

“You Want Me To Do WHAT?!” – Acts 9:1-20 – Easter 3 – Apr 22, 2007

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” I suspect many of us as we hear those words automatically think of Paul’s conversion experience on the road to Damascus – and the rest of us think of it when we hear the phrase “on the road to Damascus.” This is arguably one of the best-known-about (I can’t say best-known) incidents in the New Testament – even people who do not profess to be Christian will probably admit to having heard about it. And almost everyone can recite the key details of the incident: Saul is traveling on the way to Damascus; he is blinded by a brilliant light; he hears the Lord ask him in a loud voice why he is persecuting him; his sight is restored; and he becomes the apostle Paul, the greatest evangelist of the new church.

Well, sort of. That’s the way the story goes – sort of. Oh, people remember the part about Saul heading to Damascus accurately enough. Most people who have heard of the story even know that Saul was persecuting Christians, but I’m not sure how many people today know he was hunting them down like Palestinian terrorists, kicking in doors of houses and arresting all inside, just like the videos on CNN. He even had the equivalent of the National Security Letters that are used today to bypass irritating obstacles like court warrants and constitutional restrictions. No stopping Saul, he was on his way to the top! Actually, according to his own admissions later he was already at the top of his game – nobody was more zealous, more successful in carrying out search and destroy missions against these religious fanatics who called themselves “the people of the Way.” Even here, he had obtained letters from the high priest giving him permission to arrest and extradite without interference any believers he found, and bring them back to Gitmo – I mean, Jerusalem.

Most people today can even remember with some accuracy something about a flash of light, and a voice talking to Saul, and Saul answering. With one major exception, this part of the story has all the shock value, all of the adrenaline-producing impact of an IED – those homebrew explosive devices that are doing so much damage in Afghanistan. While the event stopped Saul’s convoy dead in its tracks, leaving all “standing speechless,” this event was not the death-dealing blast of an IED but the life-dealing intervention of Jesus protecting his people. When the dust had cleared, and the shocked travelers regained their composure, they discovered that Saul was now blind, and with grace they brought him to Damascus, where he remained sightless and apparently in shock for he neither ate nor drank for three days.

This is where most people’s memory fails. Now, be honest – without turning to the text, do you remember how Saul the prime persecutor becomes Paul the ace apostle? For ten bonus points, do you remember the name of the person involved? Don’t feel too badly if your answer to either of these is ‘no’ because I suspect very few people recall this part of the story – and yet I think it is perhaps more important than what happened to Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus.

I say that it may be more important because what happened to Paul was miraculous, a once-in-a-thousand-years kind of experience, but what happened next is the kind of thing that happens to you and me all the time. Not in exactly the same way, perhaps, but we can relate to what happened next in the story.

First, let’s answer that second question first – the name of the person involved. The name was Ananias – and if that sounds familiar it may be because we saw another Ananias last week. That Ananias was the husband of Sapphira, and they were believers in the Jerusalem area who both died of embarrassment when confronted with the charge that they had been dipping into the offerings. (Makes me think they may have been the first Presbyterians ... after all, the only unforgivable sin for Presbyterians is messing with the money!) Later in the Book of Acts we will run into another Ananias who is the high priest that attacks Paul in Jerusalem, but the Ananias here is a third and distinct individual. This Ananias was a resident of Damascus, and a very faithful disciple of Jesus.

As a bit of an aside, you may be wondering about the Saul/Paul name issue. There is no account in the New Testament as to how the change of name from Saul to Paul happened. We do hear of a Saul who prosecutes Christians in Acts prior to this incident, and afterwards he is always referred to as Paul. Paul never refers to himself by the name Saul, but he does in the letter to the Galatians refer both to his

former life as a vicious prosecutor of Christians and to a revelation experience, although not with the kind of detail given in Acts. So there seems to be a loose connection between the Saul who violently persecuted Christians and the Paul who became an apostle through encountering Jesus on the road to Damascus, and we can probably safely assume, as did Luke, that it was one and the same person.

But back to Ananias, in Damascus. Faithful Ananias, a practicing believer in Jesus, who appears to him in a vision and gives him detailed instructions to go find a certain “Saul of Tarsus, and lay hands on him that he might regain his sight.” Can you feel the tension here? Can you grasp hold of the enormity of the grace that is being displayed by Jesus and asked of Ananias? He is being asked to go find the person who could be described as a cross between the head of the National Security Agency and Dog the Bounty Hunter, and touch him to heal him! We can understand that he might have been a bit reluctant, and can also understand why he sought confirmation that yes, this was what Jesus wanted him to do, asking “you want me to do WHAT?!” And God bless him, Ananias did as he was asked – he found Saul, laid hands on him, and his blindness was cured.

Why is this so important? Because it demonstrates the incredible grace of God made manifest in Jesus. Jesus could have restored Paul’s sight the same way he lost it – simply by willing it to be so – but then the whole incident would have been merely a divine magic trick. Paul could then have gone on preaching about the incredible power of God who could cause anyone to do anything. But Paul was cured through the same offering of self by a disciple that was demonstrated so powerfully in the offering of self by Jesus, and it is this that made Paul proclaim instead, “Jesus is the Son of God.” There is an infinite difference between the power of a God who can make anybody do anything by command, and the power given by God to those who respond in faith. If God were to make us do everything, then our actions would be meaningless – we would be nothing more than puppets, or images on some cosmic DVD. But God gives us the choice to respond – or not – and it is in that having a choice that God’s grace becomes real, and our actions become truly meaningful. That’s the most powerful message of all in this story, that the creation of the Apostle Paul was completed through the meaningful, faithful, and even loving action of an ordinary disciple of Jesus who responded in faith. The ministry of Paul, arguably the most significant factor in the creation of the Christian church, was made possible through the faithful action of an ordinary follower of Jesus.

We should also note that Ananias drops out of sight at this point, and that too is both normal and important. To be sure, his role in Paul’s conversion experience continued to be talked about – still is, even today – but he went back to living his life. We can almost hear him say with gratitude, “this one thing you have asked of me, Lord, and I have done it with your help.” I have no proof, but I am sure, however, that more was asked of Ananias, and he continued to respond in faith – for that is the way of those who have been touched by Jesus and follow him.

That’s where this story becomes personal for us. I doubt many of us can relate easily to Paul’s conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Few if any of us have been blinded for days by the dazzling glory of God. For that matter, few of us could claim to have persecuted the followers of Jesus with unmatched zeal – we may have dissed a few believers before we became one, but persecute? Naw! And none of us have gone on like Paul to change the world by creating a new religion, founding a new world-wide church. But all of us have, like Ananias, been approached by Jesus and asked to do something in faith that would heal someone, that would help someone come to believe, that would free someone from their spiritual blindness. Not necessarily in a vision, like Ananias. More likely our chances to help have seemed much more normal, looking like chance meetings with someone who is troubled, or having someone ask us a simple question that underneath begged for an answer of faith. An opportunity to help, perhaps. Maybe just a chance to be present, and listen, and signal love. These are the requests from Jesus that connect us with Ananias. These are the moments in our lives when God’s grace in Jesus Christ fills us with the Holy Spirit, and gives us the strength to proclaim, along with Paul, “He is the Son of God.”