

April 18, 2010 Saul and Ananias

Acts 9:1-20

*9*Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and 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. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' ⁵He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.' ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' ⁷The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul 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. ⁹For 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.' ¹¹The 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, ¹²and 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.' ¹³But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' ¹⁵But 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; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' ¹⁷So 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.' ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

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

Have you ever gone visiting on behalf of the church? Stewardship visitation, or as part of a pastoral care team or anything? People generally find that to be a scary thing to do, and I admire those faithful folks who agree to do it in spite of the discomfort that it can cause. That's a topic for a whole other sermon sometime...today though, we're going to take a look at another visit – and if you thought YOU were scared to knock on a door.....just picture this:

Damascus. 36 CE

Your name is Ananias, and you are a follower of Jesus. Luke calls it “the Way”. You are a follower of “the Way.” (Interesting expression, isn't it? Instead of saying “I'm a Christian” or “I'm a follower of Jesus” – you say “I belong to the Way.” - do you like it? Does it imply or evoke a different way of faithfulness? That would be another good sermon wouldn't it? Again – sometime. Not now. Sermons just fall out of these passages, so many ways to take it and I just have to pick one and go. So here we go.

Your name is Ananias, you belong to “the Way”. Whatever else that way is, it has everything to do with someone called Jesus, of Nazareth. You had never met him while he lived in Galilee, but you'd heard about him: how he preached, how he said that people and God came before rules and traditions, how he accepted and welcomed those whom others rejected, he ate with sinners, and told people that the reign and realm of God was so near as to be in their very midst....

You'd heard the horrible part too –the trial by night, the way he'd been crucified and the strange things he said while he was in agony on the cross....

And somehow, even though you didn't know him in person, you'd been fascinated by him. As though something kept drawing you to him...and you wanted to know more.

And then, not long after his death – and you had thought that was the end of that – some of his followers came to town. Everyone was talking about it, and so you went to see. Partly out of curiosity, and partly.....something else. Deeper than that. You went. They were in the town square, talking to anyone who'd listen. Saying weird things, these men and women....they said he wasn't dead; that God had raised him and that some of them had actually seen him.

You looked into their eyes. They were serious! You looked around to see how the others were taking it – some looked dubious, some looked disgusted, others laughed and rolled their eyes...but some stayed behind to talk with them afterwards. You did too. You said to yourself “well they're either crazy, or they're for real.” And you had to know which.

And from that day on, your life was never the same. Even though you'd never seen him in the flesh, and even though you never saw him after he rose from the dead, through these women and men who took the time to talk with you and tell you what he meant to them....you became convince that he WAS there, that he was in some mysterious way alive among you, calling you to follow him as he had called some of them from their nets years before. And you decided to say yes...to follow....and that had been two years ago.

In those two years, you'd learned more and grown more than you ever imagined you could. You met with other believers regularly, and their numbers were growing daily....it was wonderful. Even though you had to hide from the authorities, you'd meet and sing and pray and tell each other what God was doing in your life – and the group included people you'd never have talked with each other normally, never mind eat together and hug and supportthis Jesus really made a difference. His vision of God's dream of a world where there was radical equality, acceptance, hospitality.....that dream lived on whatever else you say about him. In that dream was his life, and it continued, alive among you.

There were arguments of course, some snobbery and disagreements about how things should be run, but the preachers always called you back to the teachings and life of Jesus. It was an amazing thing to be part of the Way - it made your head swim.

The hardest thing for you, had been to learn to speak to others about Him. You'd rather do anything but that. But slowly, and hesitatingly you began. No long speeches.....no universal pronouncements...just telling people one by one how you came to be part of this and what it means to you. It was hard at first, but you did it.

There was another reason it wasn't easy. A very practical reason. There were those who wanted to stamp out the Way – who were so threatened by it and afraid, that they were persecuting its followers. You had to be careful. Speaking to the wrong person could cost you your life. And it was getting worse.

Among you, you developed a secret sign to identify yourselves to each other. The fish. You used it to protect yourselves....your lives.

Then, the worst happened. It was horrible. Stephen, a strong and brave man,well this is how Luke remembers it:

Acts 6-7

Seven Chosen to Serve

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.' What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

The Arrest of Stephen

Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. They set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.' And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Stephen's Speech to the Council

Then the high priest asked him, 'Are these things so?'

And then he preached a sermon. It was quite a sermon! You can read it all in chapter 7. And this is what happened next.

When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

What a time to be part of the church! It was terrifying. You didn't know WHO you could trust...and the church members stuck close together for support and protection. It made for a tightly knit group of believers. There were more and more people captured, tortured, put to death....some of them you knew. Your friends. Every time a knock came to the door, you'd jump and you'd wonder is this it?

And among those who were doing the persecuting, one name stood out. Saul of Tarsus. He was vicious. You'd heard plenty of stories about him, and he was one man you would avoid at all costs.

So that's how it was. Frightening, ...but humans can get used to almost anything, and life had settled into a predictable pattern. Be careful who you trust, keep out of the public eye as much as you can, look to your sisters and brothers in Christ for support. It wasn't great – but it was predictable, and you could live with it.

Have you ever noticed that just when your life gets predictable.....

One day, you'd been praying and reading the scriptures with your friends. The story had been about young Samuel with Eli in the temple, hearing God's voice at night – remember that one? Well, it was the strangest thing! As you were praying it seemed as though God called YOU. Spoke your name. And, as young Samuel had done, you said "here I am, Lord"

You're not going to BELIEVE what came next! Or – if you know God and God's ways, you probably will. God is always doing stuff like this. God said

Verses 11 and 12 *"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."*

You thought: "I didn't hear that right".

Then

"Yes I heard that right. Saul of TARSUS???? The one who's been breathing threats and murder against us and breaking into houses and throwing our sisters and brothers in prison – you want me to go and lay my hands on him to help him regain his sight? It's a trap! Or if it's not and if he's really blind then good enough for him. Why should I go and help him see again, to murder more of your people?"

And you went on like that for a while – really indignant and toward the end, almost panicking because you just knew what was coming next. And it came.

Verses 15 and 16 *"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."*

What was there left to say? You opened your mouth a few times to object, but – three was nothing to say – so you wrote your will, and went.

On the way to that house you thought a lot about your life (chances were, it was over) and how you came to know Jesus and to follow in his way. What you had learned about him from other followers – how he broke down the barriers between and among people, how with him anyone could have a fresh start no matter who they were and what they'd done....

You thought about your group of believers...how rich people and slaves, Jews and Greeks, men and women all mattered – all ate together – all shared everything they had, serving each other and God....

And your thought kind of ran away with you and you found yourself at that door, walking in and saying to your mortal enemy – the man who had killed your family and friends...you took a deep breath, **and called him brother.**

Verse 18: "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."

If there is any miracle about the 9th chapter of Acts, that's it.

How Ananias could, because of the call of Jesus, go to an enemy and call him brother. And only then did the scales fall away from Paul's eyes. Only then was the sight restored. It took a simple man, following in the way of Jesus, to pay a visit to someone he should have hated and call him brother – and mean it.

That does not happen by human will or strength. The ability to do that is a miracle – the gift of a gracious God who calls us to go where we would never choose to go

And do things we never thought we would.

The risk is considerable

The promise is monumental

Who knows what scales can fall?

Amen