

Now Scripture:

9 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.

The word of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God.

Not many of us knew the name Ananias before this VBS week, did we? In fact, as the week went by, we learned lots of names, and lots of stories--we learned about Jesus healing people with leprosy, people who were left out; we learned that Jesus loves us when we are different, like how he reached out to the samaritan woman at the well; we learned that Jesus loves us when we don't even understand, just like the disciples didn't understand when Jesus washed their feet; and we learned that Jesus loves us when we do wrong and that his love for us led him to die and rise again. And finally we learned on Friday that even when we are afraid, like Ananias, Jesus loves us.

We learned some things that were brand new, stories we had never heard, and we came back to some of those Bible stories that we know pretty well, but had sunk pretty far back into our brains. This story may have been familiar to some, the story of the conversion of Saul who would become the Apostle Paul, but Ananias...who has ever thought much about Ananias?

Saul, of course, was...well, he was a bully. He was a bully of the worst kind, because he had the law on his side, he had the judges and the prisonkeepers, the police, all the people in charge were listening to him. A few chapters before, we first met Saul as he oversaw the first execution of a Christian, named Stephen. He was notorious, known for going house to house, dragging both men and women off to prison for blasphemy, for their dangerous belief that this man Jesus, was not just a man, but was actually the one true God. These Christians actually believed that Jesus was God in the flesh, and that his life and death and resurrection meant that everything in the world had changed. They actually believed it...and Saul was ready to kill them for it.

So we pick up here today when Saul has decided to extend his reach--he's decided to bring his mission of persecuting Christians on up to Damascus. And Saul, walking along the road, has...an experience. Knocked to the ground, with a blazing light all around him, and hearing this voice, saying "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul is blown away. His eyes are blinded, but it is very clear to Saul that God is seriously up to something. He fasts for three days--he eats nothing, he drinks nothing.

Meanwhile, in Damascus, God has spoken to someone else...Ananias. "Ananias, Go," God said. Go to this street, to this house, Go and find a man named Saul, and give him back his sight. And Ananias responds the way any person with any common sense would: "Lord, do you know who this guy is? Everybody's talking about him--he does terrible things to Christians, he's been doing them in Jerusalem and now he's come here, he's coming for US!"

I love that Ananias feels the need to explain...to God...who Saul is, and what Saul has been up to. As if God was unaware of the goings on in Jerusalem, as if God wasn't in on the news and the gossip.

But God responds with this: Ananias, Go. I have big plans for Saul. He is going to be my instrument, the one who will bring my name to all of these others...but right now, he's waiting on you, Ananias. He's waiting...for you.

The tables have turned. Saul **was** headed to Damascus to seek out Christians, perhaps to seek out Ananias, to bring him harm--to stop him in his tracks. Now, **Ananias** must go in search of **Saul**, to bring him healing, and to set him on his way for the work God has for him to do.

You know, it strikes me that God chose to rely on Ananias. God could have stopped Saul in his tracks and read him the riot act, and set him on a new path right then and there...but instead God sent Saul right up to Damascus, to the place where he was headed anyway, and instead of Saul going out to find the christians, to hunt down the church...God brought the church to Saul, in one man: Ananias.

The linchpin that this whole thing hung on was Ananias. It was whether Ananias would go through with it, whether he would act. The question here is not whether Ananias would be afraid; of course he was afraid--"Lord, do you know who this guy is? Don't you know what he's done? What he's up to?" The

question was not whether Ananias would be afraid; the question was whether he would act anyway. Would he let himself be governed by his fear of Saul, the fear of what Saul had been doing and had promised to do...or would he let himself be led by hope? By the hope that God really might be up to something new? By the hope that God's love really actually can transform people, even the most unlikely people.

We certainly have a lot to be afraid of. Watching the news is like shopping for whichever variety of fears you'd like to feel today--on this side we have local crime, and over here we have wars and political conflicts. But we know we don't even have to go looking for reasons to be afraid. We can generate enough fear on our own--fear of change, of stepping out and starting something new, perhaps starting a new school or a new job, fear that what we do doesn't actually make any difference, fear of making the wrong decision, fear of being alone, fear that we don't or we won't have enough, fear that we won't amount to much or live up to somebody's expectations--do I need to keep going? Friends there is no shortage of things to fear...the question is not whether we will be afraid. Like Ananias, we already are, and that's ok--we can voice that to God--God, don't you see what is happening? Don't you see how hard this is, how scary this is?

But God responds to us as God responds to Ananias--Ananias, Go. Taylor, Go. _____, Go. _____, Go. _____, Go. Don't be paralyzed by fear, don't let fear stop you from moving in the direction I need you to go. Be driven, and led, by hope--hope that I am up to something new, that I just might be using you; hope that my love can change people, hope that I am making the world

whole again, that I am making people whole again; hope that I will provide; hope that God is bigger than anything we might fear. Hope that, like Ananias, God might actually need us to go, to move, to act, to decide.

Even when we are afraid, Jesus loves us. And that love calls us to act--to act out of hope. To wake up in the morning and say, "Ok Jesus. Where are we going today?"

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Summary: Ananias is afraid to follow God's call to heal Saul's blindness, but he acts anyway. God's call to us is the same—to act out of hope, rather than fear.