

Blinded By the Light  
Acts 9:1-19a  
Matthew 6:22-34

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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Acts 9:1-19a

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.

Matthew 6:22-34

"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe

you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

You’ve all heard this story before. Saul of Tarsus is a Pharisee. He held the coats of the men who stoned Saint Stephen.<sup>1</sup> He has been persecuting the early Church, dragging men and women off to prison as collaborators of the noted enemy of the state Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>2</sup> At least some of these people have died.

He is headed to the city of Damascus, in Syria, the same Damascus, Syria that the United States bombed yesterday. He’s headed there to do the same thing he did in Jerusalem, and he is stopped in his tracks, and knocked off his horse. A bright light shines all around him, and he has his first conversation with Jesus the Christ. He’s struck blind and goes to Damascus.

At this point I’d like to hit the pause button on our story for a moment.

One thing I learned from my father when I was growing up is that, if you really want to understand what is happening on the football field or the basketball court, you have to look off the action. Look at the linemen moving back and forth just barely on their own sides of the neutral zone. Watch the forward setting up for the rebound, even while the point guard shoots a three-pointer. There is a multi-layered game going on there that you don’t notice, unless you look off the action.

I now return you to your Biblical story, already in progress.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 6:8-8:3.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 8.

Let's look off the action. Ananias is a Christian living in Damascus. He is well-known and respected among the Jewish and Christian community.<sup>3</sup>

He has heard about Saul, and about the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem. He has heard that Saul has scattered almost the entire Christian Church across all of Judea and Samaria.<sup>4</sup> He has heard that Saul has letters of authority, allowing him to arrest any Christians whom he finds in Damascus.

So, when Ananias hears that Saul has been struck blind, apparently by the power of God, I could understand if he breathed a sigh of relief. I might even be able to understand a little bit of gloating.

I mean, that sure sounds like God's judgment on a sinner, doesn't it? This will hinder Saul in hunting down Christians, but, even more significantly, a man who is not whole in all his parts is prohibited from entering the Temple.<sup>5</sup> This means that Saul, a self-righteous Pharisee, is now barred from even entering the Temple.

Talk about poetic justice for the holier-than-thou!

I could understand Ananias feeling that way.

But I didn't say that he was right.

That's not how God works.

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 22:12.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 8:1.

<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 21:18.

God does not punish human beings in this lifetime. Jesus taught us that, “He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”<sup>6</sup>

Maybe you know somebody who falls for this temptation. People who are always saying, “Look at that bad thing that happened to that person. I never liked her.” It’s easy to do.

Or people who say, “But he’s doing so well. That means God has blessed him.” This logic is particularly dangerous when we apply it to ourselves. We say “I’m just so blessed!”, and expressing gratitude to God is wonderful, but what we’re thinking is, “That means I’m doing everything right. Aren’t I wonderful?”

Or we say, “My life is awful. God must be punishing me. Aren’t I terrible?” In that direction lie many terrible decisions.

Life going well for you is a blessing. But that does not mean that you are doing everything right. And it does not mean that people who are suffering, are experiencing negative consequences in this lifetime for bad actions. That is true whether those people are you, or someone else.

Sometimes suffering happens to change something, like the life of Saul of Tarsus.

Sometimes suffering just happens. And we will never know why. It is the height of arrogance to believe that you can diagnose someone else’s spiritual faults and tell them why they are suffering. Even if you’re completely correct, it almost never helps. It usually serves only to make you feel better about yourself, at the expense of making the other person’s suffering even worse. Jesus explained something along these lines, about removing the beam from your own eye before you try to help your neighbor with the speck in his.<sup>7</sup> Feeling superior to others because of what you see as their spiritual faults is not a kind or a loving thing.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:45.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 7:3.

Returning to our story, if Ananias is feeling superior and self-righteous because God has struck Saul blind, well, then, God reaches out and fixes that for him. God tells Ananias to go see Saul, and to lay hands on him, to heal him of his blindness.

Ananias cannot believe this. In one translation of this scene, Ananias responds to God, saying, “Master, you cannot be serious!”<sup>8</sup> Ananias lays out all the good, rational reasons why he does not want to get anywhere near Saul. Saul has hurt and killed Christians in Jerusalem. He has come to Damascus to do the same thing there.

Ananias does not complain to God, “I’m disappointed! I thought you struck him blind because he was doing evil things!” But he probably felt that way.

Ananias argues, but God says, “Go!” And Ananias goes. He lays hands on Saul, and Saul is healed of his blindness. Saul gets up out of bed, and is baptized, and starts his life again. The man now known as Paul goes on to found churches all over the Roman world and to write a number of books of the New Testament.

Two weeks ago, at Easter, Mary Magdalene was a character with whom we could identify in the story. She believed that it was over, but she was faithful. Jesus appeared to her and called her by name.

Last week, it was the Apostle Thomas. Thomas missed one meeting, and he has yet to live it down. He missed Jesus’ appearance to the rest of the disciples, and he insisted that he had to have the same personal experience with the risen Christ that his friends had.

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 9:13, *The Message*.

This week, I suppose that some of us could identify with Saul, or Paul. We've had dramatic or traumatic experiences and turned our lives around.

But I don't think most of us here are Saul or Paul.

No, I believe that most of us in this room are better fits for Ananias. We are seemingly ordinary folks. We are Easter people, who know that the God who created us, loves us enough to die on a cross for us. Jesus promised us at the end of Matthew's gospel that he will be with us to the end of the age. Wherever we go, Christ will go with us.

This amazing love and grace, however, is not expectation-free. Christ said that, if we love Him, we will keep his commandments. He also said that the law and the prophets are summed up in just two commands. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." And "Love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>9</sup>

If we love our neighbors, we will reach out to those who are hurting.

Every single person out there is created in God's image, and, yes, they are our neighbors. Not just the ones who look like us. Not just the ones we like. Not just the ones whom we expect to be nice to us. Not just the Christians. Not even just those who would call us neighbors. And certainly not just the ones who are pleasant to deal with.

But we will reach out to the hurting.

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<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, respectively. Jesus says this in Matthew 22:37-40.

I am not saying that you should put yourself in danger. I know that some in this room have dealt with situations of abuse. That is not what I'm talking about here. Physical or emotional or sexual violence and abuse are not part of God's plan for anyone. And they are not acceptable, no matter who does them or who is the victim.

I am, though, talking about the situations that make you uncomfortable.

I am, though, talking about violating that most fundamental of middle-class suburban cultural mores.

I'm talking about getting into socially awkward situations.

Your co-worker who has been missing work may have a temporary personal crisis going on, or this might be something more serious. Simply the fact that someone cares enough to say something will probably be a comfort. God cares, and you can be God's voice.

That homeless person whom you see isn't just somebody's child, as the cliché says, rather, she is somebody. She is beloved of God. If we are the servants of God whom we confess to be, then we ought to be reaching out to her in love.

No situation that you see around you is a test, or a punishment, or a way to earn God's love – you already have that. But they are opportunities to be the hands and the voice of God in our daily lives. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that we are to love even our enemies and those who persecute us.<sup>10</sup> We are to be like God, really loving all of God's children.

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 5:44.

My friends, God loves us.

Each and every one of us.

Jesus told us how we should treat other people around us.

Jesus told us not to fear something so trivial as a little awkwardness.

Who in your life is difficult to reach out to, or who needs you, but it would be easier not to reach out?

Who in your life makes you say, “Master, you cannot be serious?”

The LORD says, “Go.”

AMEN