

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." ⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. ¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. ¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." ¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." ¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" ²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

YOUR FAITH IS AN AMAZING STORY

In our lesson this morning, Saul was on his way to the city of Damascus to be baptized in Christ and to preach the name of Christ. Of course, Saul didn't know these things when he left Jerusalem. Luke, the historian of the Acts of the Apostles, makes clear Saul of Tarsus initially had no intentions to be baptized or to preach in Damascus. Quite the opposite. Saul was on his way to Damascus to continue doing what Saul had already done in and around Jerusalem: *breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples*. Saul was headed the wrong way.

The story of your conversion

Have you ever driven the wrong way on a one-way road? I have. One time. In a previous congregation I had visited a couple who had been attending my church. They lived on a divided road that had two-lanes going in each direction, with an appreciable amount of desert in-between. It was a good evening visit. And it was dark when I left. There were no other cars on the road. I turned left out of the driveway when another car took a left into the lane and was coming right at me at about 25 miles an hour. The driver of the other car turned on his red and blue lights and I pulled over. I was wondering why the officer was driving right at me. The officer was wondering if I was drinking. I wasn't. I explained how I was doing the Lord's work. And the officer explained I should get out of the car. I aced the sobriety test and the officer agreed and told me to drive in the other direction. I agreed.

Driving the wrong way on a one-way street is dangerous. You could get hurt or killed, but driving the wrong way on a one-way street is not nearly as dangerous as living your life your way instead of the way of Jesus. This is what Saul was doing, and it was dangerous. Saul was headed for hell. Funny thing (or not so funny thing) was

Saul thought he was doing the Lord's work. Saul thought Jesus was dead. Saul thought the resurrection was a made-up story. Saul was convinced these people belonging to the way not only needed to be chased out of Jerusalem but chased down 150 miles from the city of Jerusalem in the city of Damascus and killed.

And somewhere on that 150-mile stretch Jesus turned his lights on and pulled Saul over in a sense and asked, *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"* Oh, the dreaded double name! The double name helps us understand the tone of this question, *"Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, ..."* (Lk 10:41). *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chick under her wing, and you were not willing"* (Mt 23:27). The double name helps us with the tone of this question, and the pronouns help us understand what is really happening. Jesus doesn't accuse Saul of persecuting his church or his disciples or his people. No, Jesus accuses Paul of persecuting *me*. That is Jesus, him. *"Who are you, Lord? Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'"*

This is an amazing story for us, but this was a frightening story for Saul. And this will be the frightening story for all the people who are convinced they know all there is to know about God and what they should be doing with their lives only to find out they were going the wrong way. That's the situation Paul was in. This is the situation a lot of people are in. That's the situation we were once in too. Later, in his writings Paul describes sinners as, "dead in transgressions and sins," as "hostile to God", and "blinded" by unbelief. In his catechism, Martin Luther explained, "I believe I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ or come to him." You cannot convert yourself. You cannot turn yourself around spiritually. Only God can make us alive. Only God can enlighten us, giving us eyes to see. Only God can draw us to himself. And God does this calling through the gospel. And God commissioned his disciples to make more disciples by baptizing and teaching.

The story of your commission

There is somewhat of an open question of when exactly Saul came to believe in Jesus, meaning which verse in Saul's conversion account was Saul converted? Had Saul already come to faith in verse 11? Saul is praying and prayer is an act of faith. Ananias' first word to Saul in verse 17 was, "Brother". Was Saul already a brother in faith before Ananias even spoke to Saul? The vision of verse 12 is certainly an act of mercy, but was it the gospel? This is somewhat of an open question, but I see the ministerial role of Jesus in the conversion of Saul as putting Saul's old man or sinful nature to death, and the ministerial role of Ananias in the conversion of Saul, three days later, as giving Saul new life.

But why Ananias? One reason, in verse 10, Ananias was in Damascus. A second reason, in verse 10, Ananias was a disciple. A third and most important reason, in verse 10, the Lord called Ananias. I suppose the Lord could have shipped one of the apostles from Jerusalem. I suppose the Lord could have baptized Saul himself, but the Lord commissioned his disciples to do this work and Ananias was there. And through the ministerial work of Ananias Saul could see again and through the ministerial work of Ananias Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit and another benefit of this ministerial work that Luke did not overlook and we shouldn't either, Saul felt like eating again.

Ananias was great, but even with a direct or immediate calling from the Lord himself, Ananias was somewhat reluctant about his commissioning to serve and speak with Saul. Like Ananias we can become reluctant about our commissioning too. Our commissioning comes through God's Word and the church. "Make disciples of all nations," Jesus says, and children are a part of all nations. Parents, especially fathers, are called to bring their children up in the training and instruction of the Lord. Let the children come to Jesus and do not hinder them. Husbands, love your wives. Husbands, you are the bride of Christ and he died for you. Your gospel for your wife is to give yourself up for her. And wives, your mission is submission. Wives, Jesus yielded himself to his equal, his heavenly Father in respect to his humanity but not his divinity. So too, you bring the gospel to your husband when you yield to his in respect to your earthly roles, but not in respect to your heavenly status, we are all children of God and equal heirs to his kingdom.

Having a family narrows the scope of our great commission. So much of your time and attention is directed to this small group so direct your time and attention to them with the gospel. Single adults, like the apostle Paul, have more opportunity to serve more people with the gospel. This availability would be quite the asset for Paul in his missionary journeys, but already in our text, Saul made use of his availability by growing more and more powerful. That means Saul dedicated his time to know his Bible better than he did before and with that power Saul set out to prove that Jesus is the Messiah.

We all have opportunities to serve. Saul jumped into serving right away, *“At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.”* One formal opportunity came to our attention last Sunday. Help with communion. Last Friday I was going to sign Amy and me up for February, but I jumped too late. We can't help until April. And the soonest you can help is July. Thank you for jumping at this opportunity and thank you for those who jumped at the opportunity of a 7am workday yesterday. Keep your eyes open for these formal opportunities and jump at them.

Other opportunities are less formal. Last Friday I happened to be standing in our school office when a mom came to pick-up her children from school around noon. She was looking to beat the traffic out to California to see her brother while he is still healthy enough for them to visit with him. I asked if he was a Christian. And she answered me that he wasn't a Christian, but that was okay she said because her brother knew the truth. One of the great God-given spiritual gift skills is ... awkward silence. I had a 3-hour plane ride behind 3 teenage girls on an airplane ride and two of them were fine. One talked for about 3 hours. Awkward silence is a gift. I covered my ears with a scarf. I prayed for a baby to cry. But in the school office silence the sister asked what she could say to her brother. I probably should have anticipated this question. Say something. Say I asked and you weren't sure how to answer. Say God so loved the world he gave his one and only Son. Ask if he believes God sent Jesus from heaven? Ask if he believes Jesus died on the cross for sins? And if he says yes, wonderful. If he says, no. He has heard the truth again and there is still time. It could be an amazing story for us. Right now, it's a frightening story for him.

You have an amazing story especially if you were here last week and if you are here next week. The best stories are old stories. The conversion story of Saul is a great story, but it's only a great story because it became an old story. Saul had to suffer for Jesus and Saul did suffer for Jesus who suffered for Saul and was even persecuted by him. The gospel isn't boring so don't get bored by the gospel. The gospel is what turned you around. And now in your family and outside of your family you have opportunities and the God given commission to bring the gospel to others. Amen.