

The Courage of the Church

Sermon text: Acts 9:1-6

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I. A scary situation

For a while, later in my college days at Stetson University, I thought that I was going to serve in the U.S. Army. It was after some of the other experiences I've mentioned previously – like making friends with a group of guys that came from different parts of the country and even different parts of the world, or like changing majors a six times during my first three years in college. By that time I had settled on being a Psychology major. My plan was to go to graduate school and get a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology, and eventually become a Psychology professor and have counseling practice on the side. But I also felt a patriotic tug to serve in the military, like my dad had done after he graduated from Stetson.

I knew the Army had Psychologists. They serve in a branch called the Medical Service Corps. So I signed up for Army R.O.T.C. classes along with my other coursework. The Cadet Corps had Physical Training every morning, drills a couple of times each week, and most months we had some kind of Field Training Exercise where we went out into the woods and did soldier stuff. One other part of being in R.O.T.C. was that after your junior year you went away to basic training camp at an Army base. They sent us R.O.T.C. Cadets from Stetson University to Fort Bragg, North Carolina for basic training.

Now, you former military folks – what is main unit that is based at Fort Bragg? That's right – it's the 82nd Airborne Division. The 82nd Airborne is a proud unit. And what unit do you imagine our Drill Sergeants assumed each and every R.O.T.C. Cadet dreamed of being assigned when we were commissioned? That's right – the 82nd Airborne Division!

At camp, those Drill Sergeants would get right up in your face and ask you what it was you wanted to be in the United States Army. Most of my colleagues in the R.O.T.C. Cadet Corps would respond back: "Airborne, Sergeant!" And the Sergeant would give a nod of approval. But I decided to tell the Sergeant the truth. So when he came down the line and got right in my face and said, "And you, Cadet Hedgepeth, what is it you want to do in the Army?" I responded, "Medical Service Corps, Sergeant!" I thought he was going to blow a gasket. I could tell by the look he gave me that I was in for a long summer.

From the first few verses of our text this morning, I think Saul might have had a disposition somewhat like a stereotypical Drill Sergeant. Listen to them again:

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threat 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.

Saul was so angry that some Jews were claiming Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah that he volunteered to spend a week walking the one hundred and fifty miles from Jerusalem to Damascus to arrest them and bring them back to be imprisoned. Later, in Acts 26 Saul describes his feeling toward these Jews who trusted in Jesus as a "raging fury."

But, as we've heard in our text, a transforming event occurred for Saul just as he was approaching Damascus. When we read those verses a few minutes ago, it was likely a familiar passage for many of us. It was about midday when a bright light from heaven drove Saul to the ground. A voice asked: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" The voice was that of the risen

Lord, Jesus. As a result of that encounter on the road to Damascus, Saul was left blind for the next three days.

II. An act of courageous obedience

Other sermons I've preached about this text focused on the transformation that Saul underwent after his Damascus road experience. The message was about the need we all have to be transformed by an encounter with the risen Christ. And that message is true and important. However, this morning I'd like to focus on some verses in Acts chapter nine that tend to get overshadowed by Saul's dramatic conversion.

Remember, the believers in Damascus had no idea what happened to Saul. As far as they knew, he was still a dangerous Pharisee armed with letters of extradition from the high priest in Jerusalem. He was in Damascus to arrest Jews who believed in Jesus as Messiah. Let's look at how Luke describes what happened next, beginning in Acts 9, verse 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." 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, 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." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." 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; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

It's clear that Ananias was more than a little apprehensive about going to see Saul. He had heard all the way in Damascus about the havoc Saul caused among the believers in Jerusalem. It is understandable that Ananias didn't want to go to Saul and identify himself as a follower of Jesus. It was like turning himself in to be arrested. It would have been a scary situation.

Speaking of scary situations, in R.O.T.C. one of the skills we learned was rappelling. Our instructors taught us how to use rope to make a "Swiss seat" for ourselves. You tie the rope around the top of your legs, waist, and backside in such a way that it will support you when you clip on your carabiner, thread the rope through it, and rappel down to the ground. To teach us the basics of rappelling, they took us to a training tower that was three or four stories high. One side of the tower was a wall that was supposed to simulate a sheer cliff face or the side of a building. I did okay with the instruction on getting my Swiss seat all tied on. I snapped the carabiner on the front and took my place in line to climb the ladder up to the top of the tower.

The climb up the ladder wasn't too bad. You basically just kept your eyes on the cadet in front of you and put one hand over the other until you made it to the platform on top. There were railings around the platform, so waiting for your turn to rappel wasn't bad either. But I will never forget the feeling when it was my turn to go. They slipped the rope through the carabiner and led me over to the edge of the platform. I called out like I was supposed to: "On rappel!" And the instructor on the ground who was holding the rope called back: "On belay!" He was the one who was supposed to be able to keep me from falling if something went wrong. I had seen it demonstrated, but with my feet on the edge of that platform forty or fifty feet off the ground, I was supposed to lean back into thin air and use the tension on the rope to bound backwards down that wall. It was a scary thing. Go, Medical Service Corps. I have to tell you I was terrified!

I think that's how Ananias was feeling too. I'm probably not reading too much between the lines to put an incredulous tone in Ananias' voice when he asked God: "Are you sure Saul is the guy you want me to visit, Lord? I mean, you are aware of the bad stuff he's been doing to your followers in Jerusalem, right? I'm not sure it's conducive to my health to go see this guy..."

III. An example for us to follow

But Ananias was faithful and obedient to God. In spite of the danger, he went to visit Saul. Here's how Luke describes their meeting, beginning at Acts 9, verse 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." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized.

To me, the way Ananias interacted with Saul is truly amazing. Even with full awareness of what Saul had done in Jerusalem and had been intending to do in Damascus, Ananias had the courage to enter Judas' house on Straight Street, lay his hands on Saul, and call him what? Brother. Isn't that an incredible, courageous, and gracious welcome for a new believer?

Since Pastor Steve mentioned last week that we're looking at the mission of the church through the lens of several passages in the Book of Acts, I got to wondering: "How, in our lives today, can we follow the example of Ananias? How might God be calling us to show the courage to lean out over the edge and go where the Lord tells us to go? And how can we do that with the grace and welcoming hospitality that Ananias showed?"

One truth we have to face is that we can't be motivated to show the courage and grace of Ananias by the hope of fame or even recognition. Ananias gets mentioned only here in Acts 9 and one more time by Paul in Acts 22 when he tells the story of his encounter with the risen Christ. But what if Ananias hadn't had the courage to follow God's call and go? What if he hadn't shown the grace to welcome this persecutor of the faithful? Who knows what would have happened to Saul? The impact Ananias had was huge, even if he didn't know it at the time.

And the same thing is true for us. We never know when that word of encouragement to another, when that decision to go where the Lord would have us to go, when taking that opportunity to have a conversation about spiritual things will be significant in the life of someone else. But God knows, so he calls us to be courageous and gracious.

A little over a year ago, as we were preparing to send two mission teams to Honduras to serve Jesus there, we got word from our host Honduran pastor that drug-related violence in that part of the country had made it unsafe, in his opinion, for us to come. Information from the U.S. State Department confirmed that violence was on the rise; however, our other host, the Director of the Eye Clinic, encouraged us to come. Wanting to be wise, we streamlined our efforts from two mission teams to one and we decided to do our work at the Eye Clinic in El Progreso instead of traveling out to a remote village each day. But the point is, when push came to shove, our mission team had the courage to go and serve God among our brothers and sisters in Honduras.

You heard this morning in our Minute for Mission what some of the downstream impact from that decision has been. Who knows what else God has planned in the future? How about you – what opportunity do you have to step out and courageously, graciously follow Christ? Who knows how God might use you to impact someone else for Jesus and make a difference for all eternity. That's the courage of the Church.