

NARRATIVE LECTIONARY 4-15-2018 Paul's Conversion

Acts 9:1-19a

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 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. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 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. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." 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, 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." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." 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; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 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." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus.

Prayer: *Merciful and loving God, set us free from all that keeps us bound to our own desires and all that stands in the way of our being the people you have created us to be. Lord, hear our prayer. Amen.*

It's fun when confirmation and preaching overlap, and they did this week as we looked at the book of Acts on Wednesday and we have this story today. The opening line in the study Bible we use in confirmation says that the book of Acts is a "linking" book, connecting the Gospel story of Jesus with what happened next – the Acts of the Apostles (or the acts of the Holy Spirit within the apostles, as I have heard it said should really be the title); followed by the stories of the churches Paul founded and then advised as the Christian faith spread around the world. (that's why we did the webby first message). The central story of Saul/Paul's call, his encounter with the risen Christ, moves the mission along; from what was said at the end of Luke, witnessing in and around the places Jesus traveled, to a mission to the whole world, to those outside the original Jewish context of Christianity.

Not only does the narrator tell the story of Saul's transformation from persecutor to apostle in Acts 9, Saul himself re-tells the story *twice* when defending himself before persecutors, both in Acts 22 and in Acts 26. Paul believed himself an apostle (a messenger of Christ's mission) "untimely born" – he never met the earthly Jesus but he certainly interacted with the risen Christ! He said his story

was as legitimate as the call of the other apostles who had known Jesus personally. And also in this text is a second, more hidden call story that is probably closer to many of ours. I would like us today to think about Ananias (who shows up in verse 10). He already has embraced the faith, but he is the one who is asked to step outside his comfort zone simply because the Lord asks. Paul had his socks knocked off. The request of Ananias is less earth-shaking, maybe; but for him, it was still risky.

Paul had held the coats of those who had murdered Stephen, a good man, the first adult martyr to the faith. He was a persecutor, a collaborator, delighted in making the lives of Christians terrible. The church in Damascus had been talking about Saul and its members were rightfully afraid of him -- he had been dragging Christians out of house after house, throwing them into prison, and desiring their deaths. In the conversation with the Almighty, Ananias didn't know what had just happened, that the risen Christ had confronted Saul on the road to Damascus just as Christ was now confronting him. But even though Ananias didn't know about Saul's conversion in process, he did as the Lord told him anyway. He trusted that Christ had a future purpose for Saul. He risked his life to do the will of God. The result of that uncertain leap of faith was that Saul's eyes were opened and he was baptized, and became part of (and eventually a leader in) the very church he sought to wipe out.

Paul's conversion is one of the great stories of the early church, it has inspired Christians from every generation. But hidden in its shadows is this other inspiring story. We know nothing of Ananias beyond this story. Acts does not tell us that he became a hero of the faith, proclaiming the gospel to the outsiders, starting churches in urban centers across the Roman Empire, standing true to the gospel while on trial for his faith over and over again, ending up under house arrest in Rome awaiting a trial before the emperor himself. That was Paul's famous story. What Ananias did was to obey Christ's command to go pray with Saul *so that* Paul could do all those things. Without Ananias' prayer, Saul would have spent the rest of his life as a blind man wondering what his life might have been.

What did Saul – become Paul – find after his conversion? Here is a selection of readings from the beginning of Acts which helps to answer that question. *All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.... Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul...With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the*

proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need... when arrested for preaching the apostles said "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him"... As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. That's just a few of the stories. Now there had to be something about the power of that community and their faith in Jesus that changed Saul's perspective.

Not all Christians are going to well-known heroes of the faith. But everyone can pray for and with those who have scorned the church and are scorned by the church. Not everyone can be Paul, but we all be Ananias. For whom do we pray even though it cuts against our grain to do so? A member once confessed to the pastor that even though he didn't think of himself as hating people, there was one person he really hated for the way the person had wronged him. The pastor advised him to pray for the person every day for two weeks -- pray *for* the person, not *about* the person. "Why should I do that?" he asked. The pastor said, "I don't believe anyone can continue hating someone when they have consistently prayed for that person before the throne of God. And, who knows, God may even answer those prayers and the person's life be blessed and changed in ways we cannot even imagine." That's being an Ananias - who certainly was surprised by joy and change and hope for the future to be better for those who called themselves Christians. That kind of prayer would be good on our lips as well. *Change our hearts, O God, as you changed Saul's. Amen.*