“Brother Saul”

Rev. Debra McGuire

Bethany Presbyterian Church

Acts 9:1-20

May 4, 2025 – 3rd Sunday of Easter

***Acts 9:1-20***

***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 traveling 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;[***[***a***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%209%3A1-6%2C%207-20%0A&version=NRSVue&interface=print&showfootnotes=no&showxrefs=no&showheadings=no&showwoj=no#fen-NRSVUE-27213a)***] so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9For three days he was without sight and neither ate nor drank.***

***10Now 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, 12and he has seen in a vision[***[***b***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%209%3A1-6%2C%207-20%0A&version=NRSVue&interface=print&showfootnotes=no&showxrefs=no&showheadings=no&showwoj=no#fen-NRSVUE-27217b)***] 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[***[***c***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%209%3A1-6%2C%207-20%0A&version=NRSVue&interface=print&showfootnotes=no&showxrefs=no&showheadings=no&showwoj=no#fen-NRSVUE-27222c)***] 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.”***

Last week Rev. Don asked you to reflect a little about your recent Easter Sunday experience. He asked you what the day was like, before or after church, what was the atmosphere here in the room; or later at home with family; or maybe outdoors later in the day. I like the idea of reminding us to remember not just the Easter story, but to also remember everything that surrounded it – the smells, the feelings, the backdrop. Here we are in the third Sunday after Easter. As we get more distant from the celebrations of that day, how much of an Easter feeling remains with us?

The Book of Acts, written by the same author as Luke, is the story of how the apostles spent their second and third and following days and months and years after the events that constitute what we now call Easter. It would have been completely different for them in so many ways. None of our current church systems, structures and traditions would have been invented or created yet. They would not have had any of Tamra’s sticky buns, or great choral music, and there wouldn’t have been any kind of liturgy, or even a bible. As hard as it might be for a life long church goer to imagine it, the first century follower of Christ would not even recognize any of the things we do on a given Sunday. The atmosphere *now* is completely different than 1st century Jerusalem.

The book of Acts introduces us to many characters that we have never met before if we have only read the gospel stories. One of the new characters we meet, just two chapters before today’s text begins, is Stephen. Stephen was one of a new category of leaders among the disciples of Jesus. Stephen was a great and loyal disciple who was enthusiastic with his messages. So much so that when he spoke in the temples the crowds began to treat him just as they had treated Jesus. They began to search for ways to speak badly of Stephen and to catch him breaking a law of the temple. Eventually Stephen was dragged to the Council to defend himself, but the temple authorities were enraged and “dragged him out of the city and began to stone him” until he died. (Acts 7:60) Acts 8:1 reads, “And Saul approved of their killing him.” Our first introduction to Saul.

“That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.  **3**But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.” Saul continued his persecution of early followers of the Way as our author calls it. Even going as far as getting letters from the High Priests addressed to synagogues in Damascus, giving Saul authority to seek those in Damascus who were also followers and bring them bound back to Jerusalem.

Saul was seeking to do serious harm as he set out on that road toward the city of Damascus.

In todays text, the atmosphere is very dark. Nothing like the celebrations of three Sundays ago in our time. And in a flash, *literally*, everything changes.

***Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around Saul. 4He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” 5Saul 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.”***

Immediately struck blind, the confused men who were traveling with him led him into Damascus. Echoing the three days of Jesus’ last days, Saul spent three days neither eating nor drinking. Like the caterpillar who sits motionless before emerging from the chrysalis as a butterfly, there is a time of transition during which all is suspended before a transformation is complete. Oh, to be a fly on the wall during those three days. I don’t know how many of us have ever experienced a bright flash of light and been pulled off of our feet and heard a loud voice calling our name. Only to be told by that loud voice that we’re seriously on the wrong track. Worse than being sent to the corner to think about what he had done, he is made blind and taken to the city and doesn’t eat. He’s all but dead. I love the narrative here, but I can’t relate to it. Certainly it would take something pretty dramatic to get my attention if I was as terrible as Saul, and certainly it’s good news when someone as bad as Saul is transformed into one of the primary authors in the collection of writings that are in our biblical canon. When I read a story with this much drama I’m certainly moved and excited and love the message.

But what really gets me? Is Ananias. Saul’s transformation was not a solitary event. There was another player. A regular guy, being a good disciple, being asked by God to go introduce himself to this murderer Saul, who might actually be carrying a letter from a synagogue in Damascus giving him authority to bind me and take me back to Jerusalem – that kind of terror I can tell you with certainty would make me run somewhere far far away. What I am in awe of is how certain Ananias was that this was God’s voice. His first reaction to the vision was to say, “Here I am Lord.” There is no indication that Ananias was worried by this vision. But when God gave him his instructions he became worried soon enough. *“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.”*

Saul was praying and had a vision of a man named Ananias. And Ananias had a vision of his own about Saul. God did not transform Saul on his own. Saul’s transformation came about because of the relationship God created by these two visions. This is another version of the words we might remember about whenever two or more are gathered there God is. Saul seems to get all the air time in this text, but it’s Ananias who is sent well beyond his comfort zone to complete the will of God as intended for Saul. Ananias faced a tremendous fear to deliver God’s message to Saul. Ananias is only mentioned once in the bible, here in this text. Saul *responds* to a startling and frightening event, but Ananias *obeys* in the face of his own fears. **Saul is acted upon, but Ananias acts.**

It is only through Ananias that Saul learns that he is an instrument whom God has chosen to bring God’s name before gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel, and that he will suffer in order to do this.

As the messenger, Ananias also brought a blessing and a sense of community to Saul who originally sought to break apart. Instead of breaking apart the community of disciples in Damascus, Ananias calls him Brother, and lays his hands upon him, bringing physical healing to Saul along with the word from God. Brother Saul. Imagine the weight of those scales, and the lightness Saul must have felt as they fell from his eyes.

We will hear a great deal more from and about Saul as we continue through the Book of Acts. Referred to as Paul only much later in Acts, this is the same Paul who is the author of 13 of the letters included in our canon. In the coming weeks we will learn about other turning points in the young church, moments that were pivotal to the expansion and spread of the word and witness to the glory of the resurrected Christ.

We are inheritors of that expansion and spread of the good news of those days. We may not have experiences that compare to Saul/Paul, but maybe! More likely we have had experiences like that of Ananias. The courage to follow what seems to be the voice of God, take in the message from God, and take steps despite our fears is the strength we get from Ananias today. We don’t need to be the main character to be vital to God’s work. Our task is to continue to listen, ask, discern so that we can step in when it is our turn to bring a transformation to completion.

Thanks be to God!

Let us pray,