

## **Sermon Notes for 4/10/16 (Easter 3)**

**Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN**

**Text: Acts 9:1-22**

**Theme: MAN'S REPORTS VS. GOD'S INTENTIONS**

**The Point:** While man's reports about people and events may or may not be accurate, helpful, and reliable, God's intentions are always pointed at the salvation of a lost world.

Man's reports about Saul were accurate, but short-sighted. Ananias said, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." Saul's reputation had preceded him. Men had reported, and those reports had come to Ananias' attention. This man who was "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" had caused a considerable ruckus in Jerusalem – and he was seeking to expand his influence into more distant territories. So he had authority from the high priest to arrest any Christians in Damascus and return them to Jerusalem for trial. This man had nothing to commend him to the disciples of Jesus. They would have seen him as public enemy #1.

Whom do you see as public enemy #1 in our day? Is it some political leader or a media mogul or a journalist or a bomb-maker or an Imam or a corporate raider or a liberal or a conservative? Just who gets under your skin and threatens you or your family or your church or your way of living or your security? Does this text have something to say about how you look at a person like this? Does it seek to readjust your thinking in some critical area of life? Is it possible that our human categories keep us from bearing bold and joyful witness to the Savior's life and love and mercy?

Man's reports about Saul could lead only to indifference, inaction, and fear. Ananias was not anxious to fulfill the call that God gave him. What did God say to him in the vision? "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." Ananias didn't even have to leave town. He just needed to hike over to Straight Street to the home of Judas and spend some time chatting with Saul of Tarsus. Ananias' heart caught in his throat. His blood pressure spiked. His "fight or flight" mechanism was fully on "flight." He tried to protest. After all, he knew what this Saul was like. There was no mistaking him. If you had asked Ananias that morning who in all the world he would least like to be in the same room with, there was a high likelihood that Saul's name would be near the top of that list. Man's reports hung heavily on Ananias' heart.

So who is it that you most seek to avoid? Someone at the office who seems to make you the butt of his jokes? A family member who takes out her frustrations on you? A neighbor who has not done anything to be neighborly in the past years? Part of an immigrant community for whom you have little good to say? Another church member with a joyless attitude and a dagger-like tongue? What kinds of reports have you listened to? What kinds have you spread? This may be an "Ananias moment" for you, for you need to know that the Lord loves that person with a love that is willing to die for him or her. And not only that, but He may very well be planning to use you to reach into that person's life with His power and His love.

Frozen witnesses result in death (eternal death) for many. If we do not speak up, then who will? Ananias could not get out from under God's intentions by excusing himself or suggesting another candidate or pleading inability. Ananias was the one God intended to use to bring Saul to faith in the Lord Jesus. And this was not just for Ananias' sake – not even just for Saul's sake – not even just for the sake of the present members of the Church. God was looking far down the road to the many people, thousands upon thousands in number by now, who would be saved through the testimony, witness, suffering, and service rendered by this once-sworn enemy of the Church.

Jesus, the persecuted One, has new plans for His vigorous enemy. He meets Saul personally on the road in the flashing light from heaven. You know the story, no doubt, of the farmer who had a mule that obeyed him to the point that a neighbor asked the farmer how he accomplished this kind of obedience from a stubborn animal like that mule. The farmer said that he just had to speak to the mule, and the mule obeyed. Having an assignment for the mule just then, the farmer picked up a two by four and swung it full into the snout of the mule. The neighbor said, "I thought you just had to speak to him." "Well," drawled the farmer, "first you have to get his attention." The Lord wanted Saul to hear the powerful comfort of the Good News, but first He had to get his attention. That happened out on that road to Damascus.

As Saul's traveling party was nearing the city, suddenly Saul was struck blind by the light that flashed. He was then asked, "Why do you persecute me?" When Saul asked who the "me" was, the Lord answered, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." You see, Jesus takes the persecution and suffering of His people personally. When Saul acted against Christians, Jesus was stung by those actions. When His people suffer, so does our Lord. Then Saul was told to go into Damascus, where he would be told what he needed to do in response to what he had just been through. The blindness of Saul was designed to move him to repentance. That is what God is seeking to work in our lives whenever we go through trials and troubles.

Simply being religious or going to church or serving my neighbor or living a good, quiet life does not provide a person with assurance of salvation. Saul was very religious prior to meeting Jesus. He had done all that the rabbis could expect of a young, eager Jewish student. But all his religious fervor was misdirected. He wrote about that later on. Thinking about his religious zeal and his endeavors to be a righteous person by means of his actions, he said (Phil. 3:8-9), "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith." Knowing Christ – that is the key to life. This is more than just knowing "about" Christ, having some facts in my head about His life, death, even His resurrection. Knowing Christ involves leaning totally upon Him and His grace for my salvation. Knowing Christ means living by faith in Him.

After spending three years as His disciple, Peter knew Jesus as well as any living soul. But following the Easter events, when Peter and several of the other disciples had returned to fishing on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus came and re-called them. He had called them from just this very spot, from just this very vocation, to be fishers of men, three years earlier. And that morning at the Sea, Jesus renewed that call to them. In particular, Jesus singled out Peter, asking him three times, "Peter, do you love Me?" Remembering his three denials, Peter was hurt especially at the third question. But Jesus just wanted Peter to know that, whatever his sins and offenses, there was still a vital place in kingdom service for this wayward disciple.

Jesus even showed Peter how many things he would need to suffer when (also in today's Gospel) He says, "When you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." This showed the sort of death by which Peter would glorify God. Peter would serve Jesus in some amazing ways in the years that would follow. Tradition says that Peter was crucified in Rome under the Emperor Nero. But even in death, Peter did not feel he could duplicate the death of Jesus, so he asked to be crucified head downward.

Jesus, who had died for Peter and for Saul also, moves to make Saul His own child. He was not out for revenge against this Christian-battering Pharisee. Jesus will have Saul as His own by faith. Jesus wants to claim this fervent foe as a model servant. He wants to remake his heart so that Saul will serve Jesus as eagerly as he has served his Jewish mentors. Ananias must be convinced to believe this is possible, so that he will carry out his challenging assignment. His debate with God is finally resolved when the Lord

simply says, “GO! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” The Spirit is working in many hearts to bring about these world-changing events, including the heart of Ananias, who bows to God’s will when doing so could be dangerous, even deadly, for him. So Ananias goes to the house of Judas (interesting, that this Judas harbors the Pharisee Saul, persecutor of Jesus and His people.)

Ananias comes in, places his hands on Saul, and calls him “Brother.” This is an amazing thing! Scales fall immediately from Saul’s eyes, and he is able to see again. Then he receives baptism at the hands of Ananias, and within a matter of days he is preaching in the synagogues with a remarkable topic: “Jesus is the Son of God.” Saul has undergone a thorough conversion. No longer will his days be filled with thinking about ways to do in this Christian movement. No, now he becomes its greatest advocate and spokesman. No longer will he stand by and watch Christians be stoned to death, but he himself will face stoning for his own confession of Jesus as risen Lord and King.

Saul had to learn how much he would suffer for Christ. Of course, the only way he really came to know that was as he endured a life of intense, wholly dedicated service to the Savior. A personal relationship with the risen Lord does not exempt us from suffering and trial. The very fact that we are walking in the footsteps of Christ will put us on the path of the cross. But that will be a road well worth taking. For down that road lie hope and peace and fulfillment and eternal joy.

Saul becomes God’s chosen instrument to proclaim Christ’s name “to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.” Through Saul, who of course we know as the Apostle Paul, the Christian mission takes wing through the then-known world. He preaches and plants churches and trains pastors in city after city through the whole of Asia Minor, Greece and even in Rome itself, headquarters of the Empire.

Paul’s spirit continues to live on in the people who serve Jesus in generation after generation. Miss Marietta Reeside in 1892 began work as the first woman missionary to the Kiowa Indians of Oklahoma. After she had been with the Indians long enough for them to know what it meant to be a Christian, they gave her a new name. They called her Aim-day-co. Chief Bigtree, in explaining the name, said, “When we Kiowas see anyone on the wrong road we call out, ‘Aim-day-co!’ (‘Turn this way.’) Our sister came to us from a far land, and found us all on the wrong road, and in great danger. She stood in a new road and called to us, ‘Turn this way,’ and showed us the Jesus road. God bless Aim-day-co.” (*Moody Monthly*)

**Conclusion:** While man’s reports about people and events may or may not be accurate, helpful, or reliable, God’s intentions are always pointed at the salvation of a lost world. Harry Ironside’s father died when Harry was very young, too young even to have memories of his presence. But Harry said this about his mother: “My widowed mother was, it seems to me, one of a thousand. I remember yet how I would be thrilled as she knelt with me as a child, and prayed, ‘O Father, keep my boy from ever desiring anything greater than to live for Thee. Save him early, and make him a devoted street-preacher, as his father was. Make him willing to suffer for Jesus’ sake, to gladly endure persecution and rejection by the world that cast out Thy Son; and keep him from what would dishonor Thee.’ The words were not always the same, but I have heard the sentiment times without number.” God’s intentions trump all human reason, philosophy, and wisdom. He desires to enlarge His family, the company of the saved, through the proclamation of Good News and life by faith in Jesus, His Son. He used Saul of Tarsus in this way. He used Harry Ironside in this way – and Marietta Reeside as well. He promises to claim you and to use you to move His purposes forward. May that be true here in this house of God, among this people of God, and within your own individual hearts as well! In the strong name of Jesus, AMEN!