

**We are Witnesses: Through Our Response To God's Presence**

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Acts 9:1-20; John 1:5

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“The light shines in the darkness

- and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5, NRSV)

- Bill King reminded us of this wonderful passage from the Gospel of John

- on Tuesday afternoon as he spoke at the Convocation at Virginia Tech.

- And those words have stayed with me

- throughout this long and difficult week.

- When I walked up from Luther Memorial to the Drill Field on Tuesday night

- following our prayer service,

- and rounded the corner

- to see thousands of candles burning brightly

- I thought

“The light shines in the darkness

- and the darkness did not over come it” (John 1:5).

- Every time I checked my email this week

- or checked the messages on the phone

- and got another message like this one which said:

“Dear Pastor John and our sisters and brothers at St. Michael,

Our hearts go out to you, your congregation and community at this tragedy this morning.

We will be keeping all of you in our prayers.

God's peace be with you,

Pastor Jon & the people of Lord of Life Lutheran, Bluffton, SC” - -

- every time I got a message like that,

- - and I got a lot of them this week - -

- I thought,

- “The light shines in the darkness

- and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5).

- And when I sat down

- to look again at our reading this morning from Acts, -

- and specifically Ananias’ ministry with Paul,

- I thought,

“The light shines in the darkness

- and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5).

- For in Ananias’ response to God’s presence with him,

- we see how one person

- can bring the light of God’s love

- to another

- and lift the veil of darkness.

- Not that Ananias was necessarily happy

- about what God was calling him to do.

- I mean,

- God comes to him in a vision

- and Ananias responds

- "Here I am, Lord",

- but it doesn't take long for Ananias

- to begin to wonder if he spoke to quickly.

- "Here I am Lord"

- turns into

>Lord, are you really sure this

- is what you want me to do,

- this is where you want me to go?

- Are you sure

- you don't want me to go

- help a sick child somewhere?

- Are you sure

- you want me to go to Saul?

- He's not a very nice person.

- He has been working against you.

- Are you sure,

- I'm understanding you correctly?=-

- But Ananias is understanding God correctly,

- Ananias

- is called to go

- to the very place he doesn't want to be

- and be God's healing presence

- for a fellow believer in need.

- None of us

- wants to be in the situation we are in today.

- None of us

- could have ever imagined

- as we began our day on Monday morning

- that we would find ourselves

- right in the middle of a national tragedy.

- None of us

- could have

- imagined the pain and suffering

- that our community has gone through this week,

- but

- here we are

- and I think the story of Ananias

- reminds us both of the good news of God's presence with us

- and of the opportunity we have

- to be witnesses to the power of God's love in our lives.

- I have told several people this week

- that I have been blessed

- to receive the phone calls and emails

- from all the "Ananias"s who have come to us

- from all around the world.

- Over the last few days,

- we have received numerous emails

- and phone calls to the church

- which have all basically said:

“We love you.

God loves you.

We grieve with you.

We are praying for you.”

- And I know from talking to many of you that my experience is not unique.

- I know that you have heard from old friends,

- and long forgotten acquaintances,

- and people you barely know - -

- all saying

“We love you.

God loves you.

We grieve with you.

We are praying for you.”

- To me,

- each of these emails,

- each of these phone calls

- is a ray of light

- breaking through the darkness and pain

- that we have been experiencing.

- Each of these emails,

- each of these phone calls

- is like Ananias

- going to Saul

- to help lift the darkness he is experiencing

- so that he might see fully and completely

- the light of God's love.

- I realize

- that many of us have been walking around in a bit of a fog,

- perhaps feeling blinded and trapped in darkness

- at points this week,

- but the good news we hear this morning

- is that

- Saul,

- Paul -

- doesn't stay blind,

- doesn't stay in darkness for the rest of his life.

- God sends Ananias

- to Saul

- to bring healing and light and hope.

- Do you remember what Ananias says

“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.”

(Acts 9:17, NRSV)

- God sends Ananias to lift the darkness,
  - to help Saul to see the light of God's love in his life. - - -
- for Saul
  - that meant that the scales fell from his eyes
    - and his sight was restored.
- and for us
  - Ananias
    - may come in the form of an email or a call
      - that helps us to know we are not alone.
  - Ananias
    - may come through a gathering of the community of God's people
      - in worship
        - which helps us to know God's presence in our midst.
  - Ananais
    - may come in the form of a friend who listens to our story
      - allowing us to express some the emotions we are feeling.
  - Ananais
    - may come in the form of one of the many counselors
      - and pastors
        - who are available
          - to talk with the people of this community
      - to try and equip us

- with the tools we need to face our grief and pain.

- God has sent and will be sending

- more Ananias' than we can count

- to help us to know God's love for us

- and to show us the power of God's presence with us.

- And while I know,

- that most of us have no trouble relating this week

- to Saul sitting in darkness, - -

- I also want you to know

- that whether you realize it or not,

- you are one of the Ananias' God is using

- to bring healing and hope to this community.

- I know that right now

- you may wonder how God could really use you

- in a situation like this, - -

- wonder if maybe God doesn't want you to do something else.

- And I know,

- that you may not feel like there is anything you can do,

- given your own pain and grief, - -

and I know

- that you may feel like you don't have the words or tools you need

- to be God's hands and feet in this place,

- at this time, - -

- but you know what

- that's how Ananias felt as well

- and look what God was able to do through him.

- God can and will use you

- as a witness to God's presence in this place.

- God will give you the opportunity.

- God will give you the Spirit's presence with you.

- God will give you the wisdom and the words

- to witness to the light of God's love.

- For you, that may mean that

- you give a reassuring hug when one is in need.

- It may mean you sit and listen when someone needs to talk.

- It may mean you remind someone that God is with us,

- then they feel utterly alone.

- It may mean you sign your name

- on this giant card of love and support

- for the police officers at Virginia Tech

- and the Town of Blacksburg

- to help them to know we are with them

- in these difficult days.

- I can't tell you what your Ananias ministry will look like,

- but I know that each of us

- will have the opportunity

- in the days and weeks to come

- to both hear and to share

- the good news

- that the Light of God's love

- the hope of the resurrection

- the power of God's victory of death

- shines in the darkness

- and that nothing,

- not pain or grief or tragedy, - -

- nothing can extinguish the light of God's love

- in our lives

- and in our community.