

## Damascus road

So far in this series on the early church and the Holy Spirit, we've primarily focused on the church before Paul...or Saul. We saw a healing by Peter. We've seen Stephen, a deacon, die by stoning. We met Philip on the Gaza road and heard his proclamation of the gospel to an Ethiopian eunuch. We heard about the astounding conversion of Cornelius's household...Gentiles. We examined the troubled reaction of the Jewish Christians to Peter and to this boundary shattering event.

But Paul is responsible for a good chunk of the rest of the New Testament, so we turn now to him.

First, just to clarify, this was not exactly a name change. Saul was his Hebrew name and Paul was his Greek name. Saul was a Hebrew...solidly Jewish. So in this story he is Saul. As his ministry to the Greek speaking Gentiles moves out from here, Paul is the name used.

This is perhaps one of the most familiar stories in the book of Acts.

Paul and Ananias both had a powerful encounter with the risen Jesus. The encounter changed them and it changed the course of history.

This is God's grace for both Saul and for Ananias. Thing is, Paul would not have believed he needed God's grace. He thought he was doing what God wanted him to do.

We talk regularly about God's grace. We are saved by God's grace. Grace and gracious are nice words. When we say someone is gracious, we think of someone who is good to be around. Gracious people make you feel welcome, safe.

If we are honest with ourselves however, when we really realize what God's grace is, we don't actually always like it that much. We do not like the idea of God being gracious to really bad people. And to those early followers of the Way of Jesus, Saul was a very bad person. Remember he stood by and held coats for the people who stoned Stephen to death.

Grace can seem like letting bad people off the hook. But this story better shows what God's grace actually looks like. God's grace can have a hard edge, because God's grace is not meant to let people off the hook. It's meant to change people. To save them...to save them from themselves and save others from the harm they cause.

For God's grace to work on Paul, it first had to get his attention. God's grace knocked him to the ground and blinded him.

And for Ananias, God's grace first scared the daylights out of him.

Grace is connected to repentance, although we sometimes get the order mixed up. We think that we have to repent before God's grace can work. But the reality is, the first movement is God's grace towards us through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

If you remember, the word repentance is defined as turning around, changing your mind, changing the path you're on. The encounter of both Paul and Ananias with the risen Christ is what brought about that change. Paul in particular did a complete 180, going from a fiery persecutor of Christians to one of its most well-known apostles.

Ananias's own about-face was also pretty dramatic, although he doesn't get any more mention in the New Testament after this. Ananias is the man through whom God's grace is completed for Paul. Ananias laid his hands on Paul and prayed over him. He did what Jesus taught – love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

For both of them, God's grace began with what had to be pretty frightening.

But it seems that's sometimes what has to happen. For Saul especially, this was a death and resurrection. The old Saul – the one breathing fire and murderous threats against Christians – had to die.

Then, the Saul who became the missionary to the Gentiles in far reaching corners of the Empire could be born. And Ananias was like the midwife through whom that could happen.

But for both, the initial movement was God's. And although the experience of Saul and Ananias was traumatic and frightening, especially for Saul, it ended up moving the mission begun in Jesus forward.

Most of us may not have had this kind of dramatic Damascus road experience – a sudden and very dramatic encounter with Christ that changed you forever. Some of you likely have. But we probably have all had less dramatic experiences where God somehow got our attention and caused us to relook at our attitudes and actions.

I've had lots of those that have more gradually changed me over time. And some of those have been experiences have been at least somewhat painful.

I sort of wonder if the church, capital C church, might be having a Damascus road experience as the anxiety over the future of the church builds.

We generally assume that declining numbers and churches closing in this country is a bad thing. And in some ways it is. Churches that are not able to sustain any kind of ministry aren't really helping move Christ's mission forward.

But sometimes something has to die for something new to be born. And sometimes what seems like a bad thing is God's way of getting our attention.

Maybe that's what's going on in the church.

As a sort of thought experiment, let's put ourselves, as the church, in the place of both Saul and Ananias and see what it might be saying to us.

We'll start with Saul. Before this experience, he was 100 % sure he knew he was doing what God wanted. He was ridding the synagogue of what he believed was a dangerous blasphemy.

This should prompt us to examine the things that we might be so sure we are right about. It's worth remembering that the church has supported – and in some cases still does support - some pretty awful things in its history...inquisitions, crusades, burning witches, slavery, racism, sexism, anti-LGBTQ stances and actions.

In some places and times, churches have been more of a social club designed to improve the social standing of its members. Churches have been sometimes too focused on their own financial well-being and buildings for their own sake. They have failed to think more deeply about how to use their resources for the good of Christ's mission to bless and save the world.

Some churches have so aligned with a particular political party that Jesus becomes sort of an afterthought.

When a church's practices become so unlike Jesus as to make him invisible, I think God will step in. And God's grace might begin with a painful and anxiety producing experience. But we can trust that God's purpose will be to move the mission forward.

On the other hand, maybe the church is also like Ananias. Ananias had to step outside his comfort zone. He felt like he was risking his life to go to Saul. But in the end, he became the midwife of sorts to the birth of Paul's ministry to the far-flung Roman Empire.

How is the church being called to step outside our comfort zone? Who are we being called to minister to even though we're a little scared of them? Are there people who we believe are a threat that we are called to pray for?

This story does call us as the church to ask ourselves some hard questions. It calls us to examine how we do reach outside our walls...and our comfort zone. How are we doing in furthering Christ's mission?

But it also calls us to trust that the church is God's church. Whatever discomfort we might experience as things change in the world and in the church, God's grace can be trusted.

It can be trusted to bring about the needed changes...changes which will propel Christ's mission forward to bring salvation to the world, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.