Today we celebrate the life and work of our patron saint, St. Paul. Paul is simultaneously the most influential writer and the most controversial character in the 2000 year history of the Jesus movement. Today, it might be helpful to consider the first of these controversies, which is related to our scripture reading from the book of Acts.

In this account in the book of Acts, composed about 65 years after the events described in the book, Paul was traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus when he and his companions were stunned by a blaze of light. Let me read you the second half of our passage as it was paraphrased by Eugene Peterson: We fell flat on our faces. Then I heard a voice in Hebrew, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me? Why do you insist on going against the grain?’ I said, ‘who are you, Master?’ The voice answered, ‘I am Jesus, the one you’re hunting down like an animal. But now, up on your feet, I have a job for you. I’ve handpicked you to be a servant and witness to what’s happened today, and to what I am going to show you. I’m sending you off to open the eyes of the outsiders so they can see the difference between dark and light, and choose light, see the difference between Satan and God, and choose God.’

This was Paul’s moment of shock and stunned silence. Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus has been described as a conversion experience. This is the first topic of controversy. The controversy is, “Was Paul a convert from Judaism to Christianity?”

For me, there isn’t much of an argument about this question. Paul was not a convert to Christianity. Paul was born Jewish and considered himself to be Jewish to the end of his life.

There was no other faith for Paul to be converted to. During Paul’s time, no one described themselves as Christian. There were followers of Christ. During Paul’s time almost all followers of Christ were Jews. There were Jewish followers of Christ and, thanks to Paul’s efforts, there were a few Gentile followers of Christ.

After his experience on the road to Damascus Paul joined a significant and growing minority of Jews who were followers of Christ. Just as there are dozens of variations on what it means to be a Christian in our time and place, there were dozens of variations on what it meant to be Jewish in Paul’s time and place. On the road to Damascus Paul moved from one branch of Jewish practice to another.

Jewish scholar Dr. Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg describes Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus as the calling, not the conversion, of Paul. I agree. Paul was called to do a new work. Paul’s calling was to open the eyes of the Gentiles to see God, the God of Abraham, the God of Moses, the God of Jesus.

The context for this story is important. Here are a couple of ideas about Paul’s context. Jewish participation in the government and authority structure in Judah had lost all credibility in the decades before Paul’s birth. This was not a prosperous time for most Jews in Judah, and most of the Jewish population could be considered to be poor. Jesus and Paul worked within a context of poverty and oppression. It was a context of uncertainty and change. It was a time of increasing divisions and increasingly bitter conflict. Oppression of the Jews within their homeland and in cities around the Roman Empire put pressures on the Jewish community, leading to fissures in the community and the growth of alternative groups, like the Qumran community.

During the first years of his adult life, Paul describes himself as a person who worked to enforce orthodoxy in the Jewish community. This is the context for his experience on the road to Damascus. For a period of three days Paul was blinded. Out of this experience he was called to do a new work.

Paul’s new work was to open the eyes of the Gentiles to see God. Paul’s new work was surprisingly similar to his previous work. Both had to do with God. The difference was that in his new work Paul would look outward to share his knowledge and experiences with the outsiders, with the Gentiles. Paul’s new work required many of the same tools and many of the same values; he still used his passion for the spiritual life, his skill with words and his knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures, but he put these values and skills to work in a new way.

As a church, we find ourselves in a similar situation. Our context is changing rapidly. The first part of our context is that in the past sixty years humanity has come to dominate the created world. People are changing the climate of the earth through our production of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. Many of us are carrying phones in our pockets that are more powerful than any computer that existed before 1980. We have the
capacity to destroy all human life with just a portion of our weapons in our nuclear arsenal. We live in a time of uncertainty and change. Humanity’s domination of our earthly environment has been part of our context in which many people are turning away from traditional religion and other traditions.

So we live in a time of the decline of all religions. This can be seen most dramatically in the United States and in Europe, but it is true all over the world. Sixty years ago there were ten Episcopal Churches in Syracuse and most of them were led by full time priests. Today there are five. Only one of those five churches is led by a full time priest. Episcopalians are not alone. The same is true in most Christian denominations and in most other religious traditions. People can choose to do many different things with their time. Many are choosing to not be part of a religious community. Some people are choosing to live or work or play with people who mostly seem to think and look and act the same. We live in a time of division and sometimes bitter conflict.

We at St. Paul’s have been struggling to adapt to our changing context. For several decades St. Paul’s balanced declining attendance on Sundays with greater use of our parish house building during the week. At the exact time when church membership was declining across the United States two closely affiliated groups were increasing their size and presence at St. Paul’s. The offices of the Diocese of Central New York took up a large portion of the second floor of our parish house for several decades. Beginning in 1982, the Samaritan Center gradually grew into a large private, non-profit organization that was housed at St. Paul’s until the summer of 2015.

The change happened in a couple of dramatic moments. First came the time, about ten years ago, when the diocese of Central New York moved their offices to a suburban office park. Then came the month, in the summer of 2015 when the Samaritan Center moved to a new, beautiful facility of their own on North State Street. I was not here in the summer of 2015, but I’m guessing that some of you had an experience that was a little bit like Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus. No one was blinded by the light. Yet some of us were shaken by the experience of walking into a building that was silent. We were shaken by the experience of walking through our enormous complex of buildings and seeing room after room, dark and bare and empty. This was our moment of shock and stunned silence.

For some of us, this was as close as we will ever come to a road to Damascus experience. The world has changed. Our context has changed. Our church has changed. Some of the change has been difficult. Some of the change has been very good. We can pretend that nothing has changed, but we would be foolish to ignore what is happening around us.

God is calling us. Just as God called St. Paul to do a new work, God is calling us to do a new work. Just as it was for St. Paul, the new work will be similar in some way to the old work. The new work will require many of the same tools as the old work. But we are faithful to God’s call when we are responsive to what we realized in our moment of shock. We are faithful to God’s call when we are responsive to the needs of the world as it exists today.

Just a few days ago a few of our members showed this faithfulness by making a change, by responding to the needs of the world as it exists today. Carol led the effort. For twenty years Carol Decker has been leading our monthly First Friday Dinner. This past week Carol put her values and her skills to work in a new way by making lunch for the Caring Place program. This was not a conversion experience; this was Carol being called by God to do a new work.

Perhaps you find yourself, or have found yourself, in a similar situation. Perhaps you have found or will find yourself in a similar moment of change. Perhaps you have had your moment, or will have your moment, of stunned silence, a moment when you were knocked to the ground as St. Paul was. Perhaps you have had a time when life knocked you to the ground. If you are like me, your first concern was to just be able to stand upright again. When we finally pick ourselves back up, and stand upright, one possibility is to act like nothing has really changed for us. One possibility is to try to go on as we were before.

Life never really goes on like it was before. It is a strange thing; it is at the moment when we are laid low that God calls us, encourages into something new. It is at the moment when we have had the wind knocked out of us, when there seems to be nothing but tears for us, that God begins to equip us to do a new work, to begin a new chapter of life.