

Unraveled: Discovering a New Path
Acts 9: 1-20
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Satowan island is smack dab in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Or just about. It was to be my placement for a 27 month service in the US Peace Corps, where I was to teach high schoolers English and support various other community development activities on the island. And apart from the constant awareness that I was a 24 hour boat ride away from the nearest airport or hospital, Satowan was truly paradise: coconut and breadfruit trees ringed the island, which was situated on a sandy atoll with a shallow beach on one side and a reef of blues and greens that went out a couple hundred yards, where the waves would crash, creating a distant but gentle sound of wake that I can still hear perfectly when I close my eyes. Sitting on that beach after snorkeling in the warm, crystal-clear water and feeling that breeze on my skin: I still get goosebumps thinking back at how other-worldly it felt to be there.

But life, even in paradise, is never what it seems. You see, I had joined the Peace Corps as a stepping stone on a path of professional development that I hoped would, one day, make me an ambassador in the State Department. Ever since I had gone on Study Abroad as a rising junior at Michigan State, I had a pretty firm idea of the foreign service career I would achieve and the road I needed to travel down to get there. I had a pretty firm set of expectations on the experiences and successes I needed to get out of my time as a Peace Corps Volunteer. So while my Peace Corps colleagues were more interested in learning idioms and swear words so they could better fit in with their friends, I was on a different track, with the terms and phrases that would give me a boost ingratiating myself with the community associations that I saw as my ticket to getting big development projects started on the island. And while my friends would spend their free time going spear fishing and hunting for coconut crabs in the marshy tidal pools, I'd travel the road back to my hut, take out a manual, and prepare workplans for the ambitious projects I was sure the island leaders both needed and would appreciate. It took about 3 months of this personal rigidity for me to realize that I was unraveling. I was miserable. I had no friends, my host family were virtually strangers to me, and I was constantly failing to accomplish the work I was setting out to do. I was traveling on a road to nowhere. As I considered terminating service early and heading home, I found myself at the end of my road.

Saul hits the end of his road in this morning's lesson. He, too, had had a precocious start to life and found great success in his religious zeal to be perfectly faithful to God. Unfortunately for Saul, and for the many women and men who were followers of the Jesus Way who had the unpleasant experience of being killed at his or his henchmen's hands, that zealotry was not really in service of God or any higher power. Saul's obsession with the law and imposing it on others was based in an idolatry of self, the psychology of which we will never know, but we can probably, if we're being honest, see in ourselves. I certainly can.

When I look back on myself, I have a lot of compassion for that me, for that 'Alex Plum.' Like Saul, I know he was seriously misguided about what the Peace Corps is or was or was to be for him. But I also know how desperately he wanted to fit in and to find friends and to make meaningful relationships with folks out there. He, or I, was just going about it completely wrong. I wonder if Saul's heart was similarly good just desperately clouded and going about things in all the wrong ways.

Too often when we read the story of Saul's unraveling on the Damascus Road, we gloss over specific elements of the story that God uses to accomplish God's work through Saul and, even today, through the church. Too often we stay at a high level, focusing only on the mystery of the miraculous encounter when Christ confronts him, pleading with him: Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? We take joy, even momentarily, when Saul gets his just desserts for all the evil he had done, and then we take even more profound joy when, seeing ourselves reflected back in Saul's evil, see the grace that God has in store for him – in store for someone even as murderous and fundamentalist and Pharisaically obsessed with being right as Saul. Because if we're being honest, at least if I'm being honest, I can get just as murderous and fundamentalist and Pharisaically obsessed with my version of justice and rightness. And to know if God could still use and love Saul in spite of all of his evils, maybe God could use and love me.

When we read this story, we often gloss over Ananias. Because when we stay at that higher level and only focus on Saul's sinful "before" and converted "after," we miss all the work that Ananias put into Saul's "during" – that part of the story where he's sitting blind and hungry in the earth-shattering reality that his God has just called him out by name for persecuting him – for persecuting the very God that Saul had only ever wanted to serve. It's in the during and the doing – the walking and the winding – that God gets to work unraveling Saul's life and helping him to discover a new path. Ananias is who responds to God's invitation to go and serve, to engage and heal. Without Ananias, there is no conversion. Without Ananias, there is no Paul. Without Ananias, there may not even be a Christian church today. Luckily for Saul and really for all of us, there was Ananias.

Luckily for me, there was Imauo. Imauo Mathew was the program director for Peace Corps in my region of Micronesia, the country of my service. A Chuukese man whose first day on the job was also my first day in the country, Imauo and I sort of came up together in our respective roles. During pre-service training, as I'd be learning Chuukese in one room with my tutor, Imauo would be in the other strengthening his English so he could be the resource person to help all the Peace Corps Volunteers in our region be successful. Imauo's work was critical to the functioning of Peace Corps: he was our local administrator. Yes, he took care of the paperwork and the invoices so we could stay focused on the immersive parts of our job but he did so much more. He taught us the cultural nuances we needed to know to avoid embarrassment. And when we failed to listen and created a "cross-cultural challenge," there would be Imauo, with his great smile, using the perfect mix of charm and deference to smooth over inadvertent insults, massage delicate conversations, work out previously unseen solutions, and leave everyone better off than how he found us. Imauo made us Peace Corps Volunteers. I think if you ask most Peace Corps Volunteers, and certainly any Volunteer who has positive things to

say about their experience, they will point to the person who was their Imauo and say: without him, or without her, I would not have had the experience I did. For me I can say, without Imauo, my Peace Corps experience would have stopped on Satowan. Without Imauo, I wouldn't have re-connected with myself and found a more fulfilling calling and purpose as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Without Imauo, I would not be the Alex I am today.

Now none of you, before I mentioned him, knew Imauo. You knew me.

And frankly, very few, if any of us, before the lesson this morning, knew Ananias. You knew Saul.

But if all we ever know are the befores and afters, the struggles and the conversions, and if all we ever celebrate are the people that we become, the Alex-as-deacon-preaching-here-this-morning, and Saul-who-became-Paul-and-globalized-the-Christ-story, if that's all we spend our time on, we're missing the actual story. Because a story that only has a beginning and an end is a story without a point. These stories need a plot: an in-between the unraveling, on the one end, and the new path we find ourselves walking, at the other end. Imauo and Ananias enliven the story of God's salvation because they become the plot of how God intervenes in the world to accomplish God's mission. They take on the hands and feet of Christ, becoming Jesus' instruments, filled with the Holy Spirit, to offer the deeply imperfect Alexes and Sauls of this world an opportunity to reset and refocus. Imauos and Ananias make God's saving story deeply personal and relational. And we have to appreciate their stories to understand the plot of God's larger story to humanity – both in general, and in today's current moment, what God is saying to the church – and to each of us individually – right now.

In Ananias, we see both what faithful discipleship looks like and what it can do. I count at least four specific elements that define the story's plot, that is, how Ananias fill in the blanks between Saul's unraveling and his discovery of the new path. The first element is **openness**. While we don't know much about him, we do know that he was a disciple in Damascus who, at least in those times, was very likely the leader of a small house church. Remember the larger context, which is one of extreme persecution by folks like Saul against the fledgling followers of Jesus – folks who were ethnically and religiously still Jewish but who were trying to model their faith after the teachings of that Jesus of Nazareth, whose death and resurrection had, in turn, shaken and then confirmed their faith and hope. So we can assume Ananias is a leader of a small community committed to sharing their wealth and resources in common, of meeting regularly to study and pray and build one another up, of leading efforts to enrich the world outside their little enclave by tending to the poor and the orphan and the widow. So it shouldn't surprise us that Ananias, probably just like any of the members of that community, would respond in openness when Christ, appearing to him in a vision, simply called him by name: "here I am." Unlike Samuel who mistook the Lord's voice for Eli's many generations beforehand, Ananias knew simply to say "here I am Lord" and invite God's direction.

The second element in this story's plot is Ananias's honest **engagement** with God. Just like Jacob, who wrestled with the angel of the Lord in Genesis 32 and came out, not only alive, but

blessed with the given name 'Israel,' so too does Ananias argue with God. After hearing Christ's instruction to go and find Saul of Tarsus, scripture says that Ananias protested. "I've got it on good authority that as soon as I enter that house, Lord, he's going to arrest me or worse, kill me, like he did to so many of my friends in Jerusalem." Ananias doesn't push back because he doesn't trust God, he pushes back because he is faithful. His hesitation isn't to run, it's to understand better what God is up to in this moment. And Christ tells him in verse 15: "Saul is the instrument I have chosen to bring my Name to Gentiles, to rulers, and to the people of Israel."

With this, Ananias displays the plot's third element, which is **acceptance** or, stated another way, faithful obedience. The scripture says, "with that, Ananias left." Not that he continued to argue or dither. Not that he convened his small worshipping community to group-think the best strategy. Nope, he just went. Like so often in the Gospels when Christ invited folks who he encountered while passing through villages and towns, the invitation is to "come and follow-me." Responding to this invitation does not require intense reflection, devotion, preparation, or study. It requires faithful acceptance – mature and demonstrated confidence that the same God who, in Matthew 26, refused Jesus's nighttime plea in the garden to take the cup of suffering he was soon to taste, would be the one in a few days' time would resurrect Christ's body and redeem the suffering and stress that had brought his body to sweat beads of blood.

These three elements together are great and, in most situations, would be enough: a spirit of openness and humble willingness to respond; a critical engagement focused on clarifying values and understanding another's perspective; and finally acceptance, or a willingness to respond in kind, faithfully obedient to a trusted other's direction and guidance. But what sets this story apart is the fourth element of Ananias's plot: **grace-giving**. Ananias accepted the work that Christ has given him to do: to go and find Saul and lay hands on him so that he would recover his sight. Ananias could have simply done just that much and left, but he did so much more. From the first moment he arrived, Ananias called him brother. He signaled to this man, until this moment an evil fanatic who represented an existential threat both to Ananias personally and his church, that they were family – that they were colleagues – that they were both children of God. What's more, he phrases his presence there not as a task he undertook unwillingly, but as an invitation to "help you recover your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit? That wasn't part of Christ's directions. He just had to help him see. But Ananias knew that sight is so much more than the physical ability to perceive sensation through the eyes. Inasmuch as Ananias had seen Christ through his own heart when Christ came in that vision, so too did Ananias realize that Saul needed to see Christ through his own heart, and that work can only happen through the Holy Spirit's indwelling inside him. Scripture tells us that after he had laid hands and spoken those words, "something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he regained his sight. He got up and was baptized, and his strength returned."

This is the during. This is the plot. Beyond just accepting the task at hand, Ananias went a step further and extended grace and forgiveness to Saul who, in any other situation, would not have deserved an ounce of it. The acceptance of the task facilitated Saul's physical healing, but it was Ananias's act of grace-giving that facilitated Saul's spiritual healing: being addressed and

treated as a brother, as a friend, as a sibling in Christ, contextualized the relational identity of being a follower of Jesus. Ananias couldn't offer the Holy Spirit without first offering his friendship. He couldn't facilitate recovering of spiritual sight – a sight that could recognize Jesus – without first letting Saul see in Ananias one that he could trust and love. This level of vulnerability is at the heart of the Christian witness to extend grace, forgiveness, and love in all that we do.

Let me say that again: This level of vulnerability is at the heart of the Christian witness to extend grace, forgiveness, and love in all that we do.

The plot of the story of going from unraveled to discovering a new path runs right through Ananias, and it doesn't happen without openness, engagement, acceptance, and grace.

The plot of my own story of going from unraveled to discovering a new path ran right through Imauo. I still remember when got off the boat on Satowan after a rainy 24 hours on very choppy seas. I was resigned to the shame that I had to tell this man I wanted to go home. Despite being exhausted, starving, and drenched, Imauo lit up and grinned that huge smile, and before I could even say a word, gave me a big hug, and said, "it's going to be alright." And it was. Imauo found me the perfect host family on a new island, and in the days he stayed out there, helping me move my things, we talked and he helped me reconnect with the sense of curiosity and openness that had motivated me to pursue Peace Corps in the first place. He encouraged me to engage with my new host family and friends, to risk embarrassing myself when I practiced Chuukese, and to accept myself and my host family simply as we were. Imauo modeled grace giving by simply being himself and being my friend.

I received word on Wednesday that Imauo had just died of complications from diabetes. When he left Moch Island after our time together all those years ago, he gave me another hug and that was it: I was on my new path, off to discovering all that awaited with this new perspective and new appreciation for grace. Kind of like Ananias, who we don't hear much from after his encounter with Saul. These plot-writers of our stories, too often unsung, too often overlooked, are the ones who step in when we've completely unraveled. Yet, by God's grace and by virtue of their own loving kindness, they offer an inflection moment and give us a chance to discover a new path.

As you go this week, I offer you the invitation to reflect, in your own life: who are the plot writers of your stories? And whose plot might you contribute to? To whom can you give thanks to God, and for whom can you be Jesus' hands and feet? For the journey from unraveled to discovering that new path, friends, goes through us. Amen.