

Scorpions, Lions, and the Choice of Ananias

^{NRS} Act 9:1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² 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. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus,²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

You know, Will is much more extraverted than I tend to be- where I may politely acknowledge someone I don't know, he'll just strike up a conversation with them. A week or so ago now, we encountered a woman who was a stranger to us both. Will of course piped up and asked her what her name was. She told him. Then, to my horror, he said, "What's on you chest?" Well, thank goodness she had this really interesting jewelry. She had three stones and a golden cross all on a necklace. She explained to Will that the three stones were for her three daughters. And then she held her cross out to him.

She said, “And do you know what this is.” Insulted, he said, “It’s a cross.” She was surprised and said, “Yes, but do you know what it’s for- who it points to?” She obviously didn’t know who she was dealing with. Will has taken to the whole church thing in a kind of frightening way- the other day Melis called me to tell me he was doing the communion liturgy with his breakfast cereal. “This is granola is my body, broken fresh for you.” And right after Easter, Will got his big bear, Mama Gollie, and brought her to me telling me that Mama Gollie wanted to be baptized. And later Mama Gollie and Monkey received the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. So again, with a kind of insulted tone, Will responded to the woman: “That’s for Jesus!” At this she gave me a very strange look. I just shrugged my shoulders.

And then she said to Will, “Yes. That’s for Jesus. And I wear him close so he’ll protect my girls. As long as I have this on,” she said, “nothing can happen to them.”

Will didn’t respond to this. I’m not sure what he thought about it. If he asked me, though, I would have had to disagree with her.

Faith may offer comfort. Faith may bless us with peace. But, if there’s one thing faith does not provide us with, it’s protection. Faith does not offer us protection or safety- in fact, sometimes just the opposite. Faith, real faith- may at times call us into danger, rather than keep us from it.

This is certainly the case in our text this morning. It’s a famous story this one. Saul, the great persecutor of the church, the one we hear who even at the beginning of this story is still breathing threats and murder against the church, is struck blind by a this

great close-encounters-of-the-third kind light as he walks down the road towards Damascus. There he is, just walking along, his hands full of papers giving him all the legal rights he needs to seize and lock up these disgusting infidels who claim to be believers yet gather in the name of this dead heretic Jesus. And then there, right there, right on the road this great light strikes him. Falling to his knees, his eyes irradiated by this heavenly blaze he hears the voice of Jesus crying to him, "Saul, Saul- why do you persecute me- why do you torture me?" And all Saul can do is say, "Who, who are you, Lord?" And he finds out it is the voice of Jesus- the very man he thought dead, the very man he thought furthest from God in the entire world.

And Saul's friends gather him to his feet- mystified by what is taking place, for Saul alone experienced the light and the voice. They didn't see a thing. But something was going on. So together they limp into Damascus.

Now everyone gets so excited about this opening part of the story- and understandably so I suppose. Saul, of course, turns into the person you and I know of as Paul, who ends up composing more than half of the New Testament. And it does shock and thrill us to think that God might not merely forgive a man notorious for murdering Christians- but that he might turn him into one of the greatest leaders ever known by the church. I mean if God can work through one who isn't just neutral towards Jesus, but actually murders Christ's followers- if God can work through him, then my goodness, is *anyone* safe from God's call?

So, we get excited about this part of the story- and this is good. But honestly, this week I was less excited by the main character, Saul, as the one without the press agent. This week I found myself fascinated by Ananias.

See, for me the real action in the text isn't Paul being blinded and then responding by going into Damascus. I mean this isn't much of a miracle, this isn't faith, Saul going to Damascus- he's blind, he just wants his sight back, he'll do anything, right?

No, the real action, the real miracle of faith to me isn't Saul at all- it's Ananias. It's Ananias.

Luke tells us so much about Ananias using just a few lines. First Luke tells us Ananias is a good guy using Biblical short hand. Luke tells us that God speaks to Ananias in a vision. And Ananias responds by saying, "Here I am, Lord." In the Old Testament God is constantly going to people- and you know whether they're wearing a white cowboy hat or a black one whether they respond to God saying "Here I am" or not. So right off the bat we know Ananias is someone we can trust.

What I love about him comes next, though. He's not some overly pious Ned Flanders who is like a lap dog to God- Ananias really listens to what God is saying and, like all the great men and women of faith who came before him, question what it is he's hearing. Pastors don't like us to know this, I guess, but the truth is Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Job, and really most anybody whose worth paying attention to in the Old Testament did not just hear God and obey. No, time and time again they argued with God, standing up for the people- even when things hadn't gone as well as they could have. And this is exactly what Ananias does here. Go to Saul? Are you kidding? Everyone knows what the butcher of Tarsus has been up to- persecuting Christians left and right, murdering believers every chance he gets. Go to Saul, so he can see again? He's better off blind. But God tells Ananias that he has plans for Saul- that there's hope for him, even him, yet.

Shaking his head, Ananias continues to pray. Absolutely unsure about what to do next.

Faith may offer comfort. Faith may bless us with peace. But faith does not give us protection and safety. Faith, real faith- may at times even call us into danger, rather than keep us from it. For Ananias it's dangerous to think about even going near Saul- much less to heal him and restore him to full power.

You know, I think the hardest thing about all this is there's just no way to know how everything will turn out. There was just no way for Ananias sitting there to really know the best course- half of him feeling called to go care for this great enemy of the church, and half of him thinking discretion is by far the better part of valor.

It reminds me of two stories attributed to Aesop, that old Greek story-teller. These are two stories Ananias would have known. And as he sat there praying about what to do- I imagined this week that Ananias found himself wondering which story he was about to live out. Now one story is about a lion and a mouse, and the other is about a scorpion and a frog.

The lion and the mouse goes like this. Once upon a time a great lion was just lying around thinking about getting up and finding some food, when all of a sudden under his nose scurries a little mouse, so wrapped up in his concerns, he didn't even notice the king of the beasts. The lion slams his paw down on the little hors d'oeuvres.

“Stop, stop!” the little mouse screamed.

“Why?” thundered the lion.

“Don’t eat me, because one day. One day, you’re going to need help- and I’m going to be there for you.”

At this the lion started to laugh. And he laughed so hard, he dropped the mouse, who tore off as fast as his little feet could take him before the lion could pop him into his mouth.

Well, years later that lion who laughed so hard, found himself all tangled up in a hunter’s snare one day. The rope just bit into him- the more he struggled, the tighter it became. Frightened thinking this was the end for him, he started to feel a strange kind of tickling sensation. He looked behind him- and there, biting the ropes as fast as he could, was a little mouse. Looking up at him, the mouse said, “I told you one day I might save your life.” Putting his own life at risk, the mouse freed the lion, who escaped from the snare, and never forgot what the mouse had done for him all the rest of his days.

Now this is a pretty good story, right- this was kind of hopeful. Maybe Ananias could go to Saul and maybe everything really would turn out for the best.

But there was another story that might have been rumbling around in his head, too, though- the story about the scorpion and the frog. It’s also a story about one animal risking their lives to help another- but this one doesn’t turn out as well. The scorpion and the frog goes like this. One day a frog was looking at a river crossing. He needed to get across, and was trying to find the safest way through the rushing water. As he was surveying the rocks and the rapids, he heard a voice hissing behind him. Turning around quickly, he saw that it was a scorpion- her lethal tail held high.

“Please, good frog. I need to get across the river, but I can’t swim. Would you allow me to climb upon your wide, green back that we might cross together?”

“Are you crazy?!” snapped the frog with fear in his eyes. “You’re a scorpion. I’m a frog. With one sting from that tail of yours, and I’d be dead within seconds.”

“You’re right about that,” hissed the scorpion, with pride in her voice. “But, on my honor, good frog, I promise not to sting you. Not now. Not ever. Consider this my thanks for your kindness to me.”

“Well,” said the frog, not all sure what to do. “Ok. If you promise.”

“Oh, I do. I do. I promise,” said the scorpion, sounding earnest.

And so the frog allowed the scorpion to climb upon his wide, green back, and together they entered the river. The frog’s powerful legs kicked behind him. He enormous eyes scanned for danger ahead. In hardly any time at all the two had reached the middle of the river. With all the big rocks behind them, it was smooth sailing now. And then all of a sudden, the frog felt this searing pain shoot through his back, and what felt like fire begin to rush through his body.

“You stung me!” cried the frog. “You idiot! You stung me!” The frog could feel his lungs and throat begin to constrict. He knew he didn’t have much time left. “Why?” he asked the scorpion? Why? You promised! Why? Now we’ll both die.”

As the two began to sink into the swirling water the scorpion hissed, “It’s in my nature.”

And so there Ananias sits. Is Paul the lion this vision of God claims? Is he the scorpion Ananias fears? Which is it? He didn’t know- he’d have to go to find out. And his faith doesn’t keep Ananias from this risk- but it’s the thing hurling him into it!

Now we know how the story turns out for Ananias- we know he goes to Saul, lays hands on him, calls this murderer his brother, and lived to see Saul become Paul- lived to see a man literally turn from death to life.

But sometimes the story doesn't always turn out this well, even when we act in faith. Prof. Liviu Librescu, a Romanian Jew who survived the holocaust, survived the despotic regime of Nicolae Ceaucescu, and who published more papers than any other professor in the history of Virginia Tech, was teaching class last Monday in Norris Hall on the campus of Virginia Tech. Soon after he started lecturing, he and his class heard what sounded like a loud hammering noise next door. It was gun fire. Some of the students hit the floor and turned over desks for cover. Others went the windows and kicked them open, helping one another jump down to safety below.

Liviu Librescu did neither.

He just headed straight for the door determined to stop whoever or whatever it was out there, from getting to his students. Unlike Ananias Librescu didn't have time to think, to choose- he only had time to react. But just like Ananias, Librescu reacted by saying "Here I am" and risking everything. And where Paul turned out to be a lion, Librescu faced down a scorpion and paid with his life. Five bullets pierced his body last Monday when he blocked the door. His faithful action saved at least twice as many young people. And you know, our brothers and sisters in the synagogue have a saying: Whoever saves one life, *even one life*, saves the entire world.

Faith doesn't promise protection- it promises the comfort and peace of God's presence precisely when our protections have failed us. May we never be faced with the

choice of Ananias. And may we never forget those who face this choice and whose faith holds fast. **Amen.**