

Sermon April 22, 2007, Acts 9:1-20 “Yes, Lord”

The sermon in a sentence: We cooperate with God in his plan as we are open to God wherever he may lead, as we take the time to discern his will, and as we welcome one another as brothers and sisters.

Why I am preaching it: To present Ananias to the congregation as a model for our own growth individually and as a congregation.

This sermon is going to be mostly about Ananias as a model for us of a fruitful citizen of the kingdom of God. We will look at his availability to God, his willingness to discern God’s call, and his graciousness towards fellow believers. But before we move to Ananias, I want to tell you a story from my childhood that I hope will make it clear why I am focusing today on Ananias rather than on the better known biblical character Saul, whom we know by his Roman name of Paul.

As a kid I liked geography, and for a couple of years I used to receive in the mail sticker books about different nations. Usually the books would be about some important country that had influenced world history—Italy, for example, the cradle of Roman civilization. It would tell about the geography, people, and history of the country. It also came with pictures that you dampened with a sponge and pasted in the appropriate page.

One month, the book that arrived was a little different. Instead of focusing on one country, it was called “The Little Countries of Europe,” and it included tiny nations like Andorra and Lichtenstein and San Marino that many people have never heard of. Take San Marino. It is on a mountain, surrounded by Italy. To put it in a local context, you could almost fit three San Marinos on Ni`ihau. It has less than half the population of the island of Kaua`i. It’s nothing compared with Italy. But there is more to San Marino than first meets the eye. For one, it is the world’s oldest republic. While Italy and other countries around it became dictatorships, San Marino managed to remain a model of a different form of government. In the 19th century it offered refuge for the patriots who were persecuted as they worked for the unification of Italy. Little San Marino played a part in the emergence of Italy as a nation. This tiny, unknown country perched on a mountaintop has a greater place in world history than you might expect at first glance.

If the sticker books had been about Bible characters instead of about countries, Paul would have been like Italy—a key player in Christian and

even in world history. He would have had his own book, with at least a chapter devoted to his conversion. Ananias, would have been like San Marino, with just a few pages in a book that included Dorcas, Epaphroditus, and others whom we might be tempted to call bit players in the Bible story. But like San Marino, we would find that Ananias had an important place in the larger scheme of things.

To appreciate Ananias fully, first we will look at the conversion of Saul, or Paul, and its place the book of Acts, and in God's plan for the world.

You find a one verse summary of Acts in the first chapter. The risen Jesus says to the disciples, "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Last week Pastor Wayne preached from Acts 2. In that chapter, the Holy Spirit came upon the church, and the apostles began to preach in Jerusalem. By chapter 8 they were in Judea and Samaria. But the "to the ends of the earth" really began in today's passage.

Acts chapter 9, the account of Paul's conversion, is one of the key chapters not just in Acts but in the whole Bible, right up there with the call of Abraham back in Genesis.

In fact, there is some overlap between the call of Abraham and the call of Paul. Two thousand years before the time of Paul, God had said to Abraham, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." First Abraham had to take the step of obedience, and only then would he be told what he had to do. A couple of verses later God tells Abraham that "...all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Here on the road to Damascus, Jesus says to Paul, "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." Again we see the scriptural pattern of first offering unreserved obedience to God, and then receiving the specific task. A few verses later, through Ananias, Jesus tells Paul that he would carry the name of Jesus before the Gentiles and their kings and the people of Israel—that is, before those "all the peoples on earth" that God had spoken of to Abraham.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of this chapter in the history of the world, or in the history of the Christian faith. Paul went on to found churches throughout the Roman Empire. He spearheaded the inclusion of Gentile Christians on an equal footing with Jewish Christians. In the course

of his pastoral work among the churches he wrote letters that now make up a substantial portion of the New Testament, and still shape the life of churches and Christians throughout the world.

We can easily relate the conversion and the life of Paul to the history of our own congregation. Through his ministry the Gospel spread to Europe. Europeans brought the Gospel to North America, and American Congregationalist missionaries brought the Gospel to Hawaii. Americans and Europeans also took the Gospel to Japan. Okumura-sensei, the founding pastor of Makiki was converted in Japan, and then came to Hawaii and founded Makiki under the auspices of the Congregational churches. So our own history is bound up with the conversion of Paul, and the faithfulness of Ananias, in Acts Chapter 9. No Acts 9, no Makiki Christian Church.

Bibles that use subheadings will usually call chapter 9 “The conversion of Saul,” or something similar. And I suppose that most sermons preached on this chapter relate to Saul.

But I think it could also be titled, “The faith of Ananias.” Let’s take a look at this disciple. I should mention that Ananias was a common name. Don’t confuse this one with the Ananias who with his wife Sapphira tried to deceive the church back in chapter 5, or with Ananias the high priest who tried to put a stop to Paul and his teaching later on in Acts.

The Ananias that we are talking about appears in the Bible only in this one incident; here in the conversion story as told by Luke, and then two times later on in Acts when Paul recounts the same story during his trials before Roman officials. We have only a glimpse of Ananias—a brief conversation with the Lord, and another with Paul. But let’s dig in and see what we can learn about this man.

The very first words we hear out of the mouth of Ananias are, “Yes, Lord.” Like Abraham at the time of his call, and Paul on the road to Damascus, we see him modeling that fundamental attitude for a fruitful Christian life—an openness to God even before he knew exactly what God was asking of him.

The conversation continues. The Lord gave a command to go and meet Saul. Listen to how Ananias answered: “Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.” I like that answer for two reasons.

First, it tells me that Ananias had a close relationship with Jesus. He knew that it was all right to express his doubts and his fears in prayer. I have been reading the Psalms recently. King David and the other great saints felt free to express all their emotions to the Lord without any fear that God would reject them.

I also like the answer because I think it shows Ananias wanted to make sure that he understood God's instructions correctly.

Someone in the sermon preparation study group pointed out that although we can read this conversation aloud in less than a minute, we probably have here a summary. Jesus might have appeared to Ananias at any time during the three days that Saul was blinded and staying in Damascus. Ananias may have had an extended time of wrestling in prayer before he was sure that he really had heard God rightly.

There is an attractive humility in Ananias. He knew that, like all of us, he could easily mistake other voices for the voice of God, and he took the time to get clarity. Again, Ananias is following biblical precedent. Abraham had an extended time of prayer with God as he struggled to understand the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Gideon in the book of Judges doubted that he had correctly heard God's call on his life, and God took the time to give him certainty. Psalm 73 is one of many examples of a believer's struggle to make sense of the will of God. The most powerful example comes from the life of Jesus himself. For forty days in the wilderness, during his temptation, he struggled to be sure that the Cross really was the call of God on his life.

So if Ananias was in good biblical company when he immediately said "Yes, Lord," he was also in good company when he took the necessary time to make sure that he understood God correctly.

So far we have looked at Ananias's conversation with the Lord Jesus. It started out with that wonderful little two-word phrase, "Yes, Lord." I was equally impressed with his gracious conversation with Saul. It starts out, "Brother Saul." There is no mention of Saul's previous persecution of the church, although it is quite possible that Ananias had friends or relatives who has suffered under him. Once Paul was a follower of Jesus, Ananias

received him immediately as a brother, with no desire to nurse hurts and grudges.

So there we have Ananias. This little snapshot begins with “Yes, Lord,” ends with his prayer for and welcome of “Brother Saul,” and in the middle we find him earnestly seeking to know God’s will.

This morning at 11:30 we have the first of three lunch meetings to explore the direction of our congregation in the area of stewardship. Stewardship is simply the recognition that everything we are and have belongs to God, and we are the stewards or administrators. Ananias serves as a fine model for us as we enter this process.

“Yes, Lord.” Since I began preparing this sermon I have been inspired by Ananias, and I have been trying to imitate him. When I wake up in the morning I have been saying, “Yes, Lord.” When I am in my office and the phone rings or someone knocks on the door I say, “Yes, Lord.” It doesn’t mean that I will do whatever the caller asks, but rather that I am available to the Lord in whatever way he may desire. “Yes, Lord” is a shorthand way of saying that we will not think in terms of OUR time, or money, or comfort, or preferences, but rather that we will think in terms of being steward of God’s time, money, resources, and plan for the world. We can take the attitude individually. We can also take it as a congregation as we begin these stewardship luncheons, telling God in advance that we will obey him as he makes his will clear.

We will take the time needed to discern the will of God. An idea may come up at the lunches that sounds exciting. But Makiki may not be the congregation, or now might not be the time that God chooses to bring that idea to fruition. Or an idea that seems far-fetched at first may turn out to be the direction that God has for us. Again, the same principle holds true individually or as a congregation. We need to take the time through prayer, Bible study, and conversation to seek clarity, having already committed to obey God once the clarity comes.

Finally, church people are just as fragile as anybody else. People who have been around church a while have hurt each other. Again we will take Ananias as our model and see each other as brothers and sisters. Finding clarity may involve vigorous discussion, as it did for the church in Acts 15 as they tried to discern what to do with the Gentile converts. It did not turn

out the way some people had originally hoped. But no matter, they were still brothers and sisters, and no matter what, we are still brothers and sisters. There is one last thing I would like to say about Ananias. After his ministry to Saul, he dropped out of recorded history. We don't know if he lived long enough to know of Paul's work throughout the Empire. He certainly had no clue that the Gospel would reach Hawai'i in part because of his faithfulness. Let us never lose the thrill of remembering that God will bring about his plan. Long after we are dead, and even after Makiki Christian Church ceases to exist, God will still be using our obedience in 2007 in the outworking of his plan for the world.

Let us pray.