us to grow in our faith. As there have been those in our past who were faithful before us, who reliably modeled Christian faith and influenced us, **so now it leaves it to us - a debt we are called to repay.** Our task is to demonstrate the truth and depth of our faith by word and deed, by our ethics & the choices we make in life... **for by our lives we demonstrate what words of faith really mean.** You’ve seen the folks handing little samples of food at Sam’s Club usually given freely on toothpicks or little paper cups, just enough to whet your appetite to buy, to stir up a little hunger so that you want more.

**As a community of faith, we of 1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian Church are called to freely hand out little samples of God’s grace and love to all the people we encounter, as those sent to us by God...** so that maybe we can whet their spiritual appetites for more, by handing out free samples of God’s grace, compassion & truth that will help strengthen and encourage them on their journey toward faith, of walking with Jesus. So during this season of Lent, consider this question: as others have helped, encouraged and strengthened me, **where, how and to whom is God calling me to reflect and proclaim His gracious love?**