

## The Damascus Road

Acts 9:1-20

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The Bible passage that we heard today moves us ahead in time. It is after the upcoming Pentecost story, and the main character is one that never met Jesus before the crucifixion and resurrection. We hear of the Damascus Road experience of Saul, soon to be called Paul, as a manifestation of this life-changing conversion. The phrase "Damascus Road" doesn't have the secular use of phrases like "Good Samaritan," but it is used often in some Christian settings and in particular with Gospel music. If my memory serves me, I drove past four different "Damascus Road" churches last summer in the American South.

We may or may not know the background to this story. Saul is first introduced in the Biblical narrative earlier in the Book of Acts when he approves of the killing of the apostle Stephen by stoning him to death. The men who killed him "*laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.*" (Acts 7:58)

A little later on, as persecution of these early followers of Jesus grew, Saul was an enthusiastic participant "*ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, [and that] he committed them to prison.*" (Acts 8:3)

The author of Luke-Acts then spends several verses telling stories about the apostles as they preached and baptized and laid hands on people, as they drove out demons and cured "*those who were paralyzed or lame;*" and with a conclusion that "*there was great joy in that city.*" (In this case, the city of Samaria.) (Acts 8:8)

All of this joy, however, and all of this success, evidently worked Saul up into a frenzy, for just after all this we hear today's reading where he is "*breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,*" and getting authorization from the religious authorities in Jerusalem to hunt down the followers of "*the Way*" as they spread their message up the road to Damascus, to "*bind*" them, and drag them back to Jerusalem.

As a footnote, the term "*the Way*" has been used over time in many ways. I remember it as the title of one of the Bible translations of my youth, trying to use modern language to be meaningful to teenagers in the 1970's. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the term "*the Way*" is an expression that suggests living in conformity with the Law of Moses. Scholars tell us that the use of this term in Acts most likely means that these early Christians continued to regard themselves as part of the Jewish community.

And that helps us in understanding the bitterness of the fight, as disagreements within a religious community often carry far more viciousness than ones between communities. And it only escalates when both sides see themselves as doing what God wants them to do. It is the ugly arrogance of being right.

And Paul is very good at this – at persecution now and at being right now and later on. I agree with the statement on the back of our UCC bulletin today that says: “Most of the evil in this world is done by people like Saul, who believe they are doing good.” Saul’s actions are a good example of the religious vigilantism that exists in all religions and in all times and places.

And then we come to the dramatic Damascus Road experience:

*“Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’”*

Like Doubting Thomas, Mary Magdalene, and the other earlier disciples and apostles Saul gets that personal encounter. He doesn’t get a “*Peace be with you*” phrase, but he doesn’t get what he really deserves either. And I think I can excuse anyone from that time – or later! – for being angry that Saul, the big persecutor, rather than being struck by a blinding light instead is healed by that blinding light.

And how ironic! The great persecutor is now blind, is not able to even eat, and has to be led meekly by his companions into the city of Damascus. And there he is for the next three days – it would seem to be his experience of being in the tomb.

So much of the commentary about this event focuses on Saul, soon to be Paul. Is it a conversion? Is it a calling? And it doesn’t escape me that he hasn’t done anything to receive this change. It isn’t an answer to his prayers. But it is an effective answer to the prayers of those persecuted by him – whether they realize that or not. I’m sure that no one asked for or expected Saul – the great persecutor of the faith – to become Paul – the great defender.

Imagine any of the great polarizing figures of our time – changing sides and remaining just as zealous and outspoken as before.

So yes, like any media driven event, Saul/Paul gets all the attention. But there is another calling and conversion in this story that often gets overlooked. And that is in the “best supporting actor category” – Ananias.

And what does Ananias hear?

*“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.”*

Now Ananias has plenty of good reasons to distrust Saul. He states the obvious:

*“Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.”*

But if we really believe in a “still speaking” God, then we also have to give up on what we expect or anticipate God to say. If we already know it all and have the answers, then we have no need for God, do we?

In response to Ananias’ very understandable response, comes back God’s response:

*“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.”*

And so Ananias goes to meet the former persecutor, calls him “*Brother,*” and heals him of his blindness – spiritually and physically.

So there is transformation all around. The dramatic Damascus Road experience of Saul gets the headlines, but the quieter experience of Ananias is the one that most resonates with me. He is challenged to a risking of his own and goes to Saul to offer healing to his former enemy. For a change, Saul is the recipient of the action. It is Ananias that has to say yes, to risk, and to trust in God’s wisdom.

On the UCC website Kate Huey reminds us of another call and conversion story that may not be as familiar to us. It is the story of John Newton, the 18<sup>th</sup> century slave-trader who later became a pastor and hymn writer. One of these hymns was Amazing Grace. She tells of Newton’s dramatic conversion during a storm at sea, after which Newton stopped participating in the great evil of the slave trade, and that this is from where comes the line in the hymn “that saved a wretch like me.” She concludes her observations by writing:

“We might think that Newton, like Paul, had an experience very unlike our own, a sudden, drastic turnaround in the most remarkable of circumstances. But closer study reveals that Newton took his time with this turnaround, and continued his slave-trading even after it dawned on him that God was at the center of his life. We live our lives in circumstances that may be dramatic at moments but are mostly everyday and common, and God’s amazing grace is present and sufficient in every one. And even if it takes us some time, God is with us all the way, in every moment of our lives.”

We all have our Damascus Road experiences – whether they are dramatic like Paul’s or John Newton’s, or quieter and less noted like the one for Ananias. And all are important because in each of them – Paul, John, or Ananias – their transformation isn’t because they have found Jesus – it is because Jesus has found them.

Amen.

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

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 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. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 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. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." 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, 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." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." 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; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

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." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."