

Considering that this is my first sermon to you all, and we are just getting to know each other, it would probably be easy to make this sermon all about me. But this isn't about me. Our time together this morning is about God...and it's about us.

With that in mind, I do want to share a little of my story...my calling...that led me to be with you here today...and I think as I do, you'll be able to see that it isn't just my story, but rather it is God's story...and I just happen to be in it.

So imagine, if you will, for just a moment... a 17-year-old version of the man who stands before you this morning... only younger, just as tall, much thinner, and a much thicker head of hair. In other words, picture in your mind the person that I keep **expecting** to see in the mirror each morning before being reminded of the inevitable march of time.

The scene for this story looks a little like this: we find our young protagonist on a dirt road out in the country, walking back home from a friend's house towards the sprawling metropolis that is my hometown of Sumter, South Carolina. All of the sudden, out of nowhere, shone a blinding light from heaven, knocking me to my knees...
...and then a voice cried out, “Tripp, what are doing?”

Confused, I said, “Lord? Is that you?”

“Who else would it be,” came the reply.

The voice continued, “Get up and go to seminary and become a preacher!”

So without question and with no reservations whatsoever, I got up, went to seminary, and now here I am, a seminary graduate and your new pastor here at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church! **END OF STORY**

OK, OK. That's not *quite* how it happened.

The real story of God calling me into ministry is one that had been over 18 years in the making. There was no blinding light from heaven, no audible voice that I heard, and no instant decision for me to follow God's call.

My journey into ministry was one filled with twists and turns, mostly of me ignoring the gentle nudge of the spirit. Through college, 8 years of funeral directing, and working in every capacity imaginable in my home church...it just wasn't right. It's not something I can easily explain, but it's something I could easily feel for myself. 18 years...18 years to finally say yes.

After hearing this, some of you may be wondering why in the world, out of all the stories in the Bible involving God calling God's people, I would choose one so dramatic and so sudden when that was not the same story as my own call story. I'm sure you'll also be relieved that before becoming your pastor, I was not out there persecuting and inflicting violence on Christians like our good buddy Saul.

So yes, this story is markedly different than my own...and rightfully so most of the attention in this story gets placed on this theatrical scene of God blinding Saul with a bright light.

But it is my sense that the key to this story in Acts lies, not only with Saul, but with Saul's two companions that are so often overlooked when we recall this story. Verses 7 & 8 say, "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 to Damascus."

Not only did Saul's companions hear God calling Saul, but they took him by the hand and led him to his destination. They actively took part in helping him fulfill God's call when he was not capable of doing it himself.

This resonates deeply with me because of the many incredible people in my life that took **me** by the hand and led **me** when I needed it over the past 18 years of indecision.

- When I pushed aside thoughts of going to seminary...I would get a friendly reminder.
- When I didn't have the courage to take the step...I was given grace.
- When I ignored God's nudging...they provided me direction.

Whether those saints know it or not, they played an integral role in my call story...or rather I should say **OUR** call story.

Just as Saul could not have fulfilled God's calling on his own...without his companions, the same could be said for me concerning the community of those around me.

Saul's story, as we know though, doesn't end once they reach Damascus. We are then introduced to a new character, who received his own call from God. The rest of the story is as follows from verses 10-19 of Acts, chapter 9.

"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.”

So now we see Ananias, a disciple in Damascus, being called by God to lay hands on Saul, of whom Ananias is well aware, and, is, for good reason, very hesitant to help. Even knowing Saul’s past crimes, Ananias is faithful, goes to the house where Saul is staying, and lays hands on him as the Lord called him to do. Immediately, scales were dropped from Saul’s eyes and he could see again. And Saul, as we know, becomes Paul and goes on to become one of the most crucial voices of our Christian faith.

In these twenty verses, which many Bibles like to label as “Saul’s Conversion,” we find that Saul’s story is not just his story. It’s the story of several people, all being faithful to God’s calling.

For Saul’s conversion to be complete, he needed several things.

1. He needed God's call...
2. He needed his companions to lead him to Damascus when he couldn't get there on his own....
3. He needed God to call Ananias...and needed Ananias to faithfully respond to God's call so he could regain his sight.

Their stories were interwoven together. They had been called individually...and yet, more importantly, they had been called together. Without each other, the story would be incomplete.

I think the same holds true for us today. Each one of us here this morning has been called by God, that I have no doubt. The beauty of it is that while each of us is trying to work through God’s call for us individually, God is working on something bigger...something that involves all of our stories, yours and mine, being woven together in a larger story: one of a community who has the courage to follow God’s call to be faithful disciples in the world.

I was blessed a few years ago to spend two weeks visiting South Korea as a part of my studies at Columbia Theological Seminary. A group of seven students and two professors made the trip, and we were exposed to the most faithful people you could ever imagine. We met with many local faith leaders, who demonstrated unparalleled courage and convictions in their callings.

One of those pastors was Rev. Yoo, who started the International Mongolia School for poor children of Mongolian migrant workers in Seoul. He worked tirelessly to build this school so that every child that walked through the door would be shown love and mercy and compassion and receive a proper education...all for free. As we listened to his story, he told us that in the middle of construction of the school, his overexertion

and stress caused him to lose his sight. He quickly jumped in before we had a chance to react and to express our sympathy, and he said, “No, no, no. I have no regrets. No regrets at all. I would lose my sight all over again to make sure these children are taken care of and loved.”

This man’s love and calling to help migrant children is holy work. He is taking care of “the least of these” because of a call from God...and by doing so, he, like Saul’s companions, has led me by the hand towards an more open heart for service.

Rev. Yoo went on to say, “I am convinced there are mysteries here in this school, and mysteries in each one of these children...hidden for the time being, just waiting to be discovered. Mysteries that could even lead to the reunification of Korea, who knows?”

Rev. Yoo has high hopes for the children in his care...the children who have been called by God...the children who he leads by the hand. PAUSE

Even as this church has continued to be faithful to God’s calling, your search for a new pastor and my being here is a sign that God is still calling St. Andrew and still calling me.

While a new person in the pulpit can cause some uneasiness and possibly some fear of the unknown ahead of you, the exciting part is this: there are mysteries hidden here, within these walls and in these pews and in your hearts, just waiting to be discovered.

So the challenge for each one of us is to continue looking for ways that God is calling us. I suspect that when we do so, we’ll begin to see that each of our individual calls are a part of something bigger...interwoven...to form a congregation of believers ready to serve this community...together.

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