

The courage of Ananias

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"I dream of walking the streets of Damascus," sighed a Syrian refugee whose radio interview I heard on my evening commute. His voice trailed off into a wistful silence. I had been engrossed in his story, but at the interview's end, my mind connected the refugee's lament and longing for a Damascus road story of long ago.

I was seven or eight years old when I first heard the story of Saul/Paul. His persecution of Christians, his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, his missionary trips, his imprisonments, and his letters to the worshipping communities he had helped to establish--these were the focus of a weeklong Vacation Bible School event, one of the most formative and memorable faith experiences of my childhood. To this day, the scent of rubber cement conjures a mental image of the "passports" onto which my classmates and I glued small photos of ourselves. Cardboard travel documentation in hand, we were eager to accompany Paul on his missionary journeys.

But first we had to walk with Saul on the road to Damascus. I remember feeling mesmerized by the stories we heard. I was horrified by Saul's relentless hunt for those who followed the Way. (Yes, I had nightmares on night one of VBS.) But then came the fantastic tale of Saul's radical conversion. Flashing lights! An audible voice from heaven! Sudden blindness! It was a scene fit for Hollywood--or at least for a thrilling Bible school story.

Best of all, the story didn't end with Saul's comeuppance. His complete transformation from Saul, the persecutor, to Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, inspired wonder and hope. If Saul with his seedy past could become a vessel of God's grace and a witness to the good news of Jesus, then we could, too.

For years, the vivid memories of my first encounter with this week's text led me to believe I had a handle on the story. But everything changed the day a seminary classmate preached a sermon in which she wondered aloud about *Ananias's role in Saul's conversion*. When I had to double-check the spelling of Ananias, I realized I'd been missing critical details of a story I thought I knew. I'm not sure if Ananias was completely omitted from the Bible school experience of my childhood or if his role in the story--with its lack of flashing lights--simply failed to grab my attention. Either way, I missed Ananias altogether, which is a shame.

It's a shame because Ananias deserves our consideration. Though it's understandable that his role is overshadowed by Saul's overall story, he is to be commended for acting out of obedience in the face of fear. When Ananias gives voice to his trepidation, he also reveals that he has heard of Saul through the grapevine. Even if Ananias's fears are well founded, we might imagine that they are magnified by the rumor mill.

And yet--Ananias chooses to trust that his assessment of Saul as dangerous is outweighed by God's choice to use Saul to bring God's name "before Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel." Ananias believes God. When he meets Saul face to face, he doesn't scout out the situation or test the validity of Saul's repentance. Ananias greets him as "Brother Saul," and Saul's sight is restored; the scales fall from Saul's eyes.

Each day as I make my commute, I hear on the radio the stories of those who struggle to live: brothers and sisters who face the daily threats of gun violence, poverty, and systemic abuse. I hear the stories of people the world over who are persecuted because of their race, ethnicity, gender, the people they choose to love, or the way in which they experience God. I am haunted by the story of the man who longed for Damascus streets--and by the stories of so many like him who have been forced from their homes.

Alongside these heartbreaking stories, I also hear a narrative that points to a terrifying pattern. When we are at our worst, we allow our fears, real or imagined, to

trump God's call to be in relationship with those who suffer. Now is the time to take a cue from Ananias. Believe God. And call the storytellers by the only names that fit: sister, brother, family, child of God. Perhaps when we no longer allow our fears to stand in the way of the reconciling work of God, the scales will fall from our eyes, too.