

## Assembly Sermon - Danger and Opportunity

Acts 9:1-6 [7-20]

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. 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. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, 20 and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Grace to you and peace, sisters and brothers in Christ, called in spite of all our sin and brokenness... converted by the power of Gospel...and sent by God's Spirit into "God's great mission" Amen.

Memory is strong. Hope is stronger.

God's hope is always stronger; stronger than our memories or our expectations. In today's first lesson God chooses two unlikely people to call and turn around so they might serve the Jesus. This double call story is also a double conversion story. It gives me hope, for if God can use the hands of Saul, if God can use the hands of Ananias, then God can use our hands to do God's work as well.

Some of us are here today having been hit between the eyes with a two by four. Like Paul we thought we were in control, but in a flash of light that takes many forms – an illness, a separation, an accident, the Great Recession, or the disagreements after churchwide decisions on homosexuality, we find ourselves eating dust, seeing stars, and unable to see in the bright light.

In the years later on, I wonder if Paul ever woke in the middle of the night trying to make sense of his great reversal from persecutor to prophet. I wonder if he asked "How could I have been so hell driven to persecute Christians? How did I get to the point I was breathing murderous threats, chasing down Christians and killing them? How did I think that was faithfulness?" Saul was one of the most unlikely

candidates for an apostle, “full of blood lust on his way to Damascus.” That is when Jesus stopped him cold in the light.

I don't know the trajectory of your spiritual lives. I bet most of you have not attacked the church of Christ, its leaders or ever heard Christ's voice saying, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” But all of us have rebelled against God's will. All of us have fallen into making scapegoats of others at times when we had our own work to do. Few of us have the blood soaked hands of a crusader. Yet, all of us have taken out our frustration in life on one another. All of us have our stories about how God called us to repent. Sometimes it takes God coming after us when we have fallen into a grave of our own making. Other times God flips us into a place of uncertainty, pain and blindness so that in the silence, fasting and prayer we can hear the truth. We are not exactly like Paul, but most of us have more of Saul in us than we would want to admit. God still comes after us unlikely disciples.

While our stories are not as dramatic, God finds way to get our attention...to turn us around. We can all point to times when God has sent someone in the tender silence to bring healing to us so that the scales of blindness and self-righteousness could fall away.

It is quite surprising God has chosen you....and me in spite of all of our sin, anger, confusion. In fact, God loves to use common ordinary, messed up people to do God's work and move forward God's mission for this world. The Spirit of Jesus is the one who claimed us as he claimed Saul in the baptismal waters. Jesus is the one who feeds us, like he fed Saul at the meal of the forgiveness and the kingdom. Jesus is the one who shocks us and sends us saying, “You will be my witnesses.”

Most of us are more like Ananias. We have to be called out of and converted from our fears and caution. Can you imagine Ananias remembering his encounter with Christ? “How could I have talked back to God? I made a good start when I heard God's voice, “Here I am” like Samuel. But when God told me who I was supposed to go and help, I could not help myself. It just came out. “Saul.....go and help the guy who was hurting and killing followers of the Way? Saul – You have got to be kidding.” The words... the tone of voice...were not so good. Yet, God did not give up on him or us when we don't get it.

Ananias' fear took over, likes ours does more often than we want to admit. God sent him to “go” and pray for and help Saul. But that day it was all happening, he was blind to God's purpose and wisdom in his anxieties. God was up to something again. It did not make any sense, just like God's work often does not make sense for us.

It took all of Ananias' courage to walk into Saul's presence, lay his hands on his head and pray. I wonder if he prayed one of my favorite prayers, “Lord God let me fear no one more than you. “ Soon he was saying in faith, “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.”

God not only uses the loud, violent and overly certain ones to do God's work. God also uses the quiet, meek, unsure, cautious ones against their better judgment to do God's will. God's Spirit works on us all. God's work opens our eyes so we can see. God's work opens our ears so we can hear. God's work opens our minds and hearts. God's work opens our hands. Just when we think we know what will happen, God shows up and surprises us. God chooses to use the most unlikely of people....and the most unlikely of tools to do God's work in this world. Who would have ever thought about using a cross, Saul, Ananias, you or me.

I notice hands as I shake them. They are smooth and rough, small and large, damaged or arthritic, young and old. The Good News is that God has, does and can use them all. Like Paul's hands stained with blood, God can redeem our hands and our lives. Like Ananias who cannot see what God can see hiding in Saul, God still uses our hands to do God's work even when we cannot see. God's hands take common and ordinary things like water, bread, wine, you and me together with God's Word to proclaim the Good News to a hungry world.

Today as we gather for this assembly we are confident God has, does and will use our imperfect hands, our imperfect lives, our imperfect congregations our imperfect synod and our imperfect church body. We trust God will be with us as we fold our hands to pray, discuss passionately our concerns, shake hands and enjoy fellowship, raise our hands to make decisions, use our hands to serve and as we stretch our hands in worship to God together.

Our God raised Jesus from the dead. Our God turned Saul into Paul and Ananias into the one who could heal. We trust in the one whose hands spoke when he taught and laughed; We trust his hands which healed and forgave; We trust the hands of our Lord who prayed. We trust in his hands angry with injustice and the abuse of the temple. We trust his hands holding children and blessing them. We trust in his promises, this one who served the last supper and continues to feed us with this meal of the kingdom and of forgiveness. We trust in his hands which raised people from the dead; his hands that were torn as he was tortured and died; his hands that were healed in God's resurrecting grace.

We trust in God's hands, because we know the hands of Christ Jesus our crucified and resurrected Lord.

Alleluia....He is risen. He is risen indeed Alleluia

- a. Know best Jesus hands – marked – healing torn – fence posts
    - i. God's hands – suffered and died and rose
    - ii. Suffering in temptation
    - iii. Talking while Jesus taught
    - iv. Healed
    - v. Praying
    - vi. Angry in temple
    - vii. Forgave – Peace be with you
    - viii. Promise – I will be with you always
    - ix. Cooking the last breakfast
    - x. Patting Peter and each of us on the shoulder after agitating and pushing us
      1. we say
      2. You know we love you
      3. Well – then feed my sheep.
  - b. God's Work
2. Fishing – last breakfast
  3. God is using people
    - a. And you will be told what it is necessary for you to do
  4. Lord make me an instrument of your love.