

Sermon: The Conversion of Ananias

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, May 4, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The painting titled “The Conversion of St. Paul”, painted by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, as appears on the cover of this week’s bulletin, really is a masterpiece. It depicts the story of Saul encountering the risen Christ, on the road to Damascus, as recorded in Acts 9, our Scriptural reading this morning.

Caravaggio does not embellish the narrative with reference to ‘light from heaven’ in verse 3, rendering a few subtle rays in the upper right corner. The focus is primarily on Saul, the persecutor of the Christian Church, unceremoniously knocked over on his back. Though the Bible doesn’t actually mentioned a horse, it can be deducted as befitting to someone of Saul’s standing as a Roman citizen. It also explains how Saul could ‘fall to the ground’.

We the viewers see him on his back, fallen towards us, almost falling out of an imaginary picture frame. His arms are extended as if to embrace the light, yet his eyes are closed denoting blindness due to the light. All the while an onlooker looks on, not realizing nor comprehending what was actually taking place.

Meanwhile, a voice from heaven, which seemingly only Saul could hear, said to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” To which Saul inquired, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

This dramatic moment marks the conversion of Saul, who would later be renamed as Paul. Let’s just be clear, this is not just an ordinary moment of encounter; it is a moment of repentance in the most original sense of ‘turning around’, in heart and in action. From that moment onwards, Saul would not and could not be the same. He literally turned his life around.

Prior to that moment, he was a zealous and self-righteous persecutor of the Christian Church. He delighted in seizing followers of the Way, throwing them in jail. Though he may not have held an executioner’s axe, he nevertheless delighted in their demise, as was the case of the stoning death of Stephen in Acts 7. As the matter of fact, he had in his pocket a

letter from the chief priests in Jerusalem, authorizing him to widen such persecution to those in the city of Damascus.

Yet, after that dramatic moment, Saul became a fervent supporter of the Christian church; became a tireless missionary, spreading the gospel of Jesus, from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, to Asian Minor, Corinth, Rome, you name it and pretty much to end of the known world.

Saul was, figuratively and in essence, born again (borrowing the moniker that has been popularized by the Evangelical side of the Church). So should you ever be accosted on the street and asked, "Have you been born again?" They are probably thinking, in the back of their mind, of the conversion of Saul to Paul.

In contrast to this conversion of Saul to Paul, which is well known in the Christian circles, and perhaps even the wider public, there is another conversion that has been almost forgotten in this story...I am referring to the conversion of Ananias. What? Who is that? Precisely! Ananias is the forgotten disciple, whose conversion in this story, offers more take aways for ordinary disciples like us. Let's take a deeper dive into his story. Shall we?

Ananias was a disciple of Jesus, who lived in city of Damascus. Had Saul continued his murderous rampage against the Church, Ananias would've been one of its many victims. The first remarkable thing about Ananias is that he recognizes Jesus, even though he had never met the man. Regardless, when the Lord came to him in a vision and called out to him, his response was that of recognition as he answered, "Here I am Lord."

That's the same response the young Samuel gave in 1 Samuel 3, but it took Samuel three tries to get it right, and only after Eli the priest had instructed him so. Yet here, Ananias got it right, right away. He knew that Jesus was calling for him, and his response was that the posture of ready to receive: "Here I am, Lord."

Now that is not easy as it sounds, for it requires faith with understanding, and it requires trust with confidence. What this disciple has patterned for us is the possibility of having a real and personal relationship with the risen Lord. It may take time to nurture such a relationship, through prayer and devotion, but it is possible.

The second remarkable thing about Ananias is that he speaks to the Lord. Yes it is through a vision and we are not sure of the exact mechanism, but Ananias dialogued with the risen Christ. First Jesus gave

him direction on where and how to reach Saul, then Jesus instructed him to 'lay hands on him so that he might regain his sight'. Knowing the reputation of Saul, Ananias objected, "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."

It is a valid objection: given all this man had done, why should he be healed and saved? Furthermore, why should I be the instrument of his healing and salvation. Let him rot in his blindness, let him stew in his own sinfulness. The world is a better place without Saul in it. Good riddance!

However, exacting a poetic justice has never been the way of Jesus, for the Lord has consistently taught and demonstrated with his life the virtue of 'turning the other cheek' and 'repaying evil with good'. Furthermore, the Lord gave Ananias a glimpse of the bigger picture in verse 15, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

This leads to the third remarkable thing of Ananias: he obeys the Lord. There was no hint of fear, there was no hint of jealousy, of 'why not me'—why couldn't I be the chosen instrument, to do this big thing for the Lord? Ananias simply obeyed, and went as was told. He may not have understood the way of Jesus, he may not have perceived clearly the entirety of the Kingdom and how it all makes sense, but he obeyed.

He met the blinded Saul, explained to him who had sent him. Ananias then laid hands on Saul, and immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, as he regained sight, for the Holy Spirit was upon him. For the grace shown by this disciple, the hospitality extended by others too, Saul restored his sight, regained his strength, realigned his faith, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God.", thus began the journey to reshape the Christian Church.

This story is a reminder to us that for every giant of faith, such as the Apostle Paul, there is an Ananias who works in the forgotten corner of the Kingdom. There is an Ananias who overcomes fear and prejudice in order to live a genuine faith, putting faith into practice. There is an Ananias who nurtures that faith diligently through prayer and intimate walk with the Lord, who obeys even without knowing and seeing the entire picture.

As we the denomination of the Presbyterian Church in Canada celebrates its 150th anniversary, and as we the congregation of St. Giles celebrates its 100th anniversary, it is vital that we realize there is an

Ananias in every community of faith, in every congregation. There is an Ananias whose story we may not get to hear, whose name we may not even remember, but God sees, God remembers, and God blesses. For that we give thanks to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**