

Acts 9:1-20

¹ Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² 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. ³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ 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, ¹² 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." ¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name."

¹⁵ 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; ¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

¹⁷ 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.” ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

John 21:1-8

¹ After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ² Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³ Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

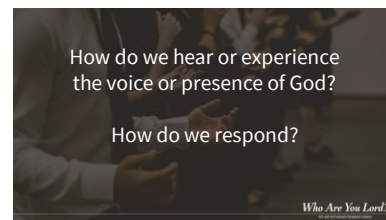
⁴ Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” ⁶ He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.”

So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸ But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.



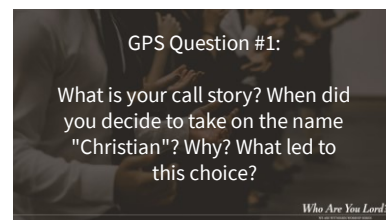
Today, as we move forward into Acts 9, we hear two call stories. We hear the call story of Saul and the call story of Ananias, a disciple in Damascus. In their own way, they both

ask the question before us today: Who are you, Lord? This morning we will also join the disciples and the risen Christ along the shore of the lake. After a long night of very unsuccessful fishing, the disciples encounter Jesus in a way that is an emphatic answer to this same question. As the power of Christ is made real to them, they know it is Jesus standing on the shore. This week we again wrestle with these same questions: How do we hear or experience the voice or presence of God? And, how do we respond? In our Acts passage, Saul needed to be introduced to the one who was calling, to the one who was reaching out to him. Maybe that is the case for some of us here today or for some tuning in online today or in the week ahead. For others, maybe today is simply a reintroduction to the one who wants to direct us and our lives, to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. As we prepare to enter into this time together, let us offer this simple prayer...



Since this morning is partially about call stories, I ask, what is your call story? Turn with me to the GPS questions in your bulletin. This is question #1.

This question asks: “What is your call story? When did you decide to take on the name "Christian"? Why? What led to this choice?” Let’s take a minute or so to jot down an answer to this question...



As we continue, I invite you to turn with me to Acts 9. In this passage we first hear the question, “Who are you, Lord?”

The central character in this passage is Saul. Throughout



most of the New Testament he is known as Paul. This name is first used in Acts 13. The truth is that he was known as both Saul and Paul from that point on. When he was with Jews, his name was Saul. When he was with Romans or Gentiles, he was Paul. Since most of his 13 letters are to the Gentile world, we most commonly know him as Paul. But for today he will be Saul because that is who and what he was to the disciples and other followers of Jesus Christ at the time Acts 9 was written.

To help us understand our passage for today, let us begin by looking at who Saul was and at what motivated him. Last Sunday we studied Peter and the other apostles and their desire, no, their passion to be witnesses for Jesus Christ. That passion, that commitment, it was matched by Saul. Saul is first introduced in the New Testament at the end of Acts 7, where he is present for the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr in the church. At the beginning of chapter 8 we read in we read, “*And Saul approved of their killing him.*” Then, in verse 3, we read that “*Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.*” Largely because of Saul’s persecution, the apostles began to scatter, and the church went underground as best they could. This was the man named Saul.

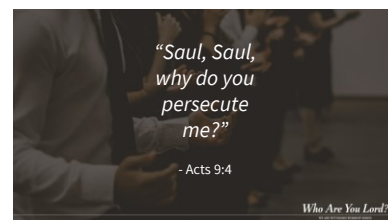
In the Bible there are lots of stories of people who receive new names. For example, Jacob becomes Israel; Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah; and Simon becomes Peter. As is the case with Paul, there remains part of their old self in each of these people. Israel still looks out for self, as Jacob did, hedging his bets as returns to his brother Esau, sending gifts and then women, children, servants, and animals on ahead of himself. After their names are changed as they receive God's promise to be with them and their offspring through the covenant of circumcision, Sarah still laughs at God's messengers when the visitors tell Abraham that she will bear a child in old age. And then there is Simon, the one who declares Jesus the Messiah, earning the name change to Peter – only to be called “Satan” a few verses later when he tells Jesus that he will never let the Lord die. The passion, the commitment, the energy that drove Saul to persecute the church – that will be the same passion, the same energy, the same commitment that will lead him to preach in the name of Jesus for the rest of his life.

While there is some of the old self still in each of these Bible characters, the same is true for you and for me. Once we made the decision to follow Jesus, that does not mean we suddenly were without sin or never again were selfish or greedy or anything else that resembled our old self. We too still have our moments when our words or our behaviors are asking the question, “Who are you, Lord?” And yet, once we make the decision to follow Jesus, we are made into new creations. We are indwelled with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. The same is true of Saul. After his encounter with the risen Christ and his experience with Ananias, the trajectory of his life was forever altered, changed. It is a powerful story of transformation. And like it was last week for Peter, the story is centered on identity.

Saul emerges from today's passage with a radically different understanding of who and what Jesus is and of who and what he himself is.

In our opening verse today we read, *“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.”* This is in response to the apostles and the church scattering from his earlier persecutions. Saul is almost bloodthirsty. His zeal to purify the world, to align all people with his understanding of God and the Jewish faith, they are in plain view. It is almost as if Saul were a rabid animal, panting after its prey. It is not a pretty picture. Imagine if you were Saul's prey. Imagine if this man were coming to your town, hunting you down you as well as all of your fellow Christians. Keep this image in mind when we turn to the story of Ananias' call.

Traveling along the road to Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around them and Saul falls to the ground. He hears a voice asking, *“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”* Note the personal nature of this question. Jesus doesn't ask Saul why he is persecuting his followers. Jesus doesn't ask Saul why he is going to Damascus to do what he's done in Jerusalem. Jesus doesn't ask Saul why he is filled with hatred and animosity for the church. Jesus asks Saul why he is persecuting Jesus. Jesus sees this as a personal matter, as an assault on himself.

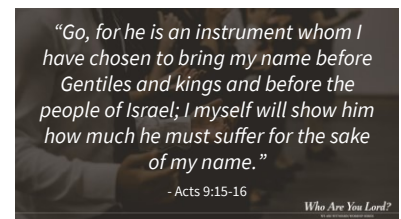


Along these same lines, when has the Lord stopped you in your tracks? When has Jesus suddenly entered your life, or maybe re-entered your life, and asked you why you were persecuting or denying or ignoring him? When has the voice of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, made you question something you were doing or considering doing? We all have moments like this, moments when Christ speaks into our lives.

After his encounter with Jesus, Saul is left blind. For one so sure of himself, for one so sure of his mission to destroy the Way, for one so committed to keeping the Jewish faith pure and untainted – what a change this would be. Saul has to be led into the city by the hand. Saul has to listen to the voices of others as they guide him, step by step. Saul must have felt all alone in the world – left to ponder, “Who are you, Lord?”



Turning to verse 10 we meet Ananias, a disciple of Jesus. The Lord gives Ananias a mission: *“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.”* Ananias does what we’d do. He asks the Lord if he’s sure about this mission. Saul? Isn’t that the one who has been persecuting and arresting and even killing many of the followers of Jesus? The one here with *“authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name”*? That Saul?



Yes, God says. *“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.”*

Ananias does what he is told. Saul receives him, is healed, and is baptized in the name of Jesus. After renewing his strength, Saul begins to preach that Jesus is the Son of God in all of the synagogues throughout Damascus. I do not know who would be more shocked at this change in Saul – Jesus’ followers who had heard all of the persecution stories or the men who had accompanied Saul to Damascus, men who had witnessed firsthand his zeal for persecuting the church.

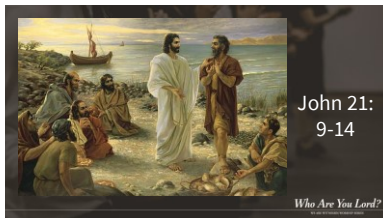
Just as Saul’s encounter and experience with Jesus invites us to ask when we have had similar experiences, so too does Ananias’ encounter and experience lead us to ask, when has the Lord asked you to go someplace that felt dangerous or to do something outside of your comfort zone or to meet with someone who you thought to be an enemy? Yes, if we are willing and if we are obedient, the Lord will ask us to do or say or go in ways that call for trust and faith on our part. God will use each of us an “*instrument*” that brings glory to the Lord. If we are but willing and obedient. That is the case in the gospel lesson as Jesus appears to the disciples for a third time. Turn with me to John 21 as we pick up this story. We begin with verse 1.



In our gospel passage we see that Peter and six other disciples have gone out to fish. After a long night with no results, a man calls to them from shore, saying, “*Children, you have no fish, have you?*” They do not recognize that it is Jesus. They are about a hundred yards offshore. Jesus says to them, “*Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.*” In its own way, this too is a call story. Even though they do not yet know that it is Jesus, it requires them to act in faith with what has been told them. Just try the right side of the boat. Just give it one more go.

They oblige by casting the nets to the right side of the boat and, in verse 6 we read, *“they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.”* The disciples go from zero fish to 153 fish in a heartbeat. As quickly as Saul lost his sight on the road to Damascus, the nets are bursting with fish. In a moment of realization, John exclaims, *“It is the Lord!”* Peter jumps in and swims to shore. The other six manage to wrestle the boat and net full of fish to shore. Coming ashore they find Jesus waiting.

Read along with me as we continue the story. I’ll be reading verse 9-14.



⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

In this way, Jesus became real to the disciples once again. He ate with them, inviting them to join him. We read that none needed to ask, “Who are you?” They all knew that it was Jesus in their midst. Last week I shared my emergency room experience where Jesus became real and tangible to me. When have you found yourself clearly in the presence of the Lord, not needing to ask if it was Jesus there with you?

Was it when you were willing and obedient, going or doing or saying as the Lord directed you, finding Jesus Christ was right there with you? Or was it as it was with the disciples? Did Jesus simply show up to remind you of who and what he was?

The truth is that we struggle with obedience and trust and faith at times. Well my friends, we find good news for all of us in verses 15-17. As we continue in John's gospel, Peter is reminded of who and what Jesus desires to be in his life. The same holds true for you and for me. Please continue to read along as I read verses 15-17.



¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

This image, to me, perfectly reflects how I see Jesus having this conversation with Peter. It also reflects how I see Peter receiving this conversation. It is how I envision Jesus speaking to me when I have messed up, when I have sinned, when I have fallen short. Jesus lovingly asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” After each of Peter's declarations that he does indeed love Jesus, the Lord instructs him to “*feed my sheep*” or to “*tend my sheep.*”

This is not only a commission, a 'call' if you will. Jesus is restoring Peter. Jesus is offering Peter forgiveness and grace. Jesus is drawing Peter back into the family.

Friends, this too is our experience with who and what Jesus desires to be for us. This is our experience with Jesus, our redeemer and our restorer. As we prepare to come to the table of grace, as we confess and repent of our sins, Jesus offers each of us forgiveness and grace. Jesus seeks to draw us back into the family, to redeem and restore each of us. Can you see yourself in this picture, Jesus standing beside you, arm gently placed upon your back? Can you sense the Lord inviting you to come, to lay your sins and burdens down, to be made new again? As we prepare to share in holy communion, let us pause and offer our confessions to the Lord...

GPS - Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. What is your call story? When did you decide to take on the name "Christian"? Why? What led to this choice?
- 2) *Pray*. We all have a bit of that Saul/Paul or Simon/Peter in us. How could you more often be like Paul or Peter? Pray for Holy Spirit strength and guidance.
- 3) *Study*. Read John 21:15-19. Why did Jesus ask three times? What is something that Jesus has to keep asking you?