

God's YES! My Yes! Acts 9:1-20

Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV Third Sunday of Easter (April 10) 2016

^{9:1} But 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 belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, 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 at Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came 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 he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; ¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened.

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. ²⁰ And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Last week we kicked off this sermon series for the Season of Easter (that runs from Easter/Resurrection Sunday (March 27) through Ascension Sunday (May 8) when Jesus goes back to Heaven after his post-Resurrection earthly appearances. This series is based upon what was taught in order for those first century disciples of Jesus to start up a Church that would continue through the

present time, and, by implication, what is necessary for us as modern day disciples of Jesus to effectively keep that Church going.

Today's story, for just a little fill-in-the-blanks, is about a persecutor of the Christians – a Pharisee by the name of Saul. He was a Jewish Pharisee with a Harvard-like pedigree of training, who had received “papers” from the high priests to go about the land – even as far away as Damascus from Jerusalem – to arrest these leaders of this new Church, and to prosecute them. We first encounter this Saul in scripture at the execution (by stoning) of the deacon leader in the Church named Stephen.

This Saul had a pretty well-known reputation for his ruthlessness in adherence to what he believed was the “true faith” and to the importance of ferreting out these heretics who followed a man named Jesus.

So, in today's scripture lesson, Saul is on his way to Damascus to round up some more Christians, when he has an *up close and personal* encounter with the risen Lord, Jesus Himself. Saul is left blind by the encounter. As our story continues, we meet this fellow by the name of Ananias, whom God calls to go to Saul's temporary residence, to identify himself as one of the ones whom Saul had come to arrest, and to teach this Saul how to re-order his thinking.

To put it into fairly modern day equivalence – it would have been like going into the court of Saddam Hussein and suggesting that you knew a better person to rule Iraq than him – remember Saddam Hussein, who kept killing every relative whom he thought might be a threat to his rule.

Yeah, that's a good comparison.

Now, how many people would like to line up for that job? So, when Ananias got the call, you might imagine his hesitancy in taking the job offered. But, after a short discussion – verse 17 tells us – Ananias did what he was asked.

And Ananias was quite successful. His student, Saul, changed his name to Paul, and became the “Lion of the Church.” Most of the doctrines that we follow in the church today are derived from Paul’s teachings, more than from Jesus’. (But that’s another discussion.) Jesus came to save the world; Paul was called to establish an institutionalized Church.

According to different traditions, this same Ananias was one of the 70 that Jesus had sent out as missionaries during Jesus’ time on earth. Other traditions say that Ananias was later martyred for the faith. He is regarded as a saint in both the western and eastern Church.

But what a phenomenal thing he did on that day he got the call to go see Saul!

Why do people do acts of heroism?

- In John Irving’s book *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, Owen believed that he was called from birth for a noble task.
- Others, like Rosa Parks, did a simple thing that ended up turning a nation upside down, because her feet hurt that day – hurt too much to walk to the back of the bus.
- In the first testament book of Esther, we hear Esther’s “uncle” telling her that *perhaps her whole life was meant for this one act of greatness,*

Why do people do acts of heroism?

In my experience, and reading, most people live pretty consistent lives. Oh, there may be a moment when people “snap” and do something really out of character. But, even under hypnosis, people will not do something fundamentally different from their core beliefs.

Many, if not most, of the really important acts of history are done by people who do something pretty much like what they have done every other day of their

lives. It's just that the particular circumstances of the day they do it that somehow (and quite often not realized until later) translate their common act into one of greatness.

- People who are basically lazy don't usually suddenly get active.
- People who are basically spectators, don't usually suddenly become activists.
- People who are basically stingy don't usually suddenly become generous.

Oh! People *CAN* change, for sure. And sometimes it is suddenly. **But, most of the time any lasting change in people happens through their *changing their habits*.**

People who do *GREAT* things usually do a whole lot of little rarely seen good things.

Most people who say YES to God, have heard God's YES to them, and have first said THANK-YOU to God.

OK – now please pay attention because I am going to ask you to share some of your ideas and feelings with the people sitting around you.

I belong to an organization called **Rotary**. I go most weeks to the meetings, unless something else takes me away. I pay my mandatory dues. I get fed. I hear what is usually an informative, if not motivating (and occasionally both) speaker. I sometimes give extra money to special causes. I enjoy the friendships I have made over the years in the local club. I see other members who feel led to assume positions of leadership. I have never been one of those. I enjoy Rotary, but – honestly – if it disappeared from my life, I would not be devastated. I may or may not find some other social organization to replace it.

NOW, PLEASE TURN TO YOUR NEIGHBOR AND SHARE THE WAYS IN WHICH YOUR INVOLVEMENT WITH CHURCH IS SAME AS AND DIFFERENT FROM A SOCIAL, FRATERNAL, OR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

In our stories from the Bible, we hear about people like Ananias, who made potentially life and death decisions, in response to God's call ... because of that which they realized is more important than anything else in their life. We also know of people who have given their lives in service to their country, or because of their jobs as first responders.

Is there a difference between our devotion to God, to the Body of Christ, to the call of God upon our lives AND patriotism or devotion to a job? Turn to your neighbor and discuss what is or is not different.

- With my Rotary Club, I pay my dues.
- With my country, I pay my taxes.
- With God, I am told that I am supposed to put nothing higher in my priorities than God.
- Is there anything in my life which I value more than my relationship with God?

Former UN Secretary General, and devout Christian, Dag Hammarskjöld wrote this prayer in his book *Markings*:

**For all that has been, Thank-you!
For all that is to come, Yes!**

Is there a "YES" for which God is asking you, and for which you are resistant?

Answering ... dancing with ... that question is your homework assignment for this coming week.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.