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Acts 9:1-21, edited, English Standard Version.

9 Saul, breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.³ Now as he approached Damascus, a light from heaven shone around him.⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ The Lord said to Ananias in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."¹¹ And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying,¹² 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."¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem."¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel."¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized.

²⁰ And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."²¹ And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name?"

1 Chronicles 16:8-11, New International Version.

⁸ Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name;

make known among the nations what he has done.

⁹ *Sing to him, sing praise to him;
tell of all his wonderful acts.*

¹⁰ *Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.*

¹¹ *Look to the LORD and his strength;
seek his face always.*

The voice of God.

Most of us would love to have God reach out to us, to literally touch us, to speak to us in an audible voice. We'd like to have some enormous, obvious event happen – like the one that happened to Paul – so that our doubts could be put to rest once and for all. Of course, there's always the risk that we or others will think that we are mentally ill, that we've just had a psychotic episode - but still, wouldn't it be incredible if something like that happened to each and every one of us?

Our first passage today is an extremely well-known scene from Acts, the Book that describes the Apostles and Paul carrying on after Jesus has left the Earth. They are moving outward, without bringing anything with them, no staff, no clothing or money or food, spreading throughout the Jewish and Gentile world. Our passage describes the beginning of the story of Paul, who under the name Saul, has persecuted Christians, hunting them down and bringing them back to “justice”, to be imprisoned and/or executed. In our scene today, Paul is on the road to

Damascus, a large trading city at the foot of the mountains, and one with a significant Jewish population, when hears the voice of God. He is struck blind. He realizes that what he has been doing is evil. Instantly, he converts and becomes a follower of Jesus. He has such a notorious reputation that God has to talk to another believer, named, Ananias, convincing him to trust Paul. As Paul continues on to preach the word, people are amazed at his magnificent transformation.

Our first passage says: *Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."* Paul was just doing his thing when this happened. He wasn't thinking about God. Then, out of nowhere, Jesus, who has been crucified and resurrected, wants to know why Paul has been going after his followers. Then Jesus gives him instruction, tells him precisely what to do next. Paul will be led by the nose. This is clearly a great thing for Paul; he has the kind of guidance from God that we would all love to have.

Raise your hand if you have had God shout at you while you were driving down Colorado 14 on your way to Pierce, and had him strike you blind, and then tell you exactly how to proceed in life. Huh, not many of you? How odd.

Most of you are aware that I have had corneal transplants. The cornea is the clear outer surface of the eye and it holds the thick, clear ocular fluid inside the eye. The cornea also pre-focuses light for the eye, and so if the cornea isn't structurally sound, if it's badly misshapen, like mine were, the cornea isn't able to pre-focus light for the lens, and so the lens cannot do its job. As a result, you don't see. No one knew what was going on back then, but my vision started to degrade when I was about fourteen. In 2008, I had one eye fixed, but my other eye was problematic; it took four transplant surgeries to get my vision back in my right eye. In one way, this experience was a fantastic gift for me. I can't think of any other single, focused event in my life that has had this much of an impact on me. But why did getting my corneas replaced with donor corneas cause me to renew my faith? It led me to connect with God, to look inside myself and judge the depth of my faith. Of course, there have been other things that have turned my eyes back to God, but getting my vision restored was certainly the most dramatic - and it fundamentally impacted my life.

Let's continue with this story of Paul. Later in Acts, Paul is defending himself in a temple in Jerusalem. He's in the beginning stages of being on trial for his life for spreading the word of Jesus Christ. At one point, Paul says: ¹⁷ *"After I returned to Jerusalem, I was praying in the Temple and fell into a trance. ¹⁸ I saw a vision of*

Jesus saying to me, 'Hurry! Leave Jerusalem, for the people here won't accept your testimony about me.' This is one of several instances where the Book of Acts links prayer and visions. Notice that he is praying in the Temple when he falls into a trance. Then Jesus appears before him and warns him to leave Jerusalem. Importantly, Paul would never have heard the voice of Jesus if he hadn't already been focused on God. This is different from the event on the road to Damascus; Paul, in this situation, had to have been reaching out for God in order to hear God.

Importantly, prayer is how we reach out to God. We don't have to wait for God to come after us. We can pursue God. If we do, God will turn and listen.

Let's look at our second passage for today. It is from First Chronicles. Chronicles means "history of the day", and it was written after the return of the Israelites from forced exile in Babylon. The author does not identify himself. The main part of Chronicles begins with the reign of the great King David, around 1000 B.C. Chronicles has as a major theme the belief that God will act graciously to those who reach out to him. It tells its readers to read the Torah, the Jewish Bible. In our passage, David is speaking. This passage comes during a time when the Arc is being brought triumphantly into Jerusalem. The Arc was an ornately decorated box containing the tablets of the ten commandments. That is why it was called the Arc of the Covenant, because it contained the agreement God laid out for Moses and

his people. In our passage, David is dressed in a robe of fine linen, something that was very valuable back then. The Arc is brought into a tent that has been turned into a shrine under the direction of David. David, who is attributed with being the author of the Israelites' liturgy, their ceremonies surrounding the worshipping of God, is giving instruction on how to properly worship God. David says this:

*⁸ Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name;
make known among the nations what he has done.*

*⁹ Sing to him, sing praise to him;
tell of all his wonderful acts.*

*¹⁰ Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.*

*¹¹ Look to the LORD and his strength;
seek his face always.*

Notice that David ends by saying that we should look toward the Lord and always seek the Lord's face. He's saying that we should pray all the time. Jesus himself is constantly portrayed as praying in the four Gospels.

The point is that we can't wait for God to reach down out of the clouds and shout at us. We also can't depend on God to grab our attention in more subtle ways. I was blessed, in that I had something dramatic happen to me; it got my attention and caused me to turn to God. Getting my vision back made me realize how much my God loves me. I suddenly knew that I had been given so many astonishing gifts in life, not just my vision, but my wife and my children and my

career and my overall health and all the joyous things I had been allowed to do. More importantly, I heard God like I had not heard him since I was a young boy. We lose our innocence as we grow older, and as a result, we lose our faith in God - and so we have to work to regain it.

We do this with prayer, because that is how we can initiate a conversation with God. We don't wait on God to call us. We pick up the phone and punch *his* number. That's what I'd like to ask you to do. Pray. Don't wait for God to make you go blind on the road to Damascus. Pray. Deliver yourself to God.

You know, Chronicles makes it clear that we shouldn't just pray alone and silently. We should pray out loud and together. So, how about if we end this sermon by praying together? Please pray with me.

God, we are believers.

We live busy lives with lots of distractions. It is hard for us to slow down and stop what we are doing – and turn our faces toward you.

But right now, we are pausing. We are in your house of worship, in this beautiful sanctuary that inspires all of us. We are here, supporting each other. Together, we reach out to you.

We're not here to ask you for anything earthly. We don't need you to deliver candy or a day off from work or new cars. What we ask is that you be our vision,

our breath, the beating of our hearts. When we encounter anger or cruelty or unfairness in the world, we ask that through us, you bring love, compassion, and forgiveness to those who mistreat others.

May we be free of lies, of addiction, of hopelessness. Please bring us serenity and joy. Give us hope in our fellow humans and in a life in the kingdom of God right here on Earth, and in an eternal life with you. Let us always reflect your love and your concern for all of your children.

But we are here to do more than ask. We are also here to listen to you. Our ears, our eyes, our hearts are open. We know that you will touch us, but we also know that you will not strike us blind and then tell us exactly what to do. Please give us the patience and humility needed to hear your voice. Let us listen always, and not just right now, in this moment. Let us develop a deep intuitive sense of your wishes, so that even when we are not consciously aware of it, we are being guided by you.

Further, God, let us do more than simply ask things of you; let us do more than listen for your will. Let us develop a mature, constant, ever-present connection with you. Let our relationship with you become a major focus of our lives. Keep your hand on our shoulders and guide us toward a path where we walk side-by-side with you every minute of every day.

Finally, thank you for all that you have given us, for the fresh air and clean water and bountiful food that we enjoy. Thank you for our clothing and our homes. Thank you for family and friends and for those around us right now who help us as we strive to live in your nonstop presence.

May all people live with justice, security, joy, and love. May all people everywhere be treated equally, as we are all equal in your eyes. And most importantly, may we bring peace and safety to all those around us.

Amen.