

Acts 9:1-19 NRSVUE

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...

My colleagues and I this season are making pilgrimage between our churches, telling the stories of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. All of the scriptures you'll hear from my colleagues take place within that brief period of time between Jesus' resurrection and ascension - between his rising from the dead and when he ascends into heaven to sit at the right hand of God. But today's scripture comes *after* Jesus' ascension.

Jesus has returned to heaven as our crucified Lord, wounded and glorified, human and divine, to rule and reign with God in this new era, this new age, where God's Spirit would pour out on all flesh and the law would be written on the people's hearts - not enforced by a hypocritical and corrupt God-brigade.

But as you know, having a vision for a beautiful future does not mean that everyone is on board with making that beautiful vision come to life. And there sure was opposition to Jesus' dream. The chief priests who presided over Jewish religious life in Jerusalem had so much authority, even under Roman rule, that they seemingly had the power to issue warrants- that they could authorize arrests, and imprison people. It seems, maybe they had that power because they were willing to be co-conspirators with the Romans, the foreign occupying empire.

Which, I guess we should know, hearing the story of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. But, perhaps, I've thought, that was a one time thing, and it seemed they had to collaborate with and convince the Romans to carry out that crucifixion. But after Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension, the persecution of the followers of Jesus, who call themselves followers of the Way, grows.

Before this story, we've heard of the stoning of Stephan, a servant of the gospel, who makes a long, moving speech about his faith before the Sanhedrin- the body of all the chief priests - and they stoned him to death. A penalty that Saul, who becomes known as Paul, co-signed, approved of, supported.

The Sanhedrin, the Jewish Chief Priests have grown in their audacity and authority; using their place of power and privilege to imprison and punish people who disrupted the flow of cash into their pockets and social power into their positions.

-

We see this practice of arrest and imprisonment has become normal. Our scripture begins with Saul “still” breathing threats and murder, and going to the temple not to atone or worship or pray but to get permission from the house of God to break into people’s homes who worship differently from him, shine their torchlights in their sleepy eyes, arrest them, and bring them bound to Jerusalem.

He goes to the temple, to the representatives of God, mediators of God’s covenant as he understands it, to get their blessing - supposedly on behalf of God - to arrest and imprison people, then bringing them back to the house of God as some sort of offering? a sign of his righteousness? He truly thinks he is doing God’s will. He’s even got a letter from the priests saying it’s what God wants, for him to terrorize families by knocking down doors and hunting followers of the way.

I don’t remember God asking for human sacrifice, for a police force, to fulfill the law.

Right? For someone so intent on people being adherents to the law, he is completely avoidant of his departure from it; ignorant of how he breaks what is fundamental and basic to it - thou shalt not kill.

This is so egregious to God, it seems, that Jesus appears to Saul, who has warrants in hand, on his way to Damascus AFTER Jesus has ascended. He spiritually steps down from his throne once more and reveals himself to Saul, shining his God-light into his eyes, temporarily blinding him, and calling him by his name. There was no warrant needed for this confrontation, no doors needed to be knocked down on this road to Damascus; Jesus is not beholden to any worldly power, but God alone.

Jesus doesn't call him "murderer" or "enemy," which he could and it would be the truth. Jesus calls him by his name. His Jewish name. Speaks to him in the context of his faith, as a fellow Jew; in another recounting of this story later in Acts, Paul - called Paul, his Roman name, at that point because he is in a Roman setting, working with Gentiles - even mentions that in this moment Jesus spoke Aramaic to him. This is not a civic hearing, but an encounter of two fellows part of the same synagogue. And it starts by calling him by his name, starts by humanizing and dignifying him. Not because he is acting dignified, but because Jesus sees and wants him to start acting dignified; faithful; truly righteous. He sees his humanity, first, and with that, calls him out of his power trip and back into his personhood.

Unlike the prophets of old who have their names called by God, Saul does not answer with “Here I am,” instead he asks “who are you?” Despite his firm belief that he is doing God’s will, Saul surely seems not to know the God he’s working so hard for.

His hypocrisy, and plain wrongness temporarily manifests in his body as blindness. He thought he saw clearly, in black and white, good and bad, righteous and unrighteous, in and out, holy and unholy, pure and impure. But now, without physical sight, he sees more clearly than ever: he’s been persecuting the God he thought he’d been working for.

He, and the faithful Ananias who also hears from God, are both told to ‘get up and go’ to Damascus, to Straight street, a main road in the Syrian capital, to Judas’ house for a divinely appointed rendezvous.

—

When Jesus appears to Ananias, a faithful disciple who, after this story, fades into the background, Ananias responds as all those prophets of old did, saying, “Here I am, Lord.” He knows the sound of the Lord’s voice, because he has been listening for it, he has been following The Way, a path without obvious waymarkers or a clear trail; it is a path which requires constant listening for the voice and direction of God.

So, Ananias knows this voice, and is able to open himself up to the direction that comes - Get up and Go, Jesus tells him, to Straight Street, to a guy named Judas' house, and meet Saul, your persecutor.

Now, THAT Judas, has been dead for some time, the one who betrayed Jesus. And I think Judas is a relatively common name - a Steve or Larry. But I can't help but wonder if in addition to being called to go lay hands of blessing and impart the Holy Spirit to the persecutor of his people was made that much more daunting by being sent to the home of a man who shares a name with the one who sold the Lord into the hands of the chief priests for 30 pieces of silver. Was this Ananias' fate too?

But as with every step of following The Way, Ananias followed the sound of God's voice, he got up and went, to face and bless the man who had been dragging his friends out of their home and taking them bound to Jerusalem for doing the same.

—

It is striking to me just how much trust the both of them had to have in God to be at work in the other. Ananias had to trust that something transformational had happened to his people's persecutor, for God to ask Ananias to bless him. Jesus himself said to Saul "why are you persecuting me?" Jesus understood, as did I think his followers, that to persecute the followers of The Way, you persecuted Christ; just as those who feed and clothe their neighbors feed and clothe Christ. And if Christ was now asking Ananias to bless Saul, he must have had a change in course, must have heard Jesus' voice and started following it.

And Saul had to trust that God was at work in Ananias' heart and spirit. It would have been reasonable for Ananias to try to retaliate against Saul for all the harm he'd caused his neighbors. In every sense of the word, they were enemies.

But both of these people are given a message: "get up and go." and they did.

—

The word there, translated to 'get up and go' here, is in some translations 'arise,' it is the same word that is used for resurrection. Healing stories. Rebellion and resurrection stories. And even in call stories. It is a word of power, of urgency, a command that is full of God's life-power.

Resurrection happens in big moments like in the tomb, but it also happens every time we step into our power, every time we get back up instead of staying down, every time we take the risk of trust to bless and heal and repair, every time we reach out to see if God might be working over there too, every time we get up and go.

—

Our faith is not a sedentary one, despite our long history of telling people to sit down and listen in church. Our faith is one that calls us again and again to get up and go. To be part of an upRISING - a resurrection life - that causes people to arise. To go and see how God is at work in others, to trust and obey when Jesus invites us into something that on the surface makes absolutely no sense - or is risky.

—

Each of us feel the Holy Spirit at work in our churches, in the community that is formed in these places. I trust that you all feel bound to one another by the love that connects you. You have prayed together and wept together, you have celebrated together and you have been through great challenges together.

As we continue to explore what it means to practice cooperative ministry here in the South Sound, I invite you to ask the Holy Spirit to help you trust that the Spirit is also at work in the other churches in our connection; that your calling from God could be met with the gifts and graces and gratitude of someone else Jesus is speaking with on their own road, in their own visions.

But in order to find one another, you'll have to listen for God's voice, then get up and go - go see what God is doing beyond you in order to prepare the way for the thing God has called you to do.

—

I want you to think of someone who changed your life; who nurtured you or called out gifts in you, who blessed you, who taught you, who spent time with you.

Draw them into your mind's eye.

Now think about all of the things that had to happen just so, in order for you to know them. Maybe its biology or life path or happenstance or where they chose to live or who they chose to marry or where they got a job. Maybe it was a call from God they did or didn't listen to.

And all of that coordination led them to your door, led them to some place in some town, an unlikely and divinely appointed rendezvous.

—

God has done it. God has worked miracles and coordinated callings that you might become and help others become all God dreams. And God will do it again. Here at St. Andrews, here in the co-op, and in every time and in every place. May this be so, in order that our world might be full of people who've been blessed and no longer bind others, that our land might be full of people who are free rather than fearful, that our neighborhoods will be full of peace rather than punishment for how they worship, work, and witness.

Get up and Go, my friends, God is calling!

