

5th Easter - 5/2/10 – Acts 9:1-19 – Life Happens

Life happens! Have you ever been on the way to living when life interrupted you, when something happened that altered the direction in which you were headed or changed what you believed? Maybe it was a graduation, a job loss, a person you met or someone who died, a disappointment, illness, or discovery. In our lesson from Acts, we hear a story about how God interrupts the lives of Paul and Ananias. While on the way to putting an end to the Christian movement, Paul was blinded; while trying to evade capture, Ananias was called to bring God's grace to the very person he feared most. This was a life-altering event for both men. That set me to wondering: How have life and Christ changed our lives? What is our story?

I don't know about you, but I don't like surprises. I like to anticipate and plan for things. Yes, some surprises are fun – a party, a friend who drops by, an unexpected gift or phone call - and there's something to be said about spontaneity and being in the moment. After all, that's how life happens. But I like to live in the illusion that I have some control over what happens. However, I'm not sure that is really true. Life happens! More often than not it seems random, with interruptions being the norm. This story of Paul and Ananias has helped me view life's interruptions as "God moments." When life pulls the rug out from under me and I'm flat on my back, I'm more inclined to trust in God's presence and rely on God's power. I also look for God to send me an Ananias to help me find my way and discern where God is in all this.

As this story unfolds, Paul is on his way to Damascus. His intent is to stamp out this fledgling movement of Christians. Reading between the lines, we realize Paul is "blinded" by the limitations of his faith – limited by rigidity to the traditions and law of Judaism and in his understanding of the wideness of God's mercy. He is passionate; he views himself as God's warrior. He believes himself to be right and on God's mission when God interrupts him. Over the course of the next 3 days, God opens Paul's eyes to see beyond his anger and hatred. Through Ananias, God's grace and healing are extended to Paul in a life-changing way. Life happens, and Paul finds that God is sending him in a new direction – forward into God's future, not Paul's.

Ananias, a follower of Jesus, knows that Paul had been complicit in the stoning of Stephen. He knows that Paul had secured the proper papers empowering him to arrest followers of Jesus and bring them back to stand trial in Jerusalem. Knowing all this, Ananias is filled with fear – fear for his life and for those who followed Jesus. God interrupts Ananias and calls him to overcome his fear in order to convey God's grace to Paul. It is counter intuitive. It goes against everything Ananias knows and believes. Over the course of the next 3 days, God opens Ananias' eyes to see the breadth and depth of God's forgiveness. Life happens, and Ananias discovers the transforming power of God's love. That sets his life in a new direction as he walks into God's future.

Life happens! On our way to living, life interrupts us; the direction in which we travel is altered. A child tells his parents he was laid off and needs financial help; a parent becomes ill and the adult child takes an extended leave in order to go home and help; your closest friends relocates; as you age you find yourself less able to do the things you once did; your child becomes sick and you leave work to care for her; your spouse is transferred; an emergency arises. How do we deal with these unexpected events; these life-altering situations in which we find ourselves? These interruptions often call our faith into question. At the same time they teach us that we walk by faith not by sight. While we wonder where God is in all this, we also know that God promises to be with us, and, in time, we see how God helps us deal with the unexpected and overcome our fear and anger. Life goes on, and God walks with us into the future as we live out God's purpose for our lives.

We're experiencing that right now in the life of our congregation. Who knew the recession would be as deep or as long as it has been; that people would lose jobs or move away; the effect of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly decision; or the effect of the building vote on those who felt it was the wrong decision? Who would have predicted 5 years ago the changing worship trends with traditional declining and contemporary growing? But it has happened, and we need to face our fears and deal with our changing situation. For the second consecutive year, income in support of our mission and ministry has fallen 4%. Until now, we've been able to minimize the effect on our ministry. We've chipped away each year until we can no longer operate the same way given our income level. Like Paul and Ananias we need to step back and open ourselves to God's presence and direction.

God has a future for us and a purpose to live out. It may well be nothing like we imagined. We trust that God is with us and will help us find a way. God never says it would be easy. Rather, God says, "I am with you." God works through the events that happen along life's way to shape us and deepen our faith. We've been in situations like this before – the late '70s, early '90s and 2000. God has brought us through them and, in many ways we're stronger because of the journey. Like Paul and Ananias, God invites us to face our fears and open ourselves to God's possibilities. Life happens. But it doesn't happen without Christ being at our side. Right now Christ invites us to come eat and drink and take his presence into our lives, lest the journey be too much for us. Remember, with God all things are possible. We walk by faith not by sight. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though everything around us might change.