

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor**  
**“The People’s Choice: What does it mean to answer God’s call?”**  
**Acts 9: 1-19**  
**July 2, 2017**

Today we mark the third Sunday in our summer worship series, “The People’s Choice?” based on topics that you have submitted. Today’s topic: What does it mean to answer God’s call?

We turn to the story of two persons whose stories of answering God’s call are recounted in the book of Acts: Saul, also known as Paul, and Ananias.

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I will begin by saying that the question, What does it mean to answer God’s call?, is not a word-for-word expression of the suggestion that one of you submitted for this People’s Choice series.

In the interest of full disclosure, here is what one of you actually wrote: “Examples from our midst of individuals answering God's call to them. What are they doing? Has their perception of their call changed over time and if so, how? What have they learned? How has their faith grown or changed? What, if anything, do they wish they had done differently? What do they continue to look forward to in terms of serving?”

It is a great idea for a sermon. And perhaps it is an even better idea for a series of longer conversations. At least, I hope so, because during the month of August, our Faith Formation team with the leadership of Associate Pastor John Ryan is sponsoring a series of four conversations which hopefully you read about in the July issue of our church newsletter Steepletalk which arrived yesterday in your email inbox.

**Speaking of Our Faith (9:45 a.m. Jetton)**

**During the month of August we will have a special month long Sunday school class at 9:45 a.m. in Jetton Hall. Each week a church member will speak about their faith and reflect on their spiritual journeys. Speaking of our Faith will meet on August 6, 13, 20, and 27. Please plan on being present!**

In August, you’re invited to engage one another on the question of God’s call in your lives. As a biblical backdrop to the upcoming conversations, it seems right to consider the biblical stories of God’s call to Saul and to Ananias.

It was Flannery O’Connor who said, “I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.” (1)

Actually, there is no mention of a horse in Acts’ telling of the story of Saul’s call! But the story of Saul’s call has probably gotten more press than any other story to be found in the book of Acts.

Saul was the first-century James Comey, I suppose one might say, for the FBI—the Faith Bureau of Investigation. Earlier in Acts we read that Saul was on a mission of defending the Jewish faith. This upstart group—not yet known as Christians, but at that point a primarily Jewish sect called People of the Way—was challenging “the way we have always done things around here” or “how we’ve never done it that way before.” Saul took it as his responsibility to keep the faith pure, to root out any false teaching.

He was on his way to Damascus to round up any followers of Jesus who might be found there, when suddenly without any warning, a light from heaven flashed around him. Saul fell to his knees, and a voice from heaven spoke to him.

Chuck Williamson, now parish associate at First Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, has written a great little commentary on the book of Acts. In it, he points out something that had not occurred to me to the extent that he describes it...that Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus brings to mind another biblical call, that is, the call of Moses. Moses too met God through an unexpected light. Moses too heard the voice of God calling. Moses too wanted to know, “Who are you?” And almost as if he is quoting Moses, when Saul hears the voice from heaven and asks, “Who are you?”, the voice responds, “I Am” as it did to Moses in saying, “I Am Who I Am,” here saying, “I Am Jesus whom you are persecuting.”(2)

The call of Saul is dramatic. Over the years, I have heard many stories, some of those stories from some of you, who share that God has spoken to you in equally dramatic ways. And I honor those stories. I honor your call. I honor you in your response to the call of God.

And with the same breath, I hasten to say too that this is not the experience of everyone, and any expression of the Christian faith which says that it is imperative and non-negotiable that someone point to a particular time and place and experience when one was “saved” or “called” by God is not being attentive to the whole of Scripture.

Perhaps the strongest affirmation of this is found in Acts 9 because paired with the story of Saul’s dramatic calling by God is the story of another call.

I am speaking, of course, of the call of Ananias.

Ananias’s call was not dramatic in the manner of Saul’s call.

It was a whispered nudge, if you will, a dream in the dark of night.

But it was a whispered nudge that stirred up fear inside Ananias.

When that nudge came, “Get up and go to Straight Street and look for a man named Saul,” it would be like, well, let’s see. Imagine an anti-abortion activist being told to go to Planned Parenthood or a dedicated Planned Parenthood supporter going to pro-life pregnancy center. Imagine a Muslim being told to go to a Christian house of worship. Imagine a mom being told to go the book group where all the other members’ children had been invited to a birthday party from which her child had been excluded.

When that whispered nudge came to Ananias, he said in so many words, “Are you sure you want me to do that? Don’t you know about Saul? He has hurt people I love. He has hurt people you love! He is repugnant and abusive! What good could possibly come from my going to meet with him?”

We can understand where Ananias was coming from. He had heard of Saul’s reputation and couldn’t believe that such a person could ever change. Ananias is us every time that we make up our minds about another person—we know them, we know the way that they think, we know the way that they act, we don’t particularly like them and would just as soon have nothing to do with them.

But God called Ananias, and Ananias went. And when he met Saul, Ananias spoke one of the most daring statements of faith in the entire Bible. He said, “Brother Saul.” (3)

“Brother Saul.” That is what Ananias called him.

This is the nexus of what it means to be called by God, according to Acts 9.

Whether the call comes dramatically or whether it comes as a whisper in a dream in the dark of night, a call from God is being given the gift of having one’s eyes opened to a new vision of the people around us and acting on that vision in such a way that those who see our witness have their eyes opened in turn.

Berry Brazelton recently celebrated his 99<sup>th</sup> birthday. His “call,” if you will, came when he was 8 or 9 years old and he was charged with the care of 9 younger cousins. So began his call to become a pediatrician and for more than 6 decades, he has guided parents in the care of their precious treasures, their children.

A few years ago, in connection with his receiving the Citizen’s Medal from President Obama, he was interviewed on NPR.

Dr. Brazelton saw a women struggling with her 2 year old while grocery shopping. The mother then began hitting her screaming child. In seeing this, Dr. Brazelton walked up to the mother and said, “It is so hard... to take a two year old to the grocery store.”

Hearing those words, the mother immediately started to cry. She held her toddler and they began to reconnect and repair. The child even started to wipe the tears off his mother’s face.

“It is so hard...”

Spoken in a time of vulnerability, fatigue and overwhelm, the words “It is so hard” were medicine for this mom. Instead of judgement, she received compassion. Instead of chastising, she received kindness. And healing began immediately between mother and child.

I don’t know if Berry Brazelton would say that he answered a call from God, but I do. And in a world in which judgment and rancor and incivility seem to be at an all-time high, perhaps the creative and non-judgmental manner in which he answered God’s call may open our own eyes to a new vision of the people around us and spur us to act on that vision in such a way that those who see our witness may have their eyes opened in return.

1. Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, Sally Fitzgerald, ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 355.
2. Charles C. Williamson, *Acts* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1998), 35.
3. *Ibid.*, 36.
4. [https://potentiatherapy.com/category/healthy-identity/faith/page/2/;](https://potentiatherapy.com/category/healthy-identity/faith/page/2/)  
<http://hereandnow.legacy.wbur.org/2013/06/05/brazelton-baby-whisperer>