

Sermon, St. David's, Easter 3C, 4/28/22, Acts 9:1-20, John 21:1-19 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

“Saul, Saul,” Jesus calls out to Saul on the road to Damascus. Saul, we heard, was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord when Jesus called to him, after a light from heaven flashed around him and he fell to the ground. “Saul, Saul. Why do you persecute me?”

Notice how Jesus says Saul's name twice. Pay attention when you hear a biblical character's name twice. Like “Samuel, Samuel” back in his call story. Samuel was just a boy and it took three times and the help of his mentor Eli for him to realize that the Lord was calling to him.

Or Jesus saying to Martha, when she was irritated that Mary wasn't helping wash the dishes and wanted Jesus to make, “Martha. Martha. You are worried and distracted by many things.”

Or Abraham, when the angel of the Lord calls to him in Genesis 22 after he has reached out his hand and taken the knife to kill his son Isaac. “Abraham, Abraham! Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him.”

The double name adds emphasis. Urgency. Saul, Saul. Samuel, Samuel. Martha, Martha. Abraham, Abraham.

But back in Genesis 22, when God first called to Abraham, he only said his name once. It wasn't as urgent as when they had to save Isaac's life. Back at the beginning, when Abraham was just a righteous guy who had finally been given the promise of a son that he had dreamed of for decades, God just called, “Abraham.” And Abraham said, “*Hinene*. Here I am.”

Kind of like Ananias in today's story. We could have stopped today's reading at verse 6, but I included the optional part because then we remember that this is not only the story of the call of Saul, who becomes the apostle Paul and writes the earliest New Testament books that we still have today—Paul, the former persecutor who went on to found churches and was one of the most influential Christians ever—this is also the story of the call of Ananias, who isn't remembered in the same way that Paul is.

The Lord said to Ananias in a vision: “Ananias!” Notice that the Lord only had to speak Ananias's name once. He was a faithful disciple, who didn't have to get knocked on the ground and blinded and have his name said twice to get his attention. Instead, Ananias immediately responded, “Here I am, Lord.” Much like Abraham that first time God spoke to him back in Genesis 22. Unsuspecting. Here I am.

And what comes next is not pleasant for Ananias, because God wants him to lay hands on Saul so that Saul will regain his sight. Saul, who has been persecuting disciples just like Ananias. Disciples Ananias likely knew and loved. This is a huge ask. So Ananias pushes back a little. “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.”

In other words, “Um, God? I'll be risking my life if I touch this man for you.” But God insists he go through with it, so Ananias finds Saul, still blind from his Damascus Road experience, and lays hands on him so that scales fall from his eyes, and then he becomes baptized.

You may not have had as dramatic of a call story as these two men, but presumably, you have been baptized. Baptism isn't something that just happens to one person in isolation. It's a community experience, as we were reminded last week when we were privileged to baptize Maxwell. In baptism, we all renew our own vows. We welcome someone into this body of Christ, and every time we have a new member, *we* are changed.

Saul's call wasn't only about Paul: it was about Ananias, too, because Ananias's call was directly linked to Saul's. Ananias would not have needed to lay hands on Saul to release him from blindness had Saul not been blinded on the road to Damascus.

Your call will likely touch other people, and theirs will touch yours. Our baptisms all touch each other and make us each a part of church. We all touch each other with our ministries, with our presence, with our service.

The pandemic has meant that church has been able to reach people in new ways, so that more services than ever are streamed and recorded, so people can still participate when on vacation or when prevented by jobs or health concerns from attending in person. Some have also made church a less important part of their lives, filling the time with other things. One thing I sometimes hear is that church doesn't "feed" people like it once did.

But church isn't only about one person. It's not only about you and how you feel and your own hunger. Did you notice what the risen Lord say to Jesus at their beach party in this morning's gospel? "Feed my lambs." "Tend my sheep." "Feed my sheep."

As disciples, Christianity is not only about our own encounters with the holy. We are called to serve others. Your presence might feed someone else, touch someone else. We come together to honor God first of all, and to tend to each other.

I know that it sounds preachy and self-serving of me to say to you that church is not only about you, since I am a preacher. So I want you to know I say this to myself as well, and Gary often says it to me. Because sometimes, especially after my cancers the past two years, sometimes I want to retire early, move to Arizona, and just write and play with great nieces and nephews. But being at St. David's isn't only about me. I believed that I was called here, and I still believe that God continues to call me to this wonderful place at this sometimes difficult time, and I believe that God still has work for us together in this glorious corner church.

We are emerging from rough couple of years, but especially after Easter and last Sunday's baptism, I am truly excited about our future. Being hopeful seems a little scary sometimes, especially with the pandemic, because things start to look better or at least hopeful and then more bad news comes; but, as Christians we are called to hope, especially in this season of Easter, which we will be in for the entire month of May that starts today.

Did you feel called here this morning? I believe that God called every one of us here. What is it that we are going to do together? How will we tend Jesus' sheep?