

Today's scripture lesson from the Book of Acts is an example of what the Narrative Lectionary does so well. It allows us to grapple with the narratives, the stories of the Bible.

As I read our passage for today, I invite you to listen to the story. If you have a sermon manuscript, feel free to set it on the seat beside you. Close your eyes if it helps you to listen better. And while you are listening, I want you to know there are a few different people to pay attention to in this passage— and I invite you to pick one person to follow as the story unfolds. Saul (also known as Paul.) Ananias. The people traveling with Saul. Pick one – or more – and pay attention to how this story is about them.

Acts 9: 1-19a Meanwhile, Saul was still spewing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest, ² seeking letters to the synagogues in Damascus. If he found persons who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, these letters would authorize him to take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ During the journey, as he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven encircled him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice asking him, "Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?"

⁵ Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?"

"I am Jesus, whom you are harassing," came the reply. ⁶ "Now get up and enter the city. You will be told what you must do."

⁷ Those traveling with him stood there speechless; they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ After they picked Saul up from the ground, he opened his eyes but he couldn't see. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind and neither ate nor drank anything.

¹⁰ In Damascus there was a certain disciple named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

He answered, "Yes, Lord."

¹¹ The Lord instructed him, "Go to Judas' house on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias enter and put his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³ Ananias countered, "Lord, I have heard many reports about this man. People say he has done horrible things to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ He's here with authority from the chief priests to arrest everyone who calls on your name."

¹⁵ The Lord replied, "Go! This man is the agent I have chosen to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

¹⁷ Ananias went to the house. He placed his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord sent me—Jesus, who appeared to you on the way as you were coming here. He sent me so that you

could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸ Instantly, flakes fell from Saul’s eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized.¹⁹ After eating, he regained his strength.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word, **Thanks be to God!**

I wonder what you noticed? I find that focusing on a person in the story helps me to see the whole story in a new light.

Let’s begin with Saul. What do we know about him at this point?

Professor Andrew E. Arterbury writes,

“Luke initially depicts Saul as a malformed creature who is growing perpetually more violent. In 7:58, Saul stands by as others stone Stephen. In 8:1, Saul approves of the murderers’ actions. By 9:1, Saul is literally “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” Saul has taken on dragon-like qualities. Rather than being an onlooker, Saul hunts and pursues his victims. He instigates the violent persecution of Christians in Damascus (9:2).”¹

Saul was a pharisee, versed in the Jewish scriptures. He was zealous about rounding up those that were deemed heretics, or problems for the Jewish leaders of the time. I guess you would say he was a bounty hunter, but a bounty hunter with the zeal of his religion behind him.

If we were members of that early Jewish Christian community called “The Way,” I think we would go out of our way to avoid the man. We would tell our neighbors when he was sighted in the streets, and we would pray that the papers he carried from the high priest didn’t list them name of our synagogue.

Saul was important in his bounty hunter role. Saul had people who looked up to him, who followed him. I think Saul would have said his life was pretty good. But Jesus had other ideas. This enemy of the early Christian faith – Jesus had big plans for him. Jesus just needed to get Saul’s attention.

I still remember a conversation with our youth pastor when I was a teenager talking about how people decide to follow Jesus. And he said words to this effect, some folks hear a whisper, a nudge, a quiet moment that confirms what they have always known, that they are one of God’s children. No fireworks, no falling off a donkey on the way to Damascus. But others need to be knocked off their donkey so they stop traveling down the wrong road, they need a complete change of life’s direction. Author Flanner O’Connor wrote this about Paul’s conversion story, “I reckon that the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.”² And yet, both the quiet and the dramatic conversions are equally valid. Both lead to the same thing – choosing to be a disciple of Jesus, a follower of the Way, a Christian.

¹ Andrew E. Arterbury - <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/pauls-conversion/commentary-on-acts-91-19a-3>

² As quoted by William H. Willimon in *Acts, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox Press © 1988, p. 73.

While Saul is traveling on the road, accompanied by traveling companions, he is struck down by a bright light that literally blinds him. If he was traveling on a donkey or a horse he surely would have fallen off, as so many paintings of Saul depict. He hears the voice of Jesus, though he doesn't recognize it at first. And his companions help him continue on the road until they find a place for him to stay in Damascus.

Saul stays in Damascus for three days before Ananias visits him.

Let's pause there to reflect on Saul's life. One of the reasons this story is so familiar to many of us is because we can see ourselves in it.

There are times when I've been asked if I am happy with my life. Often, I say 'yes, all is good' ... until one day that question feels different. I see my life with new eyes, and I know I need to make a change – but what? And how? Has that ever happened to you, or someone you love?

For Saul the change began with a Theophany – a divine manifestation – a vision- of Jesus speaking to him.

I have seen this kind of dramatic change in friends struggling with addiction. They love the high, or the way alcohol seems to blur all the hard edges for them. But then one day their eyes are opened – through hitting rock bottom, through the words of a child, through watching another's life implode and realizing they might be next. Something deep inside them becomes open to change. And though it is not easy, that is often the first step, to admit that they want to change, and to admit that they need help doing so. We are blessed to have 12-step groups that meet here in the church and in the larger community -and even online. They are a good support for people who have decided to take that first step toward a clean and sober life.

Have you ever been convicted, felt deeply, that your life needed to change? Perhaps your actions do not match your values? Perhaps what you are doing or the pace you are doing it has become unsustainable? Or have you ever changed your heart and mind about an issue?

After being struck blind, Saul has three days to consider what his life is, what the words of Jesus in his vision may mean for him. That's a long time to sit in the dark.

While Saul is blinded and waiting, God is working on changing someone else's heart – Ananias. Ananias is a disciple in Damascus. There are other Ananiases in Scripture, but we don't know much more about Ananias of Damascus.

Tradition hold that he was one of Jesus' 70 disciples sent out to preach the good news, and that he was later martyred for his faith. Based on our scripture we do know that he knew of Saul by reputation and he didn't want anything to do with his harassment or as other versions translate, his persecutions.

Imagine for a moment what Ananias must have felt and experienced when Jesus appeared to him in a vision.

As the vision is reported to us it is pretty brief and to the point. There was no chit chat, no lead-in. "Ananias!" Calls Jesus. And Ananias replies, "Yes lord" And Jesus gives him instructions What does this dialogue remind you of?

It reminds me of a conversation between an employer and an employee, between someone in authority, and someone who reports to them. The commander says "Jump!" and we answer, "How high?"

But then Ananias, the servant, protests. And I scratched my head a little. Ananias has a relationship with Jesus that is respectful and yet also encourages dialogue. And that's a wonderful thing. He doesn't blindly follow, he wonders what the heck is going on and tells Jesus what he knows.

Listen again to this part of their dialogue, starting in verse 13:

¹³ Ananias countered, "Lord, I have heard many reports about this man. People say he has done horrible things to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ He's here with authority from the chief priests to arrest everyone who calls on your name."

¹⁵ The Lord replied, "Go! This man is the agent I have chosen to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Go. This man is the agent. Agent here is a Greek word that is most commonly used to describe a vessel, a container. Some have translated it as an Instrument. Saul will carry Jesus' message far and wide – to Gentiles, Kings, and even to his own people, the Israelites. And, reading further into the book of Acts, we see that is what he did, serving as a faithful vessel of the good news of God to the world. And, yes, he does suffer. That portion of Jesus' words is also true.

For those of you who listened closely to the passage as if you were Ananias, I wonder. Would these words of Jesus have been enough? Would they have convinced you? Frankly, setting off into the enemy's camp because of a vision from God... that's pretty gutsy. That would take a LOT of prayer and a really convincing vision.

I wonder if you can remember a time, when, like Ananias, you have been so convinced that something is right, that it needed to be done, that you overcame your fear and acted courageously?

When I was in my 20's I attended a church in Bellingham and was one of the small group leaders for a young adult bible study. One Sunday a woman in her 30's joined me in church and sat next to me just as worship started. Then, immediately after the benediction she bolted for the door. I sought her out in the coming weeks. I will call her Pam. I invited her to our Bible study. And Pam said – 'you've seen the friendship pad address; you know where I live.' I said, 'yes, you live near the church.' That is when I learned that her address was a half-way house for women prisoners on work release. She explained that, and taking a deep breath, I asked if she could still join us for the bible study. She said yes... if I would be her sponsor. I asked what that would entail. She told me more, and over the next week I checked with the bible study participants

and our pastor. I learned more about what being a sponsor entailed. I completed a background check, was interviewed by her case manager, and learned the procedures for taking her to and from Bible study – how to check her out for the two hours and return her by the time limit. My bible study friends lovingly referred to her as “my library book.” And there were other legal restrictions common to all prisoners on work release – which we easily accommodated since there were no children on site and we did not serve alcohol. But I have to say, it was an act of faith for me to welcome Pam into my home, especially since she didn't want us to know what crime had sent her to prison. I only knew that it was not a violent crime. It took courage for me to say ‘yes.’ And a few deep breaths. Pam was part of our Bible study until she completed her sentence.

When have you needed to summon courage to say ‘yes?’

Returning to our text, the story continues to unfold for Saul and Ananias, Ananias appears at the home where Saul was staying and did as Jesus commanded him.

We read,

¹⁷ Ananias ... placed his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord sent me—Jesus, who appeared to you on the way as you were coming here. He sent me so that you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸ Instantly, flakes fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized

But... a question I wanted answered is not answered in the text. What happened to those who had accompanied Saul? Is the fact that he didn't eat or drink for three days tied somehow to his companions possibly deserting him once he could no longer do his job? We do not know. Perhaps some of you who were listening for their appearance in the text have ideas. I'd love to hear them.

Saul has moved in this narrative from persecutor of Jesus to becoming Jesus' disciple, filled with the Holy Spirit, baptized, and prepared to be God's agent in the world.

Reading the story of Saul and Ananias, I have found myself remembering times when I have been like Saul – maybe you have, too. Times when my life was in need of a course correction. And remembering with thanksgiving those who stepped up, like Ananias, to help me to see what I could not see without them.

I have also been remembering those times when I have been nudged to act courageously, or to help friends or family see what they could not see for themselves. Sometimes I told a story—like the prophet Nathan did for King David. Other times I just asked good questions to help them see what I was seeing.

But this passage is also about us today, not just in the past. I wonder if you are sensing the need for a course correction in your life? Who might help you discern your next steps? How have you been praying about this change?

Or, maybe today you are being nudged to act courageously, to be like Ananias and follow God into places you might not want to go. Maybe there's a conversation that needs to happen?

Maybe someone has asked for your help? Maybe there's something or someone you have been avoiding? How have you been praying about finding the courage to do what you sense needs to be done?

As we move into a time of healing prayer later in the service, I invite you to continue to reflect on Ananias, Saul, and Saul's companions.

Which story is most compelling to you at this particular moment in your life? How can you lean into Jesus' invitation with courage?

Please remember that a sermon is an oral communication. The words preached may or may not correspond with the words written.