

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
First Sunday After Easter, April 19, 2020

✠ ✠ ✠

(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 496, 477:1, 395:1-4, 489, 47.

Lessons: Psalm 119:149-160, Acts 22:1-21, Matthew 5:11-16.

Sermon Text: Acts 9:1-19a.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltrittter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

In the previous chapter of Acts we read that *“Saul was [at the stoning of Stephen], giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.”* Acts 8:1-3 (NIV)

Saul wasn't satisfied to harass, persecute and scatter the believers who were living in Jerusalem. He was determined to destroy the Christian church everywhere he could. So he got approval from the high priest to go to Damascus, 120 miles north-east of Jerusalem, to capture Jewish followers of Jesus. From this, it seems that the Sanhedrim at Jerusalem claimed authority of regulating the Jewish religion everywhere, including jurisdiction over all synagogues everywhere, and the Roman government allowed this.

Saul would have gone to the synagogues to disrupt their worship of Jesus and drag Christians, bound like prisoners, back to Jerusalem to be tried by the Sanhedrin. Jews who believed that their Messiah had come in the person of Jesus would not stop worshiping with their fellow Jews until it became clear that they and the name of Jesus were no longer welcome in the synagogue.

But a remarkable act of God occurred to Saul, later known as Paul, on the road to Damascus. This was a most dramatic life-changing event.

This kind of dramatic conversion to faith in Christ isn't something we see today. For most of us, Christianity is something we have known all our lives – and perhaps have even now come to take for granted! Today we hear about

THE CONVERSION OF SAUL, WHO BECAME PAUL, A FAITHFUL SERVANT OF GOD

- 1. God intervened when Saul was going to round up Christians to persecute them, and**
- 2. Saul was then appointed as the Apostle to the Gentiles.**

The fact that Saul asked for letters of authority shows the intensity of his desire to persecute the Christians. But God had other plans for him.

As they drew near to Damascus, *“Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.”* And he heard a voice. The light from the power of God and the voice from heaven made Saul realize that he was in the presence of God. His question and the Lord's answer convinced him that Jesus, whom he had been persecuting, is the long-promised Messiah, the Lord who came into the world as a servant to save sinners. He realized that he was not just persecuting people, but persecuting Christ, the Savior that his religion had been waiting for.

Imagine yourself in his place. Hearing a voice. Being blinded, and staying blind for 3 days.

Paul retold this history by the inspiration of God in our Epistle lesson, where you heard *“My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.”* The men traveling with Saul saw the light and heard some sound but didn't see anyone. Saul was blinded and had to be led into Damascus.

From that moment on Saul was under the orders of the Lord, and the first order was to go to Damascus and wait for further instructions.

Here was a Pharisee, thoroughly trained in Jewish religion, who was set on the right path by Jesus. Before this, he had been convinced that everything he was doing was right. But after this he recognized, as he wrote to Timothy that ***“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst.”*** 1 Timothy 1:15 (NIV) After Jesus brought him to faith in this most unusual way, he considered himself the greatest, the chief, the worst of sinners. After all, Scripture tells us he had consented to the death of at least one follower of Jesus Christ, the martyr Stephen. Who knows how many other Christians he persecuted?

In Scripture Paul tells us twice that he had seen Jesus. We read twice in First Corinthians: ***“Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?”*** 1 Corinthians 9:1 (NIV) And in speaking of the Resurrection of Jesus, he tells us: ***“last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”*** 1 Corinthians 15:8 (NIV)

The voice on the road to Damascus said ***“to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. ‘Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.’”***

For three days he was blind and was praying. By this miraculous calling of Jesus Christ, he now knew to whom he – and all believers – should pray.

Meanwhile, ***“In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, ‘Ananias!’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he answered. 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. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.’ ‘Lord,’ Ananias answered, ‘I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.’ But the Lord said to Ananias, ‘Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.’”***

Saul’s reputation had preceded him. The believers in Jesus in Damascus had heard he was coming. So Ananias was understandably reluctant to go to this man. But he had a direct command from God to do so. He was being told to go and find one whom he had heard was an enemy who had come to persecute him. He had heard how Saul was persecuting the saints. Saul’s reputation preceded him.

Wouldn’t it be great if God spoke directly to us and gave us commands for every event in our lives? But he doesn’t. He has given us his written word, the Bible. ***“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*** 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV)

We apply God’s Word to every situation in our lives, allowing God to speak to us in that way. We are not permitted to add or to subtract anything to the written Word of God. We dare not turn our back on or ignore or try to set aside any part of Scripture, no matter how much our flesh would like to do so. God speaks to us plainly, just as Jesus told his disciples shortly before he ascended into heaven that we are ***“to obey everything I have commanded you.”*** Matthew 28:20 (NIV)

Saul had received an immediate revelation. But he was not in any way ignorant of the Scriptures. He knew the Old testament Scriptures: the Law, the prophets, and the psalms. He hadn’t previously seen with the eyes of faith that the scriptures he had learned were all fulfilled in Jesus who died to redeem all men from their sins. If he had not come to faith in Jesus, all his supposed good deeds, all his knowledge of the Scriptures would have been in vain and useless on judgment day.

He had waited for three days, in total darkness, for the promised message. It is often a part of God’s specific plan to permit sickness or some other affliction to come upon a person. At such a time the heart has opportunity for prayerful communion with God. The new spiritual life of Saul was manifested in prayer. By prayer he was receiving strength and patience to endure the tests of the Lord. God had given him a vision seeing the very Ananias to whom the Lord was now speaking come to him and restore his sight by the laying on of hands. This vision had been granted Saul partly to give him the assurance of healing and partly to make him see the hand of God in all the things which were happening to him.

Saul was praying, and surely he was asking God to know God’s will, to learn what God really wanted from him. We too must pray earnestly to see what God would have us do with our lives, and even pray for daily guidance for everything we do.

Ananias was understandably reluctant to go to see Saul. Can you imagine being told by anyone to go and ***“and place [your] hands on him to restore his sight”*** when that man has a reputation as your avowed enemy? Look how

Ananias first responds to what God tells him: **“‘Lord,’ Ananias answered, ‘I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.’”**

“But the Lord said to Ananias, ‘Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.’” God would show Saul how many things he must suffer for preaching that very doctrine for which he was persecuting others.

The obedience of Ananias was put to a severe test by the Lord’s command, when he heard the name Saul of Tarsus. He had heard from many people concerning this man, what and how many evil things he had done to the Lord’s saints in Jerusalem.

But the Lord quickly silenced the objection of Ananias by repeating his command: Go! And God took away all the apprehensive fears of Ananias by telling him that Saul was to be a vessel chosen by God through whom the riches of God’s mercy would be given and preserved for the salvation of many.

This man, later known as Paul, was to carry the message of the work of Jesus Christ among the Greeks and Romans. And, by the power of the Spirit, he was to confound their wisdom and learning, and teach that neither salvation nor happiness can be found anywhere else. He was emphatically called ‘the apostle of the Gentiles’.

Ananias followed the command of God. **“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.’”**

Ananias calls him **“brother”** by the direct teaching of God the Holy Ghost.

For in this chosen vessel, Saul of Tarsus, God had determined that his name should be carried before Gentiles and before kings and before the children of Israel.

The special mission of the man who became the Lord’s apostle was indicated here. His chief work was to be among the Gentiles, to those not belonging to the children of Abraham according to the flesh. But he was also to testify before kings and rulers. And lastly, his work was to include his brethren according to the flesh, that is, Jews. The Lord here opened the door of the future wide before the eyes of Ananias, in order to work in him the proper willingness to execute his commission. Not only in witnessing for the Lord would this man Saul be found a fitting, choice vessel of the Lord, but Jesus intended also to let him experience suffering for his name’s sake. No longer will Saul bring suffering and persecution to others, but he would willingly suffer those things that the Lord knew would accomplish his work. That is the privilege of believers to this day, both to confess the name of the Lord and to endure persecution for Christ.

Ananias laid his hands upon Saul to give to him recovery from his blindness, and at the same time addressed him as a Christian brother. His conversion had changed the enemy and persecutor to one who was in true communion and union with all the believers. Ananias explained the reason for his visit by stating that the Lord had sent him, the same Jesus who had revealed himself to Saul as he was traveling along the way. Saul was now both to receive his sight and to be filled with the Holy Ghost. By his conversion, Saul had received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and by the laying on of hands, besides regaining his eyesight, he was given a new and extraordinary measure of the light and power of the Holy Spirit, as well as the power to perform miracles. In this way he was being prepared for the ministry for which he had been chosen. **“Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized.”** And the baptism that followed brought the reception of the Holy Ghost as his formal acceptance into the Christian Church. Saul received the assurance and the seal of the forgiveness of his sins.

Saul now took food and strengthened himself. He was now also introduced to the other disciples of Jesus in the congregation at Damascus. He openly joined them and thus confessed his faith. Saul now had become a follower of the Way, a follower of Jesus Christ, a follower of the only way of salvation.

In this way, Saul, later known as Paul, began his work for the Lord Jesus Christ.

What work in sharing his message of salvation has Jesus laid out for you? He told us in our Gospel lesson that each of us is to **“let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”** Matthew 5:16 (NIV) Although God has not been as dramatic with us as he was with the apostle Paul, he has given you the message of eternal life! It is your calling to now give it to others! Amen.