

Who Are You Lord/Acts 9:1-20
Preached Sunday, May 1, 2022/We Are Witnesses sermon series

Good morning, friends. Welcome to worship and welcome to week two of our new sermon series We Are Witnesses. This is a new series during Eastertide and we're focusing on different passages from the book of Acts. Now that we celebrated Jesus' resurrection from the dead and we know we are heirs to the promise of resurrection, the question is how do we live into that? And one way is to see ourselves as witnesses of the story of Christianity. Much like the folks in the early church, we are witnesses to the greatest story ever told. And it's a helpful reference point to look at their stories, at the challenges and difficulties they encountered, so we can make sense of our own. Last week, we looked at the fifth chapter of Acts and we saw how Peter and the apostles performed signs and wonders among the people and they attracted more of a following. Things were going well until the religious leaders made a big show of putting them in prison. And then an angel of the Lord let them out of prison and told them to go to the temple and tell people about their new life. So, they did. And last week's scripture reading focused on what happened when the high priest and his colleagues went looking for the apostles and discovered they weren't in prison anymore. Peter gave a great short sermon about his faith and how he and the apostles were focused on following God and not humans.

Today's reading is one of the most famous passages in the New Testament. Gail just read the story of Saul's call that led to his conversion on the road to Damascus. Saul of Tarsus, later called Paul, had this incredible encounter during today's scripture reading and it changed his life in a powerful and dramatic way. There are lots of dramatic things that happen in the Bible, but the story of Paul's change is one of the most significant. It shows up three different times in the book of Acts alone (it later appears in chapters 22 and 26). As I said, he undergoes a name change from Saul to Paul but I'm going to call him Paul just for the sake of simplicity.

The title for today's sermon is, "Who Are You, Lord?" And that comes from the question that Paul asks during his encounter with God. Paul was an extremely polarizing figure. He persecuted Christians and he was completely opposed to the people who made up the early church. He was there at the stoning of Stephen – he was actually holding the coats of the people who stoned him. And scripture says he was in full agreement with Stephen's murder. Paul is not a minor figure in history. So, when today's text opens and says Paul was spewing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples, there was every reason for the disciples to take him seriously. He was a threat. As he approached Damascus, a light from heaven encircled him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice asking him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul responds by asking, "Who are you, Lord?"

When we look at today's scripture reading, there are a few points that struck me that I want to lift up this morning. The first comes from Paul's question. Paul has this encounter on the road to Damascus and the first thing he says in response to the voice speaking to him is, "Who are you, Lord?" One of the first things we see in this famous story is the fact that the folks in this text – Paul and later Ananias – do not have everything figured out. They don't have all the answers. I don't know about you, but when I go through life, I'm doing my best to figure out what God's will is, and what God wants me to do. That's a daily journey for me, and it isn't always easy. It would often be much easier just to give up and say, "You know, I really have no idea what God wants, so I think I'll just do what I want to do. I'm reasonably smart. I'll bet I can figure this out." That's tempting sometimes, isn't it?

When we look at this story, we see Paul who has clearly been going the wrong way in life and has been violently opposing members of the early church. At that point, he doesn't have it all figured out either. And what does he do? He asks God a question, the question that forms the

basis for the title of my sermon. When I was doing research for my sermon this morning, his question initially confused me. Because his question kind of assumes the answer, if you know what I mean. Asking, “Who are you?” is one thing. Asking, “Who are you, Lord?” kind of assumes that the person you’re talking to is the Lord. The commentaries I read about this text said his question is intended to be ironic. The commentaries said that when Paul calls God or Jesus “Lord,” it’s not a full confession of his faith in Jesus at that point. Really, his question is the honest question of a devout Jew who probably understands the significance of the experience he’s having from his reading of scripture. So, he has some context for what’s going on, but he doesn’t yet have the full, complete picture. He doesn’t have everything figured out, but he asks questions to help him with his understanding.

And while we’re on the subject of people who don’t have everything figured out, let’s look at Ananias for a minute, shall we? Paul’s call and conversion story is definitely famous, but I have to say that when I read this story, I can really identify with Ananias. He’s in Damascus when God speaks to him and gives him perfectly reasonable instructions. God tells Ananias to go to Judas’ house over on Straight Street and ask for Saul of Tarsus because Saul has had a vision that a man named Ananias would put his hands on him and would restore his sight. I love Ananias’ response. His response perfectly illustrates the first point I mentioned about how the folks in this story do not have everything figured out. It also illustrates the second point I want to make. And that is that the folks in this story really struggle to follow God’s call. We see this very clearly with Ananias, who hears God’s instructions, and he is really not interested in any of that. He basically says, “Um, God? I’ve heard many reports about this lunatic. I’m sorry, Saul. And I keep hearing about all the horrible things he’s done. And he keeps doing them to your people. He has authority to arrest people who follow you. I mean, I get the message and all, but that guy

sounds crazy.” Ananias hears God’s call – not just the call to Paul, but God’s call to Ananias. But neither one makes a whole lot of sense to him. Ananias is faithful but he’s not God. He doesn’t have all the information. He doesn’t have everything figured out. He doesn’t know the end of the story. So, he struggles to accept God’s call, and understandably so. I would not personally be overly excited if God called me to have a chat with a man who was dead set on arresting and possibly murdering me. That would not be high on my list of things to do. Ananias’ struggle to follow God’s call is completely understandable.

And as long as we’re talking about people who struggle to follow God’s call, we can’t forget about Paul. He was so intent on doing what he thought was the best course of action that God had to go to great lengths just to get his attention in the first place. When we read this story, we don’t see God quietly talking to Paul and reasoning with him and setting the rest of his life in motion. No, we see Paul on a murderous rampage to round people up and then we see a light from heaven encircling him. After Paul fell to the ground, it was only then that Jesus asked, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And even then, Paul *still* struggles to follow God’s call. He could have immediately owned up to his bad decisions; he could have stopped right then, on the ground, in the light from heaven, and said, “You know what? You’re right. I need to turn my life around.” But he didn’t. Instead he kept asking questions, and that question ultimately drew him deeper into the mystery. It brought him closer to Jesus. It helped him to really see God’s call for him.

And that brings me to my third and final observation about today’s scripture reading. Both Paul and Ananias didn’t have things all figured out. They didn’t know everything they needed to know, but they both eventually figured it out. Secondly, they both struggled to accept God’s call for their lives. I can fully relate to both of those points. I feel like I don’t have things

all figured out most of the time, and I struggle daily to discern what God wants me to do. And the third point I want to make this morning is that both Paul and Ananias end up following their call. Even when they don't have things all figured out. Even in their struggles and doubts, they both respond to God, they just do so in different ways. Ananias responds to God by basically arguing with him and his instructions, but God isn't having it. He tells Ananias, "Go! This man is the agent I have chosen to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites." That's a helpful and fitting reminder that God's ways are not our ways. We might not be able to understand what God wants or what God's goal is, but God will direct us where we need to go.

One of my favorite things about today's reading, though, is how Paul responds to God's call. Through most of the reading he's doing his own thing, he's not really in step with God, and he's asking questions. But once he gets to Damascus, he finally responds to God's call because he gets a visit from Ananias. The very person who didn't want to see him. The exact person who basically argued with God and said he had heard all these reports about the terrible things Paul had done. Ananias didn't want to go. He wanted to put it off and do his own thing. He didn't understand God's plan, either.

It really makes me wonder – when you're thinking about God's will for your life, and you're trying to discern how God is calling you, how often do you think about the effect your call has on others? What I mean by that is this – I think we are often so focused on discerning God's call for our lives and trying to figure out what our next steps should be, that we don't really consider the effects our call has on those around us. Ananias may not have known God's exact call for his life at first, but his literal calling from God was to go visit Paul to get Paul to respond to God's call. Yes, God told Ananias to visit Paul because Paul had a vision that someone named Ananias would go restore his sight, but it was only after Paul could see again

that he got up. It was only after Paul got up that he was baptized. It was only after he was baptized that he ate and regained his strength. It was only after all of that that he preaching about Jesus in the synagogues. When Ananias responded to God's call and did the exact thing he really didn't want to do, it set all of this in motion. One of the most famous and lasting stories in Christianity was set in motion by a guy who acted like he didn't really want to do it.

I cannot help but think of all the ways God calls each of us to each other every day. And I don't mean in general ways, like generally being nice to people, although that's always a good idea. Or by generally showing up for church or being in community. Of course, we're supposed to do that too. I'm thinking about the ways that God might be calling each of us to reach out to individuals – to our friends and family members and give them God's grace. Today's story is a wonderful reminder of the powerful impacts of the radical change in Paul's life, but I think it can also speak directly to those of us who might have an easier time relating to Ananias. When I think about God's call on my life, I think about big moments like having and raising kids, about getting married, going to school and fully living that out. This story is a wonderful reminder that perhaps, just like Ananias, God could be calling me to go visit someone to help them fully follow God's call. This morning, as we gather to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion, let's spend some time in prayer and discernment about who God might be calling us to visit.