

nearby. But I didn't think God would want that to stop us. So we walked over to the well, which was a few streets away. I hauled up a bucket-full of cold, bracing water. Paul knelt on the ground beside me and I scooped up handfuls of water as I baptized him and welcomed him as the newest disciple of Jesus the Christ. I was filled with awe, even as I wondered if anyone would ever believe this.

It turned out, everyone believed it. Soon Saul began going by the name Paul. Now everyone who knows of Jesus knows about him. He travels far and wide, supporting small communities of disciples throughout the region. He has suffered for his faith in Christ, just as God told me he would. I heard that he was in prison, just recently, but that by prayer and singing, God opened the doors and released him.

The real story is Paul's, for sure. But God transformed me, that day, too. I realized that God sees each of us differently than we see ourselves. Differently than other people see us, for sure. God saw Saul not just as a murderer or a trouble maker. God saw that he could become a vessel for Jesus; a messenger for sharing faith. And that's why Jesus met him on the road that day, blinding him, changing him, leading him onto the way of the cross. God helped me see Saul differently, too: as a person in need whom I could help. And then, as a fellow disciple. I never thought that would have been possible. God is the one who gave Saul his sight back. But God helped me to see clearly, too. Amen.

*** As we spend time in Acts this month, the sermons speak to you in the voice of one of the people in the story. This week, imagine the speaker of the sermon as Ananias. This kind of sermon take a little more creative license with the text, but also helps us enter the story in a fuller way and imagine ourselves present to God just like these people were.*



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

May 1, 2022

Second Sunday of Easter

The Voice of Ananias: "I Can See Clearly Now"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Acts 9:1-20 (**see note at end before reading the sermon)

I couldn't believe it. There I was sitting at the table eating breakfast, when the light changed and I started to hear a voice. Right away, I knew it was the Lord speaking to me. I dropped my bread right on the floor, I was so stunned. "Here I am, Lord," I managed to squeak out. And then I tried to imagine what God had to say to me, Ananias.

As God's voice spoke to me, the first thing I felt was fear. God was telling me about Saul of Tarsus. And from everything I had heard, Saul from the city of Tarsus was a terrible man. Because of him, my brothers and sisters who had been following the way of Jesus were being arrested. Saul was binding them up and hauling them off to Jerusalem. There were rumors - maybe more than just rumors - that Saul had even killed people who believed that Jesus was the one sent to save us. Can you imagine the evil that must have been in that man's heart for him to do something like that?! So when I heard Saul's name from the voice of God, my hands went cold. I tried to keep listening, though, and not let the fear in my chest take over. God seemed to be saying that Saul was, right that very minute, praying. And that he was seeing a vision of *me*. Of me, laying my hands on his eyes so that he could see again. I was totally confused and the last thing I intended to do was go anywhere near this Saul, no less touch him.

So of course, I protested. But in a way that felt appropriate for a response to God Almighty. I reminded God of all the evil Saul had done to Jesus' saints. I politely included my concern

that the chief priests were giving Saul permission to do all this. My own life could be in danger if I went in search of him!

Looking back, I now think about all of God's people who've come before me who tried to get out of something God wanted them to do. Sarah thought she was too old to have children. Moses tried to say he couldn't speak well enough. Jonah just didn't like the fact that God is merciful. There I was, right along with ancestors like that, telling God that *I* knew better. Well, of course, my protest didn't last long.

Quickly, God told me that God had chosen *this man*, of all people. God was going to use Saul to bring God's name to Gentiles and all across the land. I could hardly believe it! All I could see in Saul was someone to fear, someone who was going against God's will. But I didn't dare doubt the word of the Lord. And what God said next started to convince me. God said that Saul would learn that he had to suffer for Christ's name. That sounded more truthful. Not because I *wanted* Saul to suffer, even though he might have deserved for all the evil he'd done. But because of what had happened to Jesus himself. Jesus had suffered just because of how much he loved God. Jesus had endured the worst of what people and governments had to offer, rather than fight back or stray from God's love. Someone in our group told me that we are called to *cruciform discipleship*. I thought that was a little wordy. But I guess they meant that being a disciple in the way of the cross means doing some things that are hard or scary or that might even include some suffering. If that was true for me, maybe God was doing something in Saul's life that was going to make it true for him, too.

So I asked myself some questions: should I act on the truth of what I know about Saul and get out of town? Or should I trust that God has already transformed Saul? Can God really work like that - changing someone in an instant? Is that what grace does? I wondered if this is what God's mercy is like - forgiving and transforming someone like Saul for good, rather than punishing them for what they've done?

I realized that if I took seriously the things I said I believed about Jesus, then I would take seriously God's mercy in Saul's life. So I took some deep breaths and tried to trust that God needed me, in particular, to go find Saul. I didn't know for sure if Saul would hurt me or if there would be some plot to arrest me after I got there. But I trusted that I was following Jesus and the way of the cross. Even in my fear, I decided to take the risk. I tried to believe in what is possible with God.

So I pushed back my chair and I walked across the city of Damascus and found the house where Saul was. There he sat in a darkened corner of the room. No one else was there. His eyes looked strange and he seemed not to notice me come in. I stood there for a second before walking toward him. Instead of a brutal killer or a powerful tyrant, Saul looked vulnerable. Clearly something had happened to him that had changed this man. I wondered if that thing was Jesus. My own heart softened a bit. I saw him not as an enemy, but perhaps as an ally. Even as someone I needed to serve.

The words that came out of my mouth surprised even me: "Brother Saul," I said. To call this man "brother" would have been impossible, even just a few hours before. Maybe God was changing not *just* Saul, but also me. I continued, "The Lord Jesus has sent me to you so that you will be able to see again. And so you will be filled with the Spirit." I lifted my hand and placed it over his eyes. Something like scales, fluttered to the ground. He blinked and squinted his eyes in the streaks of light coming in through the door. And then he looked up at me, standing over him. I put out my hand and he took it and stood up. His face was full of questions and this man, who so recently spoke with fire and hate, seemed to have no words. Saul led me outside and shielded his eyes from the sun.

"I'd like to be baptized," he said. I had baptized several others in our little group - women, with their children who found hope when they heard about God's love that did not have to be earned. A whole household of people who had been moved by the story of Jesus. We had been at the river then. I wasn't quite sure how to go about baptizing when there was no body of water