

The Future God Sees

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Acts 9:1-2, 10-17

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 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."

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

The Future God Sees

Saul was a man of zeal. He was raised to be one. The stories Saul was raised on were stories in which the people of Israel succeeded when they obeyed God and failed when they ignored God. Saul's heroes were the individuals who risked their own lives to do the right thing, to root out unfaithfulness. Because unfaithfulness put God's covenant with the people at risk. For Saul, zeal wasn't personal intensity, it was a theological tradition, one that has always viewed violence as a tool of the faithful.

We first meet Saul at the stoning of Stephen. He is part of a crowd gathered at the edge of town. He doesn't throw any stones, but he holds the coats of the ones who do. And the text makes a point of saying that he approved of the stoning. More than approved—the text goes on to describe how Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house, dragging off both men and women and throwing them into prison. For Saul, this zeal was not persecution. This was what faithfulness required.

In our story for this morning, Saul is headed to Damascus with letters of authorization—letters that will introduce him to the leaders in Damascus and provide him with institutional backing for continuing his work of zeal in a new city. He is a man convicted of his purpose with the authority to act on it. Saul, in other words, is a serious threat.

Which brings us to Ananias. Ananias isn't anyone particularly important. You might recognize the name from an earlier story in Acts in which a couple was struck dead after lying about a financial donation to the church, but this is a different disciple. One who only shows up in this one story. But while we know next to nothing about Ananias, Ananias would have known plenty about Saul. Saul's campaign of terror in Jerusalem has sent early Christians fleeing to surrounding cities, and Ananias almost certainly knows people who fled because of him.

So when the Lord appears to Ananias in a vision and says, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul," Ananias is unsurprisingly reluctant. And bless him, because his immediate response is protest: "But I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem, and he has authority from those in power to do the same here." There's speaking truth to power and then there's speaking truth to God. And Ananias isn't the first to feel the need to remind God of relevant facts just in case the divine might have overlooked them.

And God does not argue. God does not defend Saul. But neither does God explain God's self to Ananias. All God says is, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen." And don't you imagine that Ananias had to take a minute to question God's wisdom, if not God's sanity? Saul is a killer. He has killed people just like Ananias and he has come to Damascus with the weight of institutional authority behind him to continue persecuting and killing Ananias and his companions. Certainly, God has chosen some questionable people in the past, but I'm not sure any of those stories could have prepared Ananias for this revelation.

But Ananias goes. The text doesn't tell us if he was afraid, though it's hard to imagine he wasn't. It doesn't tell us if he wanted to turn back, though surely he did. It doesn't tell us if his hands shook or his voice faltered when he finally laid them on the man who had been killing his friends and companions and said, "Brother Saul."

Brother Saul. That's it. Just those two words. Ananias doesn't offer words of forgiveness or a sermon about a crucified savior who forgave even those who tortured him. He calls Saul brother. In a house on Straight Street, in a city braced for terror, that is the word that crosses the threshold.

Brother. It's not sentimentality or performative altruism; Ananias isn't pretending that what Saul has done didn't happen. He doesn't pretend that Saul is someone other than who he is, but he goes to Saul, as one scholar puts it, armed with Saul's future and not his own. He does his best to see Saul as God does, as one whose future is drenched in divine desire.¹ Ananias acts not out of his own experience and knowledge but out of God's vision for who Saul will become.

The text makes sure we see what Ananias did, even if no one else in the story stops to notice. And then Ananias disappears from the story. His work is done. And we are left to sit with the enormity of what one ordinary disciple chose to do when God gave him a name and an address.

I suspect that most of us, if we're being honest, would have gone back to bed. We would have told ourselves it was just a dream. We would have listed the very good reasons why God would never have called someone like Saul. And the text doesn't tell us if Ananias was the first disciple God called; for all we know, a dozen people did go back to bed, certain that God would never call a man like Saul. Ananias might simply have been the first one willing to listen, willing to put aside their own skepticism in the belief, the hope, that maybe God could redeem someone as zealous as Saul.

The easier sermon to preach this morning would be the one where I remind us that one of our core beliefs, as people who take Scripture seriously, is that each and every person is created in the image of God. That everyone is capable of bearing the divine, worthy of being seen as more than the worst things they have done. That sermon is one I suspect we can all get on board with. It's got the ring of truth and it's vague enough that it doesn't ask anything particularly hard of us. Of course we should try to see the best in people. Of course God sees more potential in people than we do. Good for God.

But that isn't the sermon this text is preaching. That isn't the call that Ananias heard. Ananias got a name and an address. Ananias got a specific person in a specific place at a specific time. Ananias was called to name Saul as a child of God, a brother in Christ. He was called to say something fundamentally and theologically true to the one person he did not want it to be true about.

¹ Willie James Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

It's a big ask, allowing God's vision of someone else's future to trump our own experience of that person. It goes against every instinct we have. And yet. Isn't that what we believe? That each and every person is created in the image of God? That God can redeem anyone? That none of us are our biggest mistakes or worst decisions?

Theological truths are easy in the abstract. But Ananias's story shows us what it looks like, what it costs, when we apply them in the real world. So the question for us is: are we willing to allow God to reorder our vision? Are we willing to put aside our own experiences and knowledge of someone and allow God's vision for their future (a vision drenched in divine desire) to inform how we treat them?

Because Saul had to be struck blind on a road to Damascus before he could see through God's eyes, while Ananias allowed God to reorder his vision while he could still see perfectly well.

May God grant us the courage to cross the threshold, to lay our hands on the ones we would rather avoid, and to call them brother or sister.

Because that is the future God sees.

And God is still looking for people willing to see it too.

Amen.