

Message: Acts 12: 9:1-31:

Introduction & Saul vs. Paul:

Last week we looked at one of my favorite passages in Acts so far, and if you didn't get time to enter into the Ethiopian Eunuch's story in Acts 8:26-40, I'd really recommend it.

Today's passage is important when it comes to Acts, because it marks Luke's major transition in emphasis. We've talked about the focus on Jerusalem, on Judea, on Samaria, and now--both now and for the rest of the book of Acts--we're going to see as Jesus is borne witness to "in the ends of the earth," out into the gentile world, far past Jerusalem, literally and figuratively.

And the one God uses to spread this message, through word and deed, out into the far, wide world, is Saul of Tarsus, better known by us as the Apostle Paul. Today we're introduced to him.

Let me say this, before I say anything else: Eventually Luke will start to refer to Saul as Paul when Paul begins his missionary journeys (Greg Lanier, 2017). In Acts 13, Luke tells us, offhandedly, "Saul was also called

Paul,” and then he just calls him Paul from then on. It might be because Paul himself called himself that. We don’t know. But there’s no amazing renaming that happens the way Peter is renamed by Jesus; in fact, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Ananias, others call Paul “Saul,” and he’s totally okay with it (Greg Lanier, 2017). As we move through Acts, we’ll call this guy whatever Luke calls him. If it’s good enough for Jesus in today’s passage, it’s good enough for us.

Let’s pray!

Prayer:

Already:

We’ve already met Saul at this point in the story. He was the coat check for the Sanhedrin as they stoned Stephen to death. And we were told, then, that “Saul approved of their work.”

And while the Church is harassed and scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, Saul has been at work. This was read to us earlier:

9 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples.

He went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

We learn so much here. We learn that Saul's decided to head north to Damascus. Damascus was north of Judea, in Rome's Province of Syria. Diaspora Jews are there; Hellenistic--that is, culturally Greek--certainly. He's headed there, in part, because we know that right now the only Christians in Jerusalem are the Apostles and a few around them. The Church has been scattered, so Saul's chasing after them. He's become a bounty-hunter, of sorts, although his pay is whatever esteem and honor the Priests dole out to him, and the esteem and honor he believes God will give him for destroying this blasphemous Jewish sect. We learn that the Church has been named. "The Way," it is called here, which makes sense: It lives its life after Jesus' way, and he himself said he was "the way, the truth, and the life." We see something radical, too: The Way accepts both men and women as equal participants.

Saul is on his way.

On The Way:

3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. 6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 8 Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. 9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

Jesus identifies with those who follow him; to persecute the Church is to persecute him.

Saul does all the right things, here. He falls to the

ground when he's surrounded by this light-filled, glorified presence, he asks who is speaking to him. This is a classic "theophany," an appearance of God, and Saul was primed by all the Bible he knew to know how to respond. Our translations usually capitalize "Lord," when Saul asks it, and it's likely Saul knew he was in the presence of God--hence the falling. But he certainly didn't know it was Jesus speaking to him until Jesus told him so. Saul puts two and two together.

And in the end, Saul is blind. He saw the risen Christ, and can't see, now; The men around him didn't see anyone, but heard enough to know something was up. He tells them what the Lord told him, so they lead him to Damascus, where he waits and fasts.

This shakes Saul. We see that, right? This shakes him. He's blind and fasting, he's led instead of leading.

Saul talks about this experience himself later in Acts, and in his letter to the Galatian congregation. He makes his point to the Corinthian congregation that he was the last one Jesus appeared to after the resurrection. He says, "and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born." He was an Apostle, but one out of sync with the others; set apart,

but set apart later, the last one to see Jesus before Jesus' absconded to God.

Faithful Ananias:

Let's just keep reading Saul's story, because we're introduced to someone who I want to be our focus this morning. This wasn't read to us earlier:

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

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

11 The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. 12 In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

13 "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your

name.”

15 But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

Saul’s reputation precedes him. He’s famous for his hatred and harassment. And Ananias doesn’t say no to Jesus, but like every person ever, lays out some information in case Jesus has forgotten it. And Jesus says, “Go.”

Ananias is charged with a special call: To heal Saul. And he will, because he trusts what Jesus tells him about this Saul: That Saul is going to be the means by which Jesus is shared with Gentiles, with Rulers, and even with Israel itself. And we’ll see that play out as we read through Acts. And, because Jesus says to go, Ananias goes:

17 ...Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me

so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” 18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

I love this moment: Ananias calling his persecutor, “brother,” healing his enemy, obeying Jesus. Just as we’ve seen before, the mechanism and order of the Holy Spirit follows no particular rule, but does fall upon Saul. Saul is baptized. He finally eats. The “something like scales” falling from his eyes is probably simply medical jargon, describing what it was like for Paul to see during the time before his healing, rather than a description of some physical object (Wall 2002, 152).

Saul’s Elaboration:

Later on in Acts, Saul will present his story to a crowd in Jerusalem. He’ll elaborate on what Luke tells us here. There, Saul tells everyone that Ananias says this to him as he lays his hands on him in prayer. Saul’s telling his conversation story, and he goes:

“Then [Ananias] said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his

mouth. 15 You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'

From here, Saul goes for it. Just goes for it. He's been thinking, apparently, for those three days of blindness. He's been revisiting everything he's come to believe. And just as Peter changed when the Spirit came upon him, so now Saul does. We read from here how he "at once began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God." People are shocked; they thought he was here to take them to Temple Jail. "Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah."

"Many Days"

After "many days" pass, this happens:

"there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, 24 but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. 25 But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

We don't know how long these "many days" are. In the letter he writes to the Galatian congregation, Saul, by then known as Paul, will give us a timeline of these early days of his conversion, and it is way longer than Luke presents it. Something like 14 years passes between this verse and the next one we read in Acts, and it's been hard for scholars to totally line up these timelines. In fact, the way Saul tells it in Acts 22 and even Galatians, he seems to have returned to Jerusalem for a tiny bit after Ananias healed him. That would stretch Luke's "at once" out a little bit. What we need to see is that Luke tells us this story of Saul's earliest days following Jesus in a rush, telescoping his activity, because he wants us to feel the urgency, the activity, the energy of Saul-who-we-call-Paul's life (Wall 2002, 153).

But think about what's happened, now, in the relationships of these people. Saul came to kill them, and now Christians are helping him escape. He's got followers now, people who've come to believe the truth he's shared. He's being watched all the time, so that he can be assassinated, and faithful people smuggle him out of town in this intense, dramatic way.

Post-Smuggling:

Saul goes to Jerusalem from here, and Barnabas, that same Barnabas whose name means “Son of Encouragement,” who sold some of his property so early in the life of the Church to provide for others in need, he brings Saul to the Apostles, and advocates for him. He has to, because they’re scared of Saul. Barnabas isn’t. He preaches around. Again, those who believe what he used to believe try to kill him. The believers push him out to go back to Tarsus, where he was from. We’ll talk soon about what’s shaped Saul-- his city and culture and faith.

Luke summarizes this introduction with those updates he gives throughout Acts, saying:

31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

With reverent respect of God, the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, and living for Jesus, the Church was strengthened, filled with peace, and grew. Those three things aren’t a magic spell for growth, but I don’t think it can happen without them.

Saul, Paul, Saul, Paul, Saul, Paul:

Look. We're going to talk about Saul--that is, Paul--A LOT. A lot. The last half of Acts uses his work as its organizing principle. I don't want to talk about Saul anymore this morning. His response to God is..intense, in whatever direction he points. He is always all in. For the Temple, the Sanhedrin, the Company, and will hunt down whoever is against it; and then he's for Jesus, all the way, no matter if it kills him. He's...strange, really. By which I mean different from most of us, in some ways, and as we walk with him we'll be challenged continually by him, because it is in the differences between us and others that challenge arises. Paul is never our friend, who we can just be comfortable with; but he is always our advocate, because he always advocates for Christ. So it'll be good to walk with him.

Circling Back To Ananias:

What I want to do right now is just circle back around to Ananias. Just briefly. This man who trusted Jesus enough to save--and I mean save in the most biblical sense: heal, restore, establish, touch with shalom--save his enemy.

We come up against this, oh, once a year or so as we

walk through whatever bit of Bible we walk through, and I want us to embrace the question again, which is just this: Who is your enemy?

Who is your enemy?

Because Saul was Ananias' enemy. He was Ananias' enemy.

And let's piece this apart, a little:

Saul was Ananias' enemy. Jesus told Ananias to go to him. He told Ananias to pray for him, empower him, and charge him. Ananias knew that Jesus was at work in Saul's life in some way; he didn't know what Saul experienced on the road to Damascus, of course, which wasn't full of much instructive information anyhow. But Ananias knew that Jesus was at work in Saul's life, and he knew that Jesus was asking him to be at work in Saul's life, despite the truth that Saul was Ananias enemy, and the enemy of those Ananias was in solidarity with.

It is hard to do what we know Jesus wants us to do when we're busy, distracted, and not paying attention to God.

It is hard to do what we know Jesus wants us to do. Period. It's difficult. There are obstacles to overcome when it comes to our obedience. And it's more difficult when we are busy, and not really praying much, and not really reading the Bible much, and not really spending time with other Christians discussing Jesus much. All of which are occasionally true of us. But when Jesus told Ananias to go, he went, despite his deep concerns. And he didn't just go to this enemy of his, in going, he abandoned his fear and his antagonism, and he greeted Saul as his brother. Then he prayed for him, healed him, empowered him, and charged him with obedience to Jesus' purpose for his life.

Ananias is a hero in today's scene. And what I think we need, somehow, is to live up to his heroics.

Honestly, I haven't quite formulated what that means, and...it's too late now. But I think it could mean a few different things:

What living up to Ananias could mean:

It could mean that we consider who our enemies are, and what it would take for us to call them brother or

sister. Would it take an act of God? Or a change in our hearts? And maybe that's the same thing? But what would it take for us to call an enemy, or someone who is an enemy to those we're in solidarity with, brother or sister? What would it take, and what does it say about us, about God, about them when it comes to how we answer?

To live up to Ananias' example could mean that we consider very specifically who is harassing and antagonizing the church today? The problem, of course, is that we the capital-C church are so divided and so disinterested in coming together ourselves with other Christians--you know, the ones who are too liberal, or too conservative, especially, or, say, too loud or too quiet, or too into the Holy Spirit, or not into Service enough, or whatever--we're so disinterested in coming together, and so divided that the Church's antagonists are often...us. We're not killing people during worship, of course. But the road to hell begins with a single step, and we often forget to say "only what is helpful for building up those who hear it." So if we were to consider who today is antagonizing and harassing the Church, would we realize how often it's ourselves? And if we come to that conclusion, how do we approach ourselves? What do I do and say to

myself when Jesus reveals I am the Church's enemy...even if only the smallest of one?

To live up to Ananias' example could mean, in the broadest sense, that we go when Jesus tells us to go. Is Christ asking us to do something that we are not doing? Is God inviting us to reach out to someone we are not reaching out to? Is God specifically calling you to something that you are just doing an amazing job ignoring?

Ananias gets my attention today, not Saul. His responsiveness to God lingers. And in fact, had repercussions greater than any he might have expected, because his act of doing what God asked of him resulted in you and me in this room. I hope, long after we're gone, whatever ways we each have acted like him persist, too, in someone's faith and some goodness way down the line. In the present, though, let's just do what he did...whatever specifically that might mean for any one of us.