

Acts 9:1-8

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.

Psalm 146:1-8a

1Praise the Lord.^a

Praise the Lord, my soul.

2I will praise the Lord all my life;

I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.

3Do not put your trust in princes,
in human beings, who cannot save.

**4When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;
on that very day their plans come to nothing.**

5Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God.

**6He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them—
he remains faithful forever.**

7He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets prisoners free,

8the Lord gives sight to the blind,

Acts 9:9-18

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.

Dear friends Grace to you and peace from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week was the last week in our preaching series on John. We have been in the book of John retelling the story of Jesus since Christmas. This is the rhythm of the church. Talk about Jesus' birth at Christmas. Talk about Jesus' death and

resurrection at Good Friday and Easter. Talk about Jesus appearing to the disciples after that. We've already done all that. So now this spring just like spring every year we start talking about the beginning of the early church. It was awesome that Jesus was born, died and rose again, but that doesn't mean anything if people don't hear this awesome story about God's son. The disciples did their job of living and dying for their faith and sharing their story. But there was one guy in particular who helped share the gospel more than any other person at that time. That person was Paul. We are going to be spending a couple of weeks with a sermon series on Paul. So here is some quick info on him before we get into our story today.

Paul was about the same age as Jesus. He had this incredible religious experience that we hear about in our story today. This happened not long after Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul then ends up going on a bunch of missionary trips around the Mediterranean spreading the gospel and setting up churches in places like Corinth, Galacia, Ephesus and Philippi. Paul wrote letters to these churches and those letters became the oldest books in the New Testament. The gospels were written much later. But I am getting way ahead of myself. In our story today we hear that Paul used to be called Saul. He was a strict religious Jew. And for a few years Saul was a completely different person. He went around hunting down Christians and bringing them to Jerusalem so that they could be killed. If you were

a Christian in the early church Saul was not someone you wanted to bump into.

(Explain the game Christians and Romans).

Ananias is playing this game of Christians and Romans. But it's not a game, it's his actual life.

The Lord comes to him in a dream and calls him by name! "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."

Those are some incredible specific instructions from God! The name of the street, the name of the man, where he is from and what he will be doing. And the fact that this guy is waiting for someone named Ananias to come lay hands on him. This is a very specific dream message from God. But it still leaves out a key detail and Ananias calls God out on it.

13, "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."

Even with a very specific message from God Ananias asks for more reassurance. Ananias knows Saul is a bad guy to be associated with. The church in Damascus has been talking about Saul and its members rightfully afraid of him. This could easily be a trap. Ananias didn't know what had just happened. He didn't know that the risen Christ had confronted Saul on the road to Damascus. So what does God say to put Ananias' mind at ease?

15 "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."

Ananias didn't know about Saul's epiphany, but he did what the Lord told him to do anyway. He trusted that Christ had a future purpose for Saul even though Saul's past *as he knew it* didn't seem to line up with what God was asking him to do.

Ananias' decision to lay hands on Saul was a decision to risk his life to do the will of God. The result of that leap of faith is that Saul's eyes are opened and he is baptized, becoming a leader in the very church he sought to wipe out. I would also argue that in a way Ananias' eyes were opened to. Opened to the ways that God might be working through ways he didn't think were possible.

Paul's conversion is one of the great stories of the early church, and it has rightfully inspired Christians from every generation. But hidden in its shadows is another inspiring story, and one that I think is easier to relate to. We know nothing of Ananias beyond this story. The rest of Acts tells us the story of Paul. But we don't hear what happens to Ananias. All Ananias did was to obey Christ's command to go pray with Saul *so that* Saul could do all those things. Without Ananias' prayer, Saul spends the rest of his life as a blind man wondering what his life might have been.

It reminds me of an MLK quote: Often times the first reaction is, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the Good Samaritan came by and reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?...' At first Ananias is scared for his life, but then God helps him remember this is not about him. It's about God and a blind man who needs his help to see. Not everyone can be Paul, but we all can and should be Ananias. What does that look like? Pray for the blessing of churches or types of Christians that you might not agree with. God can use them anyway, even if you don't agree with everything they believe. Pray for Donald Trump. Pray for Hillary Clinton. Pray for Putin. Pray for Robert Mueller. Pray for the NRA. Pray for Black Lives Matter. Pray for the

homeless and the 1%. If God can use a guy like Paul to spread the gospel then God can use any of those things for good.

A man once confessed to his 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. When the man asked why he should do this, the pastor said, "I don't believe anyone can continue hating someone when they have consistently prayed for that person to be blessed by God. And, who knows, as a bonus God might even answer those prayers and the person's life be blessed and changed in ways we cannot even imagine."

Here is what it takes to be like Ananias. If you forget these points just go back to the story and pay attention to what Ananias does. 1. Be open to what God might be saying to you. Through prayer, through visions, as you experience your day. 2.

When you think God is calling you to do something say "Here I am, Lord" and listen. 3. When God gives you some directions remember it is ok to ask for clarification. Ask God about your concerns and questions. 4. God might ask you to pray for people you don't want to pray for. 5. Pray for those people anyway. 6.

Trust that God will take it from there.

We never hear about Ananias again. We don't know if Ananias hears about the rest of Paul's story. All he knows is that he did what God asked him to do. And now Saul can see again and he got baptized. And now he has to trust that God will use this transformed person to continue to do ministry even though he might not see the results.

So this week I hope that you inspired by the story of Ananias. Try praying for people and things that you normally wouldn't pray for. You may or may not see the result of those prayers. But this story encourages us to keep our spirit open and reminds us to pray for people we don't want to pray for. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

[Pastor] We pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

A brief silence.

Your persecutor, Saul, suffered a great shock on the way to becoming your servant, Paul. Awaken us where we have fallen asleep, and shake us out of harmful habits and destructive attitudes. Show us how to fully employ our best gifts to your glory. Risen Lord, **Hear our prayer.**

Lights may not blind us nor voices thunder in our ears, but the waters of this blue planet are steadily rising, and the effects of our abuse and neglect are unmistakable. Teach us to recognize and heed the warnings while we yet have a chance to be part of the solution in preserving our cosmic home. Risen Lord, **Hear our prayer.**

Sometimes the unenviable task falls to us, and you ask us to face what we fear most. Give us the courage of Ananias, who though he was terrified, obeyed your command and followed, to the benefit of millions. Risen Lord, **Hear our prayer.**

We are excited for this spring season with the abundant beauty and new life you provide. We are also excited for our building campaign and the next phase of ministry at CVLC. Help us to be bearers of much fruit, reaching out with open arms, without fears or doubts, to each other and to our community with the love of Christ. Thank you for always being with us and for providing us with grace that is sufficient to meet all our needs to continue your work that you have called us to do. Risen Lord, **Hear our prayer.**

Thank you for our partners in Christ here and around the world, who deepen our understanding of the breadth of your Holy Kingdom and the work of the Holy Spirit: **Casa de Oracion and Lily of the Valley; for the Mlowa parish in Tanzania; for the “Kids Alive” program in the Dominican Republic.**

We pray for our mission team who has been serving in the Dominican Republic this week. We pray that you were able to create meaningful connections and relationships with our team and the community in the DR. Bless their travels back home and help them to share their story. Risen Lord, **Hear our prayer.**

Make the scales fall from our eyes and restore us to fullness of vision and strength by your spirit, O God of hope and healing. Send your mercy especially to... **Shannie, Elizabeth, Shannon, Chuck, Becky, Rachel, Melissa, Alex, Kim, Dick, Michelle, Olivia, Jenny & family, Roy, Jim G., Vicky K., Sid, Karin, Annika & family, Vicki O., Rose, Jessica, Barb, Brian, Craig,** _____,
and those we now name in our hearts, or aloud (pause)...
Risen Lord, **Hear our prayer.**

Following the trail blazed by the earliest warriors of the Church, we take our place in the line of redeemed saints whose joy it is to praise your name forever.

Be with those who grieve the loss of loved ones, *especially the family and friends of...* **Diane Olson, Karen, and Vern Kohlhoff,**

_____,

Comfort them and strengthen them in the hope of the resurrection.

Risen Lord, **Hear our prayer.**

[Pastor] Mighty and merciful God, you have provided us with everything we need to carry out the work before us. Accept our prayers and fortify us for the days to come. Amen.