

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

The Past is Not a Prison

Gospel Lesson

Acts 9:1-19 (NRSV)

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.

Bible/Sermon Focus

For many of us the terms "Evangelical Church" and "Christian Fundamentalism" are synonymous. However, we have been learning over the past few weeks that the term *evangelical* is actually not rooted in fundamentalism at all, but in ancient Christian tradition and practice. The overwhelming grace, peace, and love found in the Jesus movement and the subsequent spread of said movement, sparked a world-wide phenomenon that led each of us here today. Interestingly enough, the Christian Fundamentalist movement is often touted claiming some kind of ancient authority around their beliefs. The claim makes it seem like the ideas published in *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth (1910-1915)* are actually Christian essentials. They are not. Christian essentials are the beliefs held across Christianity. Christian essentials include things like the belief in the triune God, having a closed biblical cannon, the divinity and humanity of Jesus. What is not essential are things like biblical inerrancy, western gender roles, or traditionalist marriage structures.

The Christian Fundamentalist movement is younger than the church of Later Day Saints, and the St. Louis Cardinals. That's not to say that the movement did not have something to offer us, but it's important that we are aware of the context around this particular aspect of the Jesus movement. After all, most theologians hold tightly to newer forms of theology than ancient ones. We *should* be affected and effected by the "new thing" God is doing, just like Saul was.

What we must be careful of is getting so caught up in one way that we inadvertently put the Holy Spirit in box. We must be cautious to assume that the way that God reached us is the only way and therefore become ridged to see what God is doing new. It is the rigidity of the systems that we may find ourselves tripping over.

Like Saul, we may find ourselves holding onto the traditions we were raised with so tightly that we end up harming others. And it will take first an encounter with the Risen Christ and then the grace and evangelism of someone like Ananias to help us turn our hearts and lives back to God. After Ananias heals Saul in the name of Jesus, Saul spent days with this community that he had spent years persecuting. Talk about grace. Talk about love. Talk about forgiveness and fellowship and newness.

The encounter that Saul had on the road to Damascus was indeed, astounding. But Ananias laying his hands on Saul, and the community that welcomed Saul after all he had done... that's astounding too. Evangelism builds a community of grace and it sets us free to celebrate who God has created each of us to be.

Discussion Questions

1. Talk about your experience with fundamentalism.
2. How has this series changed the way you will practice evangelism?
3. Do you feel comfortable claiming the word evangelical or is that difficult for you?
4. Who is an Ananias in your life?

Prayer

Risen Savior, you who send us a community. Make us new each day, and more ready to create your kin-dom here on earth. Help us to love one another, forgive one another, and grow your church. In the name of the Risen Lord & Savior, who meets us where we are, and by the power of the Holy Spirit who creates new community where there was none before, Amen.

"Saul's initial appearance in the narrative world of Acts prompts a deeply theological reading of his subsequent conversion and commission. That is, even as Saul approaches Damascus 'breathing threats and murder,' God's steady perspective on human destiny is that Saul is a forgiven man." – Robert E. Wall