

- The third lesson is from the gospel according to Saint Matthew, the fourth chapter. "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, "he withdrew to Galilee. "He left Nazareth and made his home Capernaum by the sea, "in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, "so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah "might be fulfilled. "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, "on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, "Galilee of the gentiles. "People who sat in darkness "have seen a great light. "And for those who sat in the region "and shadow of death, "light has dawned. "From that time, Jesus began to proclaim, "'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.' "As he walked by the sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers. "Simon, who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, "casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. "And he said to them, "'Follow me, and I'll make you fish for people.' "Immediately, they left their nets and followed him. "As he went from there, he saw two other brothers. "James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John, "in the boat with their father, Zebedee, "mending their nets, and he called them. "Immediately they left the boat and their father, "and followed him. "Jesus went throughout Galilee, "teaching in their synagogues, "and proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom, "and curing every disease "and every sickness among the people." This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thanks be to God.

- Let us pray. Help us Lord to become masters of ourselves, that we may become the servants of others. Take our hands and work through them. Take our minds and think through them. Take our lips and speak through them. And take our hearts and set them on fire for Christ's sake, amen. Assuming that all has gone according to plan, Dean Williman is at this very moment holding forth in the memorial church at Harvard College in Cambridge. And lo and behold, I am here. He will be, as usual, much shorter than I am. (scattered laughs) And that is why they rejoice to have him there. (scattered laughs) You are kind, patient, and generous here, and I rejoice to be with you. The 25th of January, a date that might not be in your appointment books in red letters, is in the calendar of the church, the feast day of the wonderful conversion of Saint Paul. And the Sunday nearest January 25 is usually kept with some notice taken of that very visible and obnoxious of all the apostles, Paul. And so I decided in the safety of a foreign pulpit to preach on Saint Paul, a subject not held in high repute in Cambridge, and probably after I'm finished here, not in high repute at Duke. (scattered laughs) But every dog has his day. Every saint, his. Every apostle, his. And today, I want to talk about the wonderful conversion of Saint Paul, and what it might possibly have to do with you, and with me. And so the text is taken from the epistle that we heard this morning; Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Christians, the first chapter, the 17th verse. "For Christ did not send me to baptize, "but to preach the gospel." "Christ did not send me to baptize "but to preach the gospel." Now Saint Paul saw himself and is seen by us as the evangelist, the apostle to the gentiles. That means, as a Jew, he preached good news to everybody else. That is to Jews, and to non-Jew, alike. And so, with a presumption, even an arrogance that you might recognize in him, he presumes to include everybody, everybody who may or may not wish to be included in what he has to say. I suggest there is no greater ego in all of theology, or in any of the world's religions, greater than that of Saint Paul. Now, I invite non-Christians to see if they can find the Muslim Paul, or the Hindu Paul, or the Buddhist Paul. Perhaps that is a worthwhile exercise in comparative religion, and

I'd be very curious to see with whom you would come up. We have Paul, and that is quite enough. Now, I could spend my allotted time this morning, and even more of my allotted time, speaking about Pauline doctrine and theology. These are not popular subjects today, and they've never been very popular among Methodists, particularly southern Methodists. But that is a subject for another occasion, another sermon, and perhaps even another preacher. (scattered laughs) Pauline doctrine and theology however is important stuff. And without Paul, which we must remember, there would be no Christian faith as we know it. Surely, there would be Jesus, and thank God there would be Jesus. But remember, Jesus was not a Christian. Jesus was a Jew. So what commends Saint Paul to us is that while he was also a Jew, he was also a Christian, and gave systematic, organized, passionate thought to what it meant to be a follower of Jesus Christ. And that is why he is important to us, that is why he is important to the Christian foundation, that is why he is important to our Christian identity. We may not like him, but we cannot do without him. So of all the things that one could say, and perhaps one ought to say about Saint Paul, and of all the things one might try to remember, what is the one thing that might be said, and the one thing that ought to be remembered? Well I'm going to give you one thing to remember about Saint Paul, and that is he was subject to change. Subject to change. S-T-C, as they like to say. Subject to change. It did not mean that he invited change. It did not mean that he sought out change. It did not mean even at the moment of change that he particularly welcomed change. But he was subject to change. And that is what has made all the difference. That is another word for a concept that we associate with Paul, and perhaps identify at a certain point in our way along the way, and that is conversion. Conversion is being subject to change. To be turned around. To have everything about you changed and transformed. And we remember Saint Paul particularly because he was subject to change, turned around on the road, and in the way. He thought of himself, as so many of us do, as committed to one thing. He knew who he was, he knew what he was, he knew what he was doing, he was committed to one thing, one way, which happened to be his way. And he was very good at that. We must not in any way diminish Paul's credentials. He was first in his abilities as a Jewish scholar, he was first in his zeal to persecute those who disagreed with him. He was a zealot, a Taliban kind of guy, if you want to put it in contemporary argot, and he was on his way when we encounter him, to stamp out the new heresy of the followers of Jesus. This is how he is described in the Acts of the Apostles: "And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter "against the disciples of the Lord, "went unto the high priest and desired of him "letters to Damascus to the synagogues, "that if he found any of this way," that is, Christians, "whether they were men or women, "he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem." Now, what do we learn from that sentence? Well number one, we learn that he was filled with zeal for his cause. He was enthusiastic. We know that he asked for the assignment of rooting out infidels. He wasn't assigned to do it, he wasn't required to do it, it wasn't his turn to do it, he asked for it. Like that irritating kid in section, whose hand is always up before everybody else, who always knows the answer and it's always right, that is the sort of person we can all do without. And that is the sort of person whom Saint Paul was. He asked for this assignment of rooting out infidels. And we know also from this passage that he was an equal opportunity zealot. He wanted the names of men and of women, the acts tell us, just like Senator Joseph McCarthy. (scattered laughter) And so what happened? We all know the story. He was turned around in the road, and the rest, as they say, was history. But it wasn't really history, for it was not the past that compelled Paul. It was the future. He lost his old name, Saul, and all that went with that, and he acquired a new name, Paul. And a new mission; to preach the gospel of Christ to anybody who would listen. Now if any of you have ever spent any time with a recovering alcoholic, or a recovering ex smoker, or a recovering Catholic, or a

recovering Presbyterian,

(scattered laughter) you know that it is a very painful thing to be around the recently and the newly converted. They cannot contain their zeal. They, having been saved from the fiery pit, or the dreadful abyss, have now taken it on, as their mission in life, to save everybody else, whether you want to be saved or not. Or whether you are already saved or not. We all know those kinds of people. Some of them come and have Thanksgiving dinner with us, sit around our table. Some of them are related to us. Some of them may be sitting beside you this very morning. (scattered laughter) Conversion is a dangerous and compelling thing. It will not only change your mind, but it will change your life. It turns things upside down. That is why in the old English prayer books, which gave a gospel reading for Saint Paul's day, they included in it that verse from Matthew, chapter 19 verse 27, which ends with that disturbingly enigmatic verse of change, that the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. If there's one verse I suspect, by democratic action that could be removed from the New Testament, it would be that one. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. Why is that? Because nearly everyone of you in this chapel has spent all of your lives trying to be first. And many of you young people, members of the student body of Duke University, you have succeeded in being first. First in everything, like George Washington. First in war, first in peace, first in basketball, first in a love of your countrymen. (scattered laughter) I know that this university, very much like my own, is filled to the gills with anxious, ambitious, over achievers. And I know how you got that way. Your parents encourage this, your teachers expect this, and most of you have bought into this at a considerable annual sum. That is why (scattered laughter) like your brothers and sisters in Cambridge, that is why you are so driven, so pushy, so anxious, and in certain cases, so very difficult to get along with. You want to be first, number one, you have the right to be first, and so when you hear this word of scripture that says the first shall be last, and the last shall be first, that is those of you clever enough to sit in these front seats will suddenly be cast back there. (scattered laughter) And those of you who have hidden yourselves back there, will be pulled up here. Everybody's a little dis connoted. But to be first in things of secondary importance is not to be first at all. How many of you would prefer to make a good living, to a good life? Conversion is waiting to turn you around to establish some new, some different, and dare I say it, some better priorities, to which you will commit your young lives. Conversion is what takes us where we are, and finds us where we are, and transforms us from where we are, to where we ought to be. Another word for conversion is transformation. And in perhaps one of Paul's most magnificent lines at the beginning of the 12th chapter of Romans, he says, "I beseech you therefore, brother and sisters, "by the mercies of God, "to offer your bodies a living sacrifice." And then he goes on to that great text, which should be inscribed over the door of every chapel on every college campus in the country, "but do not be conformed to this world, "but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Paul spoke out of the experience of transformation, of conversion, of being turned around, of having his mind changed. Perhaps some of you read, as I did, in last Sunday's New York Times, the obituary of the late dean of the chapel at Princeton, Ernest Gordon. Ernest Gordon was in his prime when Dean Williman and I were just beginning our work in this business. Gordon was the grand old man of college chaplains and college preachers. And he had a remarkable story to tell, which he told frequently and well. He had been an indifferent Christian, like so many of you. Reasonably decent, reasonably baptized, reasonably hopeful. He was in the war, and had been captured by the Japanese in the east, and spent four years in a dreadful, horrid, Japanese prison camp. The famous prison camp which built the bridge on the River Kwai. Ernest Gordon was known as River Kwai Gordon. And there, under the most horrendous, and horrible of circumstances, he was converted. At the moment where it should have been death, and

destruction, and denial, where the absolute inhumanity of his Japanese captors should have given everybody reason to give up all hope, it was in the middle of that that Gordon came to understand that Christ was sparing his life for a purpose. And so, when the war came to its end and he saw his Japanese captors now themselves captured, his initial response which was to return stroke for stroke, vengeance for vengeance, suddenly dissipated. And he said, "If I had sunk to that level, "it would be clear that my life was a waste. "But God had spared my life "so that it could be turned around, "and I could be, like Paul, a minister of reconciliation.' And so he was. He died last week, but his story will not die because before he died, it was made into a Hollywood movie, which is to be released at some point later on this year. This is not simply a case of changing one's mind. I voted democrat last time, I shall now vote republican this time, this is not a question of simply changing one's mind. This is having one's life changed. Subject to change. Now think of the Apostle Paul, as he comes down to us by his own hand in history. A man of impressive credentials. And credentials are important things. Good grades do count, leadership is valuable, charm, ability on the field, the delights of a closed community, all of these activities of endeavor and achievement, they are valuable. But they are means, and not ends. These are not ultimate goals. And if widely used, they are goals to a good life, which is yet before you, and not behind you. It is easy, I know, to say to the acne faced young, that your best years are ahead of you. That is conventional wisdom, the sort of rot we give out usually around commencement time. But what happens when I say to those of you of a certain age and beyond of whom there appear to be quite a number here this morning, (scattered laughs) what if I say to you that your best years are ahead of you, too? Either you will say I'm preaching nonsense, or you will wonder, have all the years heretofore been wasted? And the best question is, maybe I know something that you don't know. It is of course, the third. Your best years are ahead of you. And thus, when you are turned around in the way, not simply staying where you have been, but embracing what is yet to be when God turns you around, what an extraordinary moment. What an extraordinary opportunity there is. Conversion is disturbing because it upsets things as they are. But conversion is also wonderful because it gives you an opportunity to become what you ought to be, what God wants you to be, and what I truly believe you and I really want to be. No one in his or her right mind is convinced that where you are right now is the best possible place to be for you. You may be resigned to it. You may be experienced in it. You may be comfortable with it. But truly, you cannot imagine that this is the best that there is to be for you. Can't you just let your mind loose for a moment, to imagine the somebody that you really want to become? More gentle. More loving. More caring, and more cared for. More joyful. Less greedy. Less anxious. Less self obsessed. Less anally compulsed. Wouldn't you want to be more than that? To be turned around, therefore, is to be open to a changed mind, a changed heart, an enlarged imagination. It means that this possibility is as open to you as it was to the very hard case of Saint Paul. His conversion is called wonderful because it seems so impossible, so improbable, so unlikely. Here he was, here he was, a super-Jew, a super-Roman, a super-Greek. And God saw in him something else, some potential yet waiting to be realized. He needed a good crack in the head of course, a kick in the butt, a strange and mystic encounter, to get his attention. But God did get his attention. And Saul became Paul. Now what follows is not perfection. Everything about Paul seemingly changed except his personality. He did not become Mr. Nice, Mr. Easy, Mr. Charming. But his troubles and his difficulties were in the right direction, in the right cause, in the direction of becoming. These next words, I offer particularly to students in the university, however defined. The rest of you may listen in because it applies to you, but it is particularly addressed to undergraduates. You are not without hope. Some of you think you are, and some of us think you are hopeless. (scattered laughter) But you are not without hope. You may think that you

know it all, that you have done it all, that it has all been determined for you, that you are stuck in a groove, a pattern that has been laid down before you, before you were born. And yet, if God can turn Saul into Paul, and turn him around, change his mind, transform his attitude, think of what God can do with a Duke graduate. First, you know more than Saint Paul. How do I dare say that? You have his experience to help and to inspire you. Saint Paul as he stood, probably could not be admitted to Duke. One qualification that he would clearly fail to meet is he is described in the contemporary literature as short and bow legged. He would be of no particular use in one of your major activities. (scattered laughter) But nevertheless, God found a use for him, and God has a use for you. And that is why conversion is called wonderful. It's called wonderful for Saint Paul, but it's not just for him. That's why it is wonderful. Because it is now for you. Now there's been a lot of talk recently about the greatest generation. Your grandparents, who endured the great depression, and won World War 2, all by themselves, single handedly. You need only ask your grandfather, and he will tell you how it was done. You may be sick of hearing about the greatest generation. But a recent study says that you, you current undergraduates, are the next greatest generation. That may seem far fetched, fantastical, fanciful. But it's in a book filled with statistics, so it must be true. It is a book called the New Millennials. That is those of you who will graduate from college in the first few years of the 2000's. You are called the next great generation, and why? Let me quote what the authors say about those of you currently candidates for degrees, this is what it says: "History has tapped them," that is you. "to be the inheritors of the mantle of the upbeat, "team-playing, World War 2 winning GI's. "If the rhythms of history continue, "millennials will not be culture creators "to the same degree as boomers," your parents thank God, "nor entrepreneurs to the extent of generation X'ers" your older siblings. Instead, you will be "a generation capable of "rebuilding powerful political and economic institutions "and re-energizing a sense of community and public purpose. "Depending on the course of events, "millennials are poised to define the 21st century, "in much the same way as the GI's defined the 20th century." That's what it says. I didn't say it, that's what it says. This is not only personal conversion, it is a generational conversion. A wholesale turning around. And what is now defined as first; selfish ambition and success at any price, now becomes last. And what is least valued in this world; love, peace, joy, serenity, what Saint Paul calls elsewhere the fruits of the spirit, these will become first. Well that's all very good for Saint Paul, you might say. And if might be vaguely relevant to you, but will you succeed in this? Will any of us be able to accept our moment of change, and come out on the other side? Prepared not only to preach the gospel, but to live the gospel. Theologian Howard Thurman, famous a generation ago for his preaching at Boston University, has a little poem called Will You Succeed? And it speaks to this question, this is what it says: "You say the little efforts that I make will do no good. "They never will prevail to tip the hovering scale "where justice keeps in balance. "I do not think I ever thought they would. "But I am prejudiced beyond debate "in favor of my right to choose which side "shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight." Which side will feel the stubborn ounces of your weight? Saint Paul has given us everything. That is, the opportunity to turn our lives around, to have them turned around, to rejoice in the example of one whose life was turned around. Not only your life, but your generation, and your world. Conversion is wonderful. And my dear young friends, today conversion has your name on it. Who and what you will become is the great challenge and the great hope for tomorrow. That is why we give thanks to God for Saint Paul's wonderful conversion, and for the wonderful good news that conversion is available to you and to me, here and now. Opening our hearts and our minds to what God will do and how God will transform us, opening our lives, subject to change. For God, and for good. Let us pray. Oh gracious and generous God, we give you thanks for the wonderful example of blessed Saint Paul. And for

that opportunity that rests with us, to open our lives and hearts to the surprising changes you have in store for us, as we meet you in the road, and encounter you on the way. This we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen. (organ music)