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“Here We Receive New Life” 2. In Our Language and Our Loyalties

Acts 9:1-20 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. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Have you ever heard the story of the pitcher in a very tight baseball game who found himself facing one of the most fearsome hitters in the league? The catcher signaled for pitch after pitch, but the pitcher shook his head “no” at each one of the catcher’s signs. Finally, the catcher became frustrated and called time and went to the mound and said to the pitcher with some annoyance, "I have called every pitch in the

world to you. What do you want?!?" To which the pitcher replied, "I just want to stand here and hold on to the ball as long as I can."

Do you know that feeling? – when life all around you is shaking, when things get topsy-turvy, when the things that you have always thought you're now not sure you think any more, when change or the prospect of change is invading your life and the world around you, and there is some sort of batter staring at you whom you just know will make your life even more confused and complex. We all know those times. Maybe you're in one of those times right now. And all you and I want to do is stand there and hold on tight to the ball, hold on fiercely to the little bit of control – or at least illusion of control – to keep yet more change at bay by doing nothing.

But it doesn't work does it? Our scripture this morning, in our continuing Easter season sermon series from the Book of Acts on the ways that the Easter Good News can bring us new life, is a long story but one of the most famous stories in the Bible: It's usually referred to as Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. It's full of drama with lights and mysterious voices. It's a story worthy of Stephen King. But I don't think it's the most profound miracle in this passage. No, I think that has to be reserved for Ananias and his small, struggling, scared congregation of folks who had fled from Jerusalem because of the persecution by people like Paul. You see, it's Paul that gets all the "ink" here, in part, indeed because of the very dramatic elements in the story, but I believe that it is Ananias who actually ought to be our grateful focus for this story, for without his brave and courageous and faithful actions, Christianity might well have died out right there in Damascus. So this morning, as the title of the sermon has it, let's see how the story of Anianas can offer us Easter possibilities for new life in our language

and our loyalties.

Let's recap just a bit: Paul, who was earlier known by this Hebrew name "Saul," was apparently one of the most vicious of those seeking to persecute the followers of Jesus after his death and resurrection. You may recall that Stephen was the first Christian martyr, who was stoned to death – a very awful way to die – and that during that stoning, Saul held the coats of those doing the deed. That little detail tells you a lot: we know from his later writings that Paul was a very proud man and the fact that he would do such an apparently menial task gives you a clue about just how devoted he was to the cause of rooting out and destroying those Jews who had accepted Jesus as Messiah. In today's story, he is in possession of letters from Jerusalem authorizing him to be a kind of bounty hunter on behalf of the Roman authorities, with the power to return those followers of Jesus to Jerusalem for trial.¹ Scores, maybe hundreds, of these new followers had fled from Jerusalem to Damascus after the events of Holy Week, and now Saul is determined to round them up and either flog them right there (another truly awful punishment) or take them back to Jerusalem in chains.

Now, imagine with me that flock of believers in Damascus the night before Saul is arriving in town. They've gotten word he's on his way and they are scared. One preacher imagines how they must have gathered together and prayed; he says: but I very much doubt anyone prayed that this Saul might be saved. I **can** believe someone might have prayed that Saul be waylaid, or "terminated," in some divine act or providential accident.... I **can** believe [they] would have prayed for

¹Cf. <http://www.lectionarystudies.com/studyot/easter3caot.html>

the protection of the church in Damascus and for the safety of individual saints, especially the leaders and the most visible Christians. [But] No one... was even thinking of what God was about to do. Ananias is not only surprised by his commission; he is resistant to it....²

Ananias has to wonder whether God is making a huge mistake. He has to wonder if he has misheard what God is telling him to do. One scholar says that what God is asking Ananias to do would be tantamount to asking a rabbi to make a pastoral call on Adolf Hitler in 1930s Germany!³ Don't you imagine that Ananias also would have much preferred to simply stay where he was, holding tightly onto that ball instead of throwing the pitch that God was calling!

But God didn't give him that choice. And so Ananias – scared, reluctant, probably having bid his family goodbye for what he imagined might be the last time – heads out to where Saul (soon to become known as Paul) is staying after he was blinded by his own experience of God's surprising news on that Damascus Road. And what happens? Paul's blindness leaves him, he is baptized, is given something to eat and joins up with the followers of Jesus in Damascus and stays with them for three years, helping to strengthen that young church through his gifts for preaching and teaching.

What do you and I learn from this story? Two things, I believe. First of all, notice how Ananias' language changes. When God first tells him to go to Paul, Ananias says

²<http://bible.org/seriespage/conversion-saul-acts-91-31> Emphases mine.

³http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-3c/?type=old_testament_lectionary

““Lord, I have heard from many about **this man**, how much evil he has done....” He doesn’t even give Paul a name; it’s just “this man.” That’s the way that all of us avoid seeing our fellow human beings as children of God, though, isn’t it? We don’t give them a name; we just call them “those people – “those gay folks,” “those Republicans,” “those Democrats,” “those Muslims,” “those Texans” - which makes it so much easier to dehumanize and objectify them. But after Ananias goes to Paul to share the Good News that Jesus loves him and wants him for his own, did you notice how Ananias’ language changes? Instead of the third person – “this man” – it’s now the first-person and Ananias doesn’t just talk *about* Paul but he speaks *to* him and addresses him as “Brother.” When you and I see those whom so many want to label and turn into objects, the story of Ananias and Paul reminds us that when we take the risk of truly knowing “those people” we will frequently discover that they are indeed our brothers and sisters, full of loves and losses, flaws and foibles, gifts and graces, just like us. The virulently anti-gay person changes both his heart and his language when for the first time he comes into an actual relationship with someone whom he has only known in the past by a label. The rabid Democrat breaks bread with, spends time with, gets to know, someone of an opposite political persuasion and discovers not simply a straw man to be sloganized, but a brother or sister about whom he can no longer use hateful and dismissive language to describe.

Second, much as we understandably want to hold on to the ball and not throw any pitch, not confront the change that lies before us, the story of Ananias reminds us in its own way of what may be God’s most persistent message throughout both Testaments, the words that were in the mouths of the angels at the beginning of Jesus’

life and at his tomb: “Do not be afraid.” For, as one writer puts the point,

That’s, after all, always God’s basic commission to God’s church, perhaps especially when it’s fearfully hiding behind various locked doors: “Get up and go to those who scare you. Get up and go to your enemies. Get up and fearlessly go as a disciple to work, or school or wherever your routine usually takes you.”⁴

Now, I am the last person to say that’s an easy commission to carry out. It’s a scary world around us and many folks find themselves – or will find themselves – in scary situations where the prospect of letting go of the ball and following God’s commission instead of the voices that shout at us fearfully is daunting indeed. I have no recipe for how to do that. But I do have examples, like Ananias, like Paul after his conversion, and like a modern day story that happened just recently; let me share it with you:

On the night of the Paris terrorist bombs, a man by the name of Ted Hakey went to his local bar, had eight drinks, went home and drank some more, and then loaded his handgun and rifle. He then went out and emptied his weapons at the mosque near his home. This was not a surprise to anyone; Hakey’s Facebook page was full of vile anti-Muslim sentiments. Despite some of his congregation’s understandable fear, the president of the mosque, Dr. Mohammed Qureshi, invited Mr. Hakey to come to a prayer service where he was welcomed. That experience of those folks as people with names, as people like him, changed him and changed his loyalties. And Mr. Hakey apologized to them with these words: “fear is always when you don’t know something. The unknown is what you are always afraid of.... Going forward I want to help you

⁴[Ibid.](#)

bridge that gap and help someone else not make the same mistake I did.” Mr. Hakey’s life changed forever, and like Paul before him, he now sees himself as one commissioned to bring a very different message to the world. He was convicted of a Federal hate crime and the Muslim congregation he attacked is now writing letters to the court asking that his sentence be lessened, and Mr. Hakey is now trying hard on his Facebook page to educate his followers about the true meaning of this ancient religion of peace that he once got so badly wrong but about which he now knows differently because God led him beyond his fears to new loyalties.⁵

God called Ananias and Paul, and Mr. Hakey and Dr. Quereshi, and so many others. And the new life that is the promise of Easter is also calling you and me. And ours will likely not be a history-altering thing like Paul and Ananias; but it will be oh-so-important, oh-so-needed. For, to close with the words of one preacher,

...more likely it [will] mean... simply becoming more faithful right where you are, in your family, in your business, in your friendships, risking those moments when called on to speak of Jesus and share the power of the Holy Spirit.

Or as the words of that wonderful African-American spiritual has it, "If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus and say 'He died for all.'"⁶ Yes, you can. Yes, you can.

⁵All quotes from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2016/04/06/after-paris-attacks-he-shot-at-a-mosque-this-month-he-prayed-with-the-muslims-there/>

⁶<https://www.mapc.com/worship/sermons/2001/04/29/from-saul-to-paul-conversion-or-recognition>