

“Saul, Ananias & The Damascus Road”

Acts 9.1-20

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After spending the last couple of Sundays thinking about what Christian mission is all about, this morning we are returning to our study of the book of Acts. If you remember, the outline of Acts is given to us in the very first chapter, with Jesus’ final words to his disciples right before his ascension into heaven: *“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (1.8)”*. And we have seen how through the power of the Holy Spirit, the apostles have been witnessing to the Good News - the promise that God’s Spirit will be poured out upon all flesh, beginning in Jerusalem, yes, but the Spirit is always moving out further and further, breaking down boundaries and sometimes getting ahead of the church. We saw this clearly in Philip’s ministry in Samaria, when the good news comes to those usually thought of as enemies of Israel. And when the Spirit sends Philip out on a wilderness road towards Gaza, the good news comes to a most unlikely character, the Ethiopian Eunuch (8.26-40). “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” the eunuch asks. And we see the answer is clearly nothing!

Jerusalem, Judea, and yes, even Samaria - but how will the gospel reach the ends of the earth? How will the good news come to the Gentiles, those who are truly outside the Jewish faith? The answer to this question begins to unfold in chapter 9, as we read about another unlikely character who is called to be an instrument of God’s plan. The man who has been aggressively persecuting the Christians, the man known as Saul. Let us listen now for God’s word as it comes to us from Acts chapter 9, beginning with the first verse:

1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest **2** and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. **3** Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. **4** He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” **5** He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. **6** But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” **7** The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. **8** Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. **9** For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” **11** The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, **12** and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” **13** But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; **14** and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” **15** But

the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; **16** I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” **17** So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” **18** And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, **19** and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, **20** and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

This conversion story of Saul on the Damascus Road is one of the most dramatic in all of the scriptures, and is key to what will happen in the rest of the books of Acts. It will be through this man Saul - the very one who was persecuting the Christians - it will be through this unlikely instrument that the gospel will spread to Rome Ephesus and Athens, to the ends of the known world. One of the challenges we face is how familiar this story has become, so familiar that we often refer to things being like a “Damascus Road” experience. It has become in many ways the template used to describe what a Christian conversion looks like. But when things become so familiar, there’s danger for us to go into auto-pilot mode and miss what is right before us. ***So the challenge before us today is to try and hear this story as if for the very first time.***

As we begin our reading today in chapter 9, you may remember the character of Saul has already been introduced to us, but only in a minor way. Back in chapter 7, when Stephen is about to be killed, we are told that the perpetrators of the violence drag Stephen out of the city and then begin to stone him. And the witnesses to the stoning lay their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul (7.58). And after hearing how Stephen prayed to Jesus to receive his spirit, saying “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (7.59-60) we read this simple statement: “Saul approved of their killing him” (8.1). And if you think this means Saul was just a bystander watching over their coats and not really into the evil being perpetrated against the Christians, think again! We are told at the beginning of chapter 8 that “Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, [and sending] them to prison” (8.3). And so when we turn to chapter 9 we discover that Saul is as determined as ever to go after the church. Breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord (9.1), Saul, like a bounty hunter, goes to the high priest asking for the green light to target the Christians in Damascus. And if he finds any men or women followers of the Way, he intends to bring them to Jerusalem, bound like prisoners (9.2).

Over the centuries artists have imagined Saul must have been riding on a horse, making the long trek from Jerusalem to Damascus, a journey of over 130 mile - imagine him riding tall and confident as he spews out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. But then something happens that literally knocks him to the ground - a sudden light from heaven flashes all around, which is always a sign in the Bible that God is showing up. Once high and mighty, Saul is now on the ground groveling and then he hears a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” This sounds a whole lot like the time God called the prophet Moses at the burning bush, saying “Moses,

Moses, take off your shoes for you are standing on holy ground” (Exodus 3.4-5). And when Saul asks like Moses the logical question, “Who are you, Lord?” the answer is not “I am who I am” as is in the story from Exodus, but it is pretty close! The voice says to Saul, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” In other words, “When you are doing harm to members of my community, followers of my Way, when you persecute them you are doing it unto me.” Without a lengthy sermon or tongue lashing detailing all the evil Saul has been doing to the Christians, Jesus simply reveals that he indeed is alive - and that Saul’s attempt to stop the movement of the Spirit is not working. Saul’s ignorance is exposed ([New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Volume IX](#), p.151) and oh, how the mighty have been brought low!

In many ways I think it would have been very easy for this to be the end of the conversion story: Saul on the way to Damascus, the Lord reveals himself in a direct way, light flashes, divine words spoken, and Saul is set straight from his evil ways. ***But no, something else unexpected happens.*** You see, Saul’s conversion is not yet complete. The Lord simply directs Saul to get up from the ground and to go to Damascus where he will be given further instructions. And we learn that this further instruction is going to come from a disciple named Ananias. When the Lord calls his name in a vision, Ananias responds like the young Samuel did, saying “Here I am!” (9.10) Then the Lord gives Ananias directions on how and when to meet Saul. And at the same time this is happening, Saul is having a similar vision which will direct him to the same place, and through the laying on of hands Saul will receive his sight. But instead of an immediate “Yes, Lord, I will obey” Ananias speaks his truth and he calls out the proverbial elephant in the room: “Lord, everyone knows about this guy, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem, how much evil he was planning to do to us here in Damascus. You want me to be part of a plan to save him? You’ve got to be crazy!”

And you know, Ananias is right. ***It doesn’t make any sense that God would be calling this man, this persecutor of the church to be on the side of the saints!*** According to all standards, Saul is the last person who would be a candidate to be on God’s team. But here’s the deal: the gospel is the good news that God’s Spirit is poured out on all flesh regardless of how worthy someone might be! In the world’s calculation, “worthy” or “not worthy” status is usually determined by the conventional standards of morality - how naughty or nice you may have been. But in God’s calculus things are different. Even those who do the worst things, like crucify an innocent man or stone someone like Stephen, these are ones worthy of forgiveness and capable of being used for God’s purposes. Who better than Saul to reveal this truth, that God is able to use anyone to be a witness to this Good News?! So that is why in response to Ananias’ objection to Saul, the Lord simply says, “Ananias go and do as I have asked, for ***Saul is an instrument whom I have chosen*** - I have chosen this unlikely man to be the one to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and even before the people of Israel” (9.15).

For me, in many ways Ananias is the real hero in this drama. Though he has many, many reasons to resist the invitation, he chooses to trust the Lord and do his part in Saul’s conversion. And notice how when Ananias enters the house, and lays his hands on Saul, he calls him “Brother Saul.” Instead of harboring resentment over Saul’s past actions, he recognizes this enemy of his as an equal, as a member of the family faith. He extends hospitality and grace - he touches and lays his hands on Saul, and the Holy Spirit does the rest! Immediately the scales fall off Saul’s eyes - yes the one who was blind now sees! Then Saul gets up and is baptized. Because of Ananias’ obedience, Saul is able to spend several days with the disciples in Damascus, and then he begins to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” ([Matthew Skinner, Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel](#), pp. 67-73)

So what are we to make of this encounter of Saul on the Damascus Road? First of all, though Saul who will be re-named Paul becomes an important character in the rest of Acts, bringing the gospel to the Gentiles in places as far away as Athens and Rome, and though he will go on to write many of the books of the New Testament, ***the main character in the drama is not him, but rather it's God.*** You see, the turning of a Pharisee persecutor into the great Apostle to the Gentiles is a great paradox, a great reversal - indeed its "the surest sign that the crucified Messiah [is] indeed Lord, and that [the Christian movement is] from God" ([Luke Timothy Johnson, The Acts of the Apostles](#), p.166). Though most of us do not have a dramatic conversion story like the one told here in Acts, and though most of us won't spend time persecuting people for their faith like Saul did, we need to remember that the point of the story is not what Saul does but rather it's about what God does! "Ananias go and do as I have asked, for Saul is an instrument whom I have chosen." An instrument that I have chosen! It's not about Saul choosing the Lord, but rather the Lord choosing him! Throughout the scriptures God has a way of choosing unlikely instruments: remember the young peasant girl Mary who became the mother of Jesus. Or the youngest brother David, almost overlooked as king because he was off taking care of the sheep. Or think about Moses - he had murdered an Egyptian and was a fugitive in a foreign land when the Lord called him.

Each week when we hear the assurance of pardon, we are reminded that there is nothing we can ever do - no sin, no mistake, no pain we have caused - no there's nothing in all of creation that we can do that changes our standing with God. We are God's Beloved, Chosen Ones - and God is the one who has chosen us to be instruments of Jesus' mission in the world. This is the good news Ananias is able to express to Saul when he calls him Brother, the same good news we can share when we forgive one another.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul talks about the power of gospel in this way: "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (2 Cor. 4.7) The word used here for clay jar is the same one used for instrument in our passage - "Saul is an instrument or vessel whom I have chosen" ([Working Preacher's Narrative Lectionary](#) #316; April 7, 2018) Though we might like to think otherwise, all of us are made from the earth, and to earth we shall return. We are but broken vessels seeking to witness to the power of God's love, a power that we do not generate ourselves but is only a gift from God. As we shall see unfold in the chapters before us in Acts, Saul becomes Paul and he will face much suffering and opposition. Like him, when things go wrong - when we face difficulties and challenges, suffering and heartbreak - we may be tempted to give up on our call and even give up on ourselves. But my friends remember the good news, the good news of Jesus Christ that God will never give up on us, that though we might not know the plan ahead of time, and we may have to just trust to take the next step before us, God is faithful, and God's power is made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12.9).

Thanks be to God!

Amen.