

## NEGLECTED CHARACTERS OF THE BIBLE: ANANIAS

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo

Union Church of Pocantico Hills

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Psalm 145:10-18

Acts 9:1-20

I am continuing this week with my series of sermons on neglected characters of the Bible. It's based on the work of Bishop William Willimon while he was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, and focuses on a number of the "little people" of the Bible—folks who arguably play a minor role in the story of God, and who therefore rarely receive much pulpit time. Last week, we talked about Rahab the prostitute from Jericho, who helped fulfill God's promise to settle the people of Israel in the land of Canaan. Today, we turn to the newer testament and a man: Ananias of Damascus.

The call or conversion of Paul is a dramatic event, etched indelibly forever in the Christian consciousness. He was not always known as Paul. In the Jewish community he was known as Saul of Tarsus, a devout Pharisee, a scholar and zealous adherent of the Jewish law. And, he was one of the first and fiercest foes of the young Jesus movement. He was convinced that these Jesus-followers were a dangerous cult, renegades within Judaism, and that they would irreparably damage Judaism with their blasphemous innovation, their claims of Jesus as Messiah. And so, Saul persecuted Christians. He was there when Stephen became the first Christian martyr. He held the coats of the elders who stoned Stephen, and Luke tells us "Saul approved of their killing him."<sup>1</sup> Saul was on his way to Damascus with official letters from the Jewish authorities giving him power to seek out and destroy Christian groups there. But on his way, there was a light, a voice: "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?"

He fell to the ground, literally blinded by the light. The voice, you see, was from the risen Christ. What happened? The Bible says the men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the voice but saw no one.<sup>2</sup> The revelation, it seems, was for Saul alone. The great Italian artist Caravaggio imagined the moment so simply yet powerfully in his monumental painting for the church of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome. Saul lies on his back, at the foot of his horse, a horse that is neither rearing nor giving any sign that the world is being changed, but rather seems to be returning to its stall at the end of the day, tired and peaceful. Saul is shown as a strapping young man, armed with a sword and ready—at least until a moment earlier—to take on the world and all comers. Now he lies there, eyes closed, fixed in a heavenly spotlight, his out-flung arms suggesting a childlike embrace of what his mind's eye sees above him.

Paul himself described the experience fourteen years later in a letter to the church in Corinth. He spoke of being "caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—[but] caught up into Paradise. [I] heard things

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

<sup>2</sup> Acts 9:7.

that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.”<sup>3</sup> And to the Galatians, Paul wrote, “I did not receive [the gospel] from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ...God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.”<sup>4</sup>

Whatever it is that happens on that road to Damascus, Saul is stunned; he can see nothing. He has to be led around by the hand; he does not eat or drink. Theologians have noted a pattern in Saul’s conversion that they have seen in other dramatic religious conversions. Someone is moved from one way of being to another—radically transformed forever. That radical transformation is signified by the light, the blindness, the move from Saul the resourceful persecutor of the church to this rather helpless Paul being led around by the hand, totally dependent upon others.

Now in the middle of this dramatic, traumatic story of change, a little man appears. It’s easy to miss him, and even if you’ve heard the story of Paul on the road to Damascus many times before, it’s quite possible you’ve never really taken in this other fellow. His name was Ananias. At the same time as Saul is sitting in the dark in Damascus fasting, the voice of God comes to this Ananias and says, “Ananias, arise and go to the street called Straight. There you will meet a man named Saul. Go, welcome him into the faith, because I have plans for him. I have chosen him to be my missionary to all the Gentiles.”

Ananias is a respected member of the Damascus church. He can hardly believe what he hears. “Lord, did you say *Saul*? Is this the same Saul who is church enemy number one, the persecutor and destroyer of so many Christians? You’ve got to be kidding!”

But the voice replies simply, “Go!”

And Ananias goes. He goes to Straight Street in Damascus, and there, just as the voice said, is Saul. Ananias goes to him and addresses him not as church enemy number one, not as the murderer and destroyer that he is, but rather he addresses him as “Brother Saul.”

Ananias lays hands on him. Ananias thus becomes a minister, a priest to Saul, and when he lays hands upon Saul’s head, immediately Saul’s sight is restored and he is able to receive food. Ananias baptizes him. The change has been so dramatic that he is no longer called Saul in the Bible, but gets a new name, representative of his new identity. The arch-persecutor of Christians is transformed by the call of Christ into the “apostle to the Gentiles.” He will now be known as Paul.

Poor Ananias. We wonder how he must have received all of this. Unfortunately, we will never know. Ananias is never heard from again. He evidently went back home and on about his business, having played his bit part in this great drama of Christian conversion. Yet without his willing assistance, Paul might have never been converted.

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:2-4.

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 1:11-16.

Some years ago, Harvard University Press brought out a fascinating series of books called *A History of Private Life*. It told not about kings and queens and parliaments, but about ordinary people going about their lives. Life in the “good old days” was often not all that good. Over the millennia, most people have had to work from dawn until dusk, just to eke out a living, just barely getting by with enough food.

Most of us—at least when I was growing up—studied history as the lives and the work of great men—the powerful, the mighty, the ones who leave behind statues and monuments. But if you want to know true history, you must dig deeper. You must look beyond those who make the headlines, to those who are raising the crops, making the bread, fighting the wars and raising the children, to know what was really going on.

It’s true also in the history of faith. Again and again, God uses ordinary, little people, to accomplish great things. What if Ananias had said, “Lord, I don’t mind a little evangelism, I don’t mind *some* new people joining our church, but a murderer? Sure, he *says* he’s changed, seen the light. Easy enough to say! What’s the rush? Can’t we see whether this ‘spiritual experience’ of his takes root before I go charging down Straight Street risking my neck? Maybe we could appoint a committee to deal with him?”

You wouldn’t have blamed Ananias. Maybe he had friends, close family members even, who had been in prison and even put to death because of Saul. Maybe he was just being sensitive to the feelings of the other good folks in the Damascus church who would be upset by having somebody like Saul around. It’s one thing to turn the other cheek to an enemy like Saul, and wish him no harm, but who could expect Ananias to do Saul any good?

It’s enough to make you ask, who has the most dramatic conversion in this story? Is it Saul, who is converted from being church enemy number one to the great heroic missionary to the Gentiles, the one we know as St. Paul?

Or is it little Ananias? Ananias, who, on the basis of nothing but a voice and a vision risks his life, goes to the street called Straight, addresses a once bitter enemy by the term, “brother,” touches him, lays hands upon his head, and is thus the agent of one of the most dramatic transformations in all of Scripture.

When we answer Christ’s call, we are changed. We learn to love Christ, of course, but more than that, in loving Christ, we learn to love those whom Christ loves. His love is always reaching out, grasping hold of lives, changing others, bringing lost sheep into the fold. And if you are already in the fold, how does it feel when some of these lost sheep get found?

It is one thing to love Jesus, but sometimes it can be an even greater challenge to love those whom Jesus loves! Ananias had heard enough about this man Saul to know that he didn’t want any part of him. And yet, he was commanded to go to this house and bless him, commanded to call him by the name “brother.” Through the grace of God, Ananias put his doubts aside, accepted his commission, and went and did as he was bidden. And through that obedience, the power of the risen Christ was able to transform

Saul the arch-persecutor of the church into its most ardent defender and prominent witness, the one who will carry the gospel “to the end of the earth.”<sup>5</sup>

Note that Ananias is not, for all we know, some spectacular Christian. We never hear him teach or preach. His name is not mentioned among those who are closest to Jesus either before or after his resurrection. He is just an ordinary disciple, somebody perhaps like you or me. So what do we learn from that?

Perhaps we are meant to learn that Jesus does not hesitate to ask ordinary little people—like us—to act like Christians. That discipleship involves Christ’s turning ordinary, everyday people like us into saints—courageous people who are able to relate to others in the same way that Jesus relates to us, ordinary people who live counter to the ways of the world, referring to others, not by the world’s designations of good, evil, liberal, conservative, rich, poor, but as “sister” and “brother.”

In these days hyper-partisanship and division, when we are also isolated by the pandemic, it is easier than ever before to hunker down in our own tribes and to reduce other people to their labels and group identities. The story of Ananias reminds us to be listening for Christ’s call to break through all that which separates us from others whom he loves and to remember how much the Lord seems to enjoy doing extraordinary things with ordinary people.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Acts 1:8.