

The Spirit in Acts
(Acts 9:1-19)

5/4/25
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An Ominous Story?

With Easter this year the first readings, switch temporarily from the Hebrew Scriptures to the Book of Acts. This is partly to pair our experience of the Risen Christ with the story of the growth and spread of the early church, which is what the Book of Acts is about. The Book of Acts is all about the presence of the Risen Christ at work in our lives, in the form of the Holy Spirit.

However, it does seem curious that, on only the third Sunday of Easter, our attention should be directed to one of the most uncertain and anxious stories in that book. It is the story of Saul's conversion into the Apostle Paul. And it begins with Saul "breathing threats and murder against the disciples" of Jesus.

But, as ominous and terrifying a story as it is first appears, it is really a story about the victory of the Holy Spirit and life over death, which is what Easter is all about. Because God turns Saul, this fire-breathing, death dealing man and his very nervous potential victim Ananias from foes into faithful friends. That is the power of Christ

alive in the world. It is the power of salvation. And it is something to celebrate.

Acts of the Spirit

One of the most important things to know about the Book of Acts, is that it is not exactly about the Acts of the Apostles, as it is traditionally named. It is really a book about the Apostles being acted upon; acted upon by the Holy Spirit. Everything that happens starts with a push from the Risen Christ who is present to the early church as the Holy Spirit. The “apostles,” (the word apostle means “messenger” in Greek) are only the messengers, carrying out what the Holy Spirit has instructed them to do.

You could say that they are God’s “go-fers.” They don’t make up their own messages to deliver. The Holy Spirit comes to whoever it chooses; through dreams, in worship, while riding on horseback, wherever. And the people who are acted on carry out the Spirit’s directions.

This is in keeping with the Biblical faith from its beginnings. God’s people are not finally accountable to what this person thinks or that person dictates. Our final accountability is to the God who speaks

truth to our hearts and consciences through the Holy Spirit. Our accountability is to the God who comes to us over and over again in situations of need and says “Feed my sheep!” “Feed them with food and nourish them with love.”

The Story

The story of Saul’s conversion and Ananias coming to his aid is a dramatic story and the Holy Spirit is not gentle in getting Saul’s attention. It knocks him off his horse and blinds him. And the voice of Jesus comes to him and says, “Why are you persecuting me?”

This is pretty rough treatment and it probably needs to be, because Saul is a religious zealot, unbudgeable in his convictions and he is on a mission to purify his faith by exterminating this new sect of believers in Christ, who are distorting it.

But the Holy Spirit has no problem swatting him off his “high horse” and suddenly, this man who was so certain in his convictions that he was willing to have people put to death to accomplish them, is totally lost and helpless.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, the Spirit comes to a believer named Ananias, and tells him that Saul has been given a vision that he, Ananias will come lay hands on him, so that his sight can be restored. You can imagine the fear and trepidation that must have been Ananias's first response. "You want me to go and lay hands on someone who has literally overseen the stoning of Christians, like me? You had better be right, because otherwise, he will probably kill me.!"

But the power of the Holy Spirit is able to overcome Ananias fears and he does as he has been instructed. And when the two meet, the scales fall from Saul's eyes and he sees. And from that moment he is changed. And the result was a great step forward for the small community that would one day be the world's largest religion.

An Improbable Result

One of the things the story shows us is the Holy Spirit's capacity to transform people and bring them together in ways that are difficult to imagine; people from opposing ends of a spectrum.

Saul, a Roman Citizen and educated Jew, had the establishment behind him and the power and "go-ahead" to use force to

accomplish his goals. He saw the new sect of Christians as nothing but trouble and little better than vermin to be stamped out. And yet the Holy Spirit transforms him into a champion for the very people he despises.

Ananias, on the other hand, is simply a disciple of Jesus. He has a Greek name, so he is not a Jew; another thing that Saul would have had a problem with. But we know nothing else about him, which probably means there was nothing anyone would have considered exceptional enough to mention. He is from the anonymous world of ordinary people that made up the earliest converts to Jesus. And yet, his courage plays a key role in the story. And the result is a new beginning that is so improbable that only the Holy Spirit could have accomplished it.

A Historic Moment

Right now , our brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church are facing an important decision, where so much about the future is at stake. And as the cardinals gather for the conclave at which they will choose the next pope, all of them will be very conscious of the role of the Holy Spirit in the early church, that is described in Acts.

Each cardinal is holding his tongue in order not to predetermine the outcome. They have considered the options and have their own opinions. But they know that they must wait for the Holy Spirit to speak to them in the conclave and that the Holy Spirit should decide. No-one can be certain which way the Spirit will blow, but all must have faith that, if they do their best to respond obediently to it, then the right person will be chosen.

We Share this Moment

I think that it is a fascinating moment, not just because of the high stakes or how it helps us understand the Catholic Church, but because, our church is a branch of the same religion. We share the same scriptures and many of the same fundamental commitments. And our membership has its own diversity, just as the Catholic Church is diverse.

It is also an instructive moment for us, because this church will be forming a search committee, to go into a “conclave” of its own; not so hierarchical, but sharing many of the same fundamental commitments. We too are looking for a future shaped by the movement of the Holy Spirit; a Spirit that has the power to unite a

diversity of views and forces into a new and unforeseen unity, as is testified to in the coming together of Saul and Ananias.

I wouldn't go as far as to say that we are a mini-Vatican here. But I do think it is worth witnessing to what is happening there because, as we pray for success for our catholic brothers and sisters, the Holy Spirit may also speak to us in ways that will help you make the decisions you need to make.

It is a unique situation where a drama on a global scale can inform a local drama that will unfold here. Volunteering to be part of a search process can be an exciting process, in that it gives us a deeper understanding of what it means to be church; to make bold decisions like Ananias and to have our eyes opened to new ways of seeing like the Apostle Paul, all at the prompting of the Holy Spirit and for the good of the Congregation and the larger community.

Do you feel the prompting of the Holy Spirit in this moment to offer yourself as someone who can help with the search process. Is there something inside you telling you that you can and should do this? If so, then present yourself to Leslie Brown or to _____.

