

FOCUS: The Good News is God calls all kinds of people to be witnesses of the Gospel.

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ananias of Damascus appears only one time in the Bible, here in the ninth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. We don't know much about him, other than he was a disciple of Jesus, baptized, most likely Jewish, lived in the city of Damascus, and feared the man known as Saul of Tarsus. He probably wasn't a leader in the Christian community in Damascus, or Luke would have commented about that in the details of the chapter. Ananias was simply a devoted disciple, learning to love his God and living in the love and salvation offered to him through Christ Jesus. There was nothing special about Ananias.

But the Lord called Ananias in a vision to be a messenger and sign of the power of God that comes in the name of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. And, as we have heard from countless unsuspecting men and women in sacred Scripture, Ananias replies, "Who, me? You're joking, right?" But the Lord wasn't joking. In fact, the Lord knew exactly what he was doing in sending Ananias as a messenger and witness. "Saul has had a vision, too, Ananias. He's expecting you," the Lord says. So Ananias goes as he's directed.

Now, Ananias was not a preacher or teacher of the young Christian community, so he probably felt uncomfortable in his role as a messenger. But Ananias wasn't going alone to see Saul. No, Ananias was already filled with the Holy Spirit through his baptism and laying on of hands, and he also carried with him the promise Jesus made to his disciples that we heard this morning in the twenty-first chapter of Luke's gospel. Jesus said, "So make up your minds nit to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict."¹ Ananias went to Saul and did as he was told.

And after Ananias laid hands on Saul and Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit, Saul's sight was restored and he was baptized, through which Saul was received in the Christian community as a child of God and brother of Jesus Christ—the same Jesus Christ whose followers Saul had been persecuting just days before. After all of this, Saul breaks his three day fast, regaining strength, and spending time with Ananias and other disciples of Jesus who lived in Damascus. Saul, as we know, became known as Paul, and stands today as one of the great figures of Christendom. His work and ministry is so well known and so central to the proclamation of the Good News to the Gentiles that he is known even today simply by his calling, "The Apostle."

¹ Luke 21:14-15 (NRSV)

Very few men and women of history have come near the ministry of Paul in their own lives. Perhaps in our common experience, the work of Billy Graham is most Pauline, in that Graham's life has been dedicated to taking the Word of God, especially the saving grace that comes to us through Christ Jesus, to people around the world. Billy Graham's call to ministry is different than the call to ministry to which I have been called. However, at the very roots of our two calls, we have a shared calling—proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. And, even without the call to be ordained ministers of the world, Pastor Graham and I share another call to ministry—a call we share with each of you and all of the baptized as well.

That is the call to make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching all about the grace that God grants to his children without reservation or equivocation. This is the call which Ananias received in his baptism, and the call he was to exercise at the Lord's request in his visit to the heretofore hostile and Christian-hating Saul of Tarsus. It is Ananias who is called to go to a stranger and open the stranger's eyes to the Word of God and to bring to that stranger the power of the Holy Spirit. Ananias wasn't called to be an evangelist or apostle to the Greeks or the Syrians or the Romans or anyone else. Rather, he was called to take the Good News to one person specifically, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Lord would use that one person to take the Gospel to hundreds and thousands more.

Ananias' call as a baptized child of God is the same call shared by all of the baptized. In a general way, we are all called to open the eyes of those who have not seen the risen Christ to the grace and mercy that comes to those who follow him. Each of us has received the call of Ananias to go and be the tool which God will use to open the heart of a non-believer to the ministry of the Gospel. Each of us has received the call of Ananias to lay our hands on another and pray for them and with them that they might be filled with the Holy Spirit, and filled with the Holy Spirit they may come to believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Lord and Savior of all people.

But notice throughout all of this—the call of Ananias and his conversations with Paul and the call each of us share in our baptism and the call of those like Billy Graham and Jongkil Na and me to ordained ministry—at no time are any of those called expected to do the work of conversion of the non-believer. None of us have that power or ability, and no human being has the power that is contained in the Gospel message. Rather, we are the tools through which God acts in the lives of his creation. We bring the Good News by the power of the Holy Spirit, and in sharing the Good News we open the eyes of those with whom we come in contact.

So, my dear sisters and brothers, it's not up to you to "figure out" what you are to say to someone about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. No, it is your job to be the instrument through which the Holy Spirit works. God will place the words in your mouth that will stand up to challenge. You, however, are called to go out and make yourself available to God as the instrument. If you speak to no one, if you live as a hermit locked away from the world, if you think that everyone whom you do not know or of whom you—like Ananias—have only heard rumors, then you are not letting yourself stand as the instrument of God and amplifier of the Word of God, given to you by the power of the Holy Spirit. You are not living your baptism every day if you keep the Good News within you.

Gentle friends, most of you have not been called by God to seek the vocation of ordained ministry, priest, or prophet. Even fewer of us are called to a ministry such as that of Billy Graham. And only God knows who is called to serve in the ministry as Paul was called to do, as Apostle to the Gentiles, least among all of the apostles. But as the called and baptized children of God, we are all called to be witnesses of the Gospel to the world. We are all called out to make disciples of all nations. We are all called to speak the Word as the Holy Spirit brings it to us. And we will be hated because of it. And we will not perish because we are hated.

No, as we are fulfilling our calling as the baptized children of God, and even as we are hated, we gain our souls, and the calling to which we are called is fulfilled by God's grace through Christ Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. Receive the Holy Spirit and open your eyes to the power of God and his calling for you. This is the Word of the Lord!