

**NOW THE GREEN BLADE RISES**  
**A People of Love**  
**Amidst a People Still Breathing Threats and Murder**

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle  
April 18, 2107 ● Third Sunday of Easter  
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Dayton, Ohio

**Acts 9:1-20**

*Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

*Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' But Ananias answered, '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.' But the Lord said to him, '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.' So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'*

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Acts 9:1

We are living in an angry time. I'm still not sure what all the anger is about, but we hear the anger loud and clear. Over the last year, the anger has risen to the surface as the health care reform bill made it way through congress. The anger showed up in last summer's "shoutfests" as people hijacked town hall meetings of congressional representatives. It showed up in Representative John Boehner's fiery "hell no" speech against the health care bill, which also threatened "Armageddon." The anger is driving "Tea Party" patriots to organize rallies across the country and in our own backyard. And often at those rallies the anger slips out in ways that are inappropriate and disturbing: someone actually spitting on a black member of congress; people hurling "N" word; people engaging in homophobic rants; people bearing signs and calling President Obama a communist, or socialist or portraying him as a modern "Hitler."

People like Rep. Michelle Bachmann from Minnesota and former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin are stoking the anger. Bachmann said at a Tea Party Rally this week, "We're on to this gangster government. We need to take out some of these guys." Palin recently tweeted "Don't retreat – RELOAD." And sadly, this anger and venom in being spewed and stoked by people who claim to be followers of Jesus, our Christ, our prince of peace, our advocate for love.

Again, I'm not really sure why there is so much anger. From what I can gather, this anger is supposedly fueled by some vague notion of too many taxes, big government, opposition to the health care reform bill and a loss of freedom. But for the life of me, I can't figure out what freedoms have been lost lately.

It is possible, maybe even likely, that the anger is being ignited because we have a black man in the white house. Maybe it is the economic downturn, which has caused many people to lose their jobs and many people to lose half of their investment income, that is making people mad. Maybe it is because the world is changing fast, and people feel threatened and insecure, and at the heart of all this anger is fear. But who really knows? As one commentator suggested, perhaps all this anger represents something out of a Bob Dylan song written at another moment of intense political and cultural rage: "Cause something is happening and you don't know what it is do you, Mr. Jones?"

The text we have read from Acts 9 describes Paul's famous Damascus Road experience, but did you catch the way that story begins?

*"Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem."*

(Acts 9:1-2)

Saul...still breathing threats and murder...

This text only comes up every three years, but when I read that text, I couldn't shake that line "still breathing threats and murder..." It seems to describe the current ethos of our country at this time and place in our history.

It is an amazing thing (and shall I add a bit disconcerting?) to discover how many prominent biblical figures were guilty of murder. Moses did it. King David did it. And as we read in our Christian scriptures today, the Apostle Paul, whose birth name was Saul, also had a violent past. Shortly before this request to hunt Christians, Paul was a participant in the stoning of an early follower of Jesus, a man named Stephen. Now we see that his religiously motivated violence has reached the point that he wants to take his murderous rage on the road. If there was ever a person who deserved the title "Religious Terrorist" it was the Apostle Paul before his conversion to the Way of Jesus.

I bring up this little piece of ancient history because I want us to think about this age of anger that we are living in. But I also want us to be careful about how we will respond to it, which is why Ananias is my hero in the story of Paul's Damascus Road experience. You recall that on his way to Damascus Saul has a vision of the risen Christ and is struck blind. He is led into the city where he apparently gives up on his mission to arrest and terrorize Christians. In the meantime, however, a man named Ananias has a vision of his own that suggests he should go and visit Saul and help him regain his sight.

Ananias was a man transformed by the risen Jesus. When the risen Jesus calls to him, he did not ask, like Saul, "Who are you?" Instead, to Ananias, the voice is a familiar one, and he responds as one being called by one who is like a friend: "Here I am."

Unlike Saul, Ananias was not struck speechless, sightless and appetite-less. He talked back to Jesus. He was in dialogue with the risen Christ. It was not something new to Ananias. He seemed to practice it. When Saul spoke with risen Jesus, the power of the experience

immobilized him for three days and exposed the darkness of his own being. When Ananias spoke with the risen Jesus, he rose up in courage and went to Saul.

Being in dialogue with Jesus seems to have served Ananias well. While he was at first quite reluctant to carry through with this assignment, he eventually decides to do what Jesus calls him to do, and sets out to find this man named Saul. He is aware of Paul's reputation and is not eager to seek out a man who has come to town to arrest people just like him.

Ananias is very human: another reason why I like him so much. His conversation with Jesus sounds like a conversation I might have: "Jesus, you are asking me to go to Paul? Jesus, you know he helped to stone Stephen. Jesus, you know of the evil things he has been doing. Jesus, you know he has come to town to arrest and terrorize us who follow in your name. Jesus, are you crazy?"

Can you imagine what that walk was like? Can you imagine what Ananias is thinking as he approaches the home where his future will be decided? He will either be accosted and arrested, or he will find a man he is supposed to help. The risk is enormous, but Ananias is convinced this is what his experience of the risen Jesus requires of him. In the end, Ananias goes beyond the instructions given him, and even calls Saul "brother."

And in our world still breathing threats and murder, it seems to me Ananias offers us a model for faithful Christian response. And with so much of this anger and threat being fueled so many intolerant and mean-spirited Christians in our culture it sometimes seems safest to say nothing and keep our heads down. It sometimes feels tempting to either give up on our Christian faith altogether, or turn our faith into a private spiritual exercise. But when good people are silent, injustice and violence advance unchecked. And when healthy and inclusive expressions of faith are kept under wraps, intolerant and vicious expressions hold sway.

So today, I am asking us to consider the Ananias response. As an Easter people can we follow in the footsteps of Ananias and take the risky journey outside of our comfort zone. As an Easter people can we confront the voices of anger with a healing touch and a word of love? As an Easter people can we stop long enough to consider how our own cultural bias is blinding us, causing us to breathe threats and destruction when God, through Jesus, is calling us to breathe life and love?

I like it that Ananias is a fairly unknown and quiet and ordinary player in this biblical story. Have any of you today heard of Ananias before you got here this morning? It was Ananias courageous faithfulness that helped Saul to claim his own faith in Jesus as Paul. In other words, there would have been no Paul without an Ananias. And I am convinced that our little acts of courage and love, done in your own way, with our own unique touch, often unseen and unknown, in a world still breathing threats and murder, can and will offer some transformative and hopeful possibilities.

As Eleanor Roosevelt said: "It's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." Brothers and sisters, let us be the ones who light a candle! Amen.