

## Conversations with God

### Sermon for the 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity

Sermon Text: Acts 9:1-20



*But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" <sup>5</sup> And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And He said, "I am*

*Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." <sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. <sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." <sup>11</sup> 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, <sup>12</sup> 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." <sup>13</sup> But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." <sup>17</sup> 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." <sup>18</sup> And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; <sup>19</sup> and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. <sup>20</sup> And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."*

Conversations with God. Can you imagine it? I mean talking so directly and close to touch as if the Almighty were one of us? Haven't you always wished for something like that too? A conversation with God without any effort and without having to recite religious sayings from memory? It is surely a dream of us all to do something like that! Then everything would at once be clear. Something similar happened with the Apostle Paul. A bright light came upon him. It happened when he was on the way to kill even more Christians. But when that happened, Paul was not completely enlightened at first. He wasn't suddenly a know-it-all! Quite the opposite. Before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, he thought he knew everything about God. Paul was a student of the famous Rabbi Gamaliel. He had, so to speak, the best theological education that one could have wished for at that time. If there was someone who knew everything about God, then it was Saul on the way to Damascus. All of that was turned upside down after he met Jesus on that road to Damascus. Now, Paul knew nothing at all. The light was even taken away from his eyes and he fell to the ground. Completely thrown off track, he hobbled on toward Damascus with his friends, disoriented and clueless as to how things would now continue. He probably still had the letter in his bag that gave him permission from the highest authority to arrest and take Christians away to prison. Would he now be able to fulfill this assignment? After all, that was his whole life's mission up to now! How many would he disappoint if he stopped doing that? Questions upon questions occupied his mind. Wouldn't he have to take a completely different path? "I am..." Jesus said when Paul asked Him about Himself. "I am..." can also be called God's great self-designation. The "I am..." wording was already God's way of making Himself known to people in the Old Testament. As a scholar, Paul knew this all too well. But what he didn't know until now, was

that the great God he met at the feet of Gamaliel, was also Jesus...Jesus, whom he had loved to persecute! When Paul was conversing with Jesus, God came before him and at that moment, his whole life was turned upside down. It is not at all about Paul being made great. And certainly not that we may marvel at his miraculous conversion. No, when God enters a person's life, everything that holds meaning to a person is turned upside down. It can even mean that we must realize that our ways are contrary to God's ways! Paul experienced something like this on the way to Damascus. The appearance and conversation were convincing enough for him. He now knew Who he was dealing with when it came to Jesus. I can't even imagine how much sadness and disappointment he had looking back on his life since Jesus appeared to him. I don't think that we would ever wish for such a conversation with God like the one Paul had. Who likes to fall flat on their face and have to change the path they were previously on to go in a completely new direction? And yet, it is precisely in human failure and in the total powerlessness of a person that the greatest moment of God's speaking is to be found. So it was with Paul and so it still is today. Such moments are decisive moments that don't come without pain. It would have certainly been a possibility for Paul to just forget about the appearance on the road to Damascus. He still had the letter from Jerusalem. He could also just continue on as before. God would not resist him. And yet, Paul knew that he couldn't do all of that anymore. He would much rather, of his own free will, follow the One called Jesus! Because now Paul knew that the way to God was through this Jesus! Those who have encountered God in this manner can no longer stand still or continue on the path they have been walking. Paul, breathing threats and murder, left for Damascus with his deadly letters. And instead of violence and killing, he would now become a messenger of peace and an apostle. A completely different Saul would arrive in Damascus than the one who left Jerusalem breathing threats and murder. But one thing remained the same. Saul would still seek out the Church. But no longer as a persecutor, but as a brother in Christ! Because Jesus, who comes before Paul on the road, had not only identified Himself directly with God, but also with the Church! When Paul had persecuted the Church, he persecuted Christ. And whoever goes to church will find none other than this Jesus Himself there. This realization is very important for us, no matter what we may think about the Church and its many human faults. Jesus Himself holds onto the Church and is in this very Church. If I think that I can convert myself and then very privately and through spiritual exercises, make myself into a good Christian, I am very wrong. Because Jesus is not to be discovered privately. He belongs to the Church. And we will always find Jesus where the Church is. That's why, in Paul's case, the road to Damascus led first to the Church. As Christians and members of the Church, we should always keep this in mind – Christ works through us! By proclaiming the Gospel, helping people in their time of need, and by eating and drinking the Body and Blood of Christ, Christ is fully present.

We can certainly learn even more. It was the same when Ananias, the pious Christian, was supposed to go to Paul aka Saul. A great deal was already expected of Ananias. He should simply go to the famous Christian murderer Paul? I can understand his displeasure very well. So he actually asks the living God whether He had not perhaps miscalculated a little: No, God did not miscalculate. Not when He spoke with Paul nor when He spoke with Ananias. He wanted it to happen exactly as it did, as people could not have imagined. In our sermon text for today, we find two people who talk to God from very different experiences and likewise need to rethink things for very different reasons... Paul thought he understood everything about God before the encounter on the road to Damascus and yet had to ask, puzzled: "Who are You, Lord?" Ananias also had his experience with God. He was a Christian and a priest. And yet he also had fundamentally miscalculated. He actually didn't think it possible that God could change a person. Instead of trusting God, he initially persisted in his prejudices about Saul. That is one experience that we unfortunately know all too well among brothers and sisters in Christ. Sometimes we Christians stand in the way of the Almighty God with our many questions. Even among brothers and sisters in Christ there are formidable prejudices that we build up between us like cement walls. We think that our judgment of a person is greater than God's judgment. God doesn't allow Saul to remain blind forever. That's why He really wants the encounter between Ananias and Paul to happen. God Himself was not content for Paul to remain a private Christian. He wanted Paul to be among the brothers and sisters in Christ. He wanted Paul to become a member of the Church and remain in the Church. And God would not be content with Ananias' prejudice either. God had to talk Ananias through it again so that he would truly understand. Can it be that God also has to talk to us Christians and encourage us to see people from the outside with different eyes? Can it be that God sends people to us who we think can't be Christians? And doesn't God want to call these very people who we think are so far removed from faith? Today, many Muslims live among us. Meanwhile, we also keep hearing reports of Muslims being

violent towards Christians or of terrible things happening among us that we can't stop. I see that very many people are scared. Even Christians are afraid and that's why they don't want to proclaim the Gospel anymore. Christians are also too quick to accept the excuse that strict Muslims won't become Christians at all or can't become Christians. We shouldn't take this too lightly. Perhaps God sends us to the Muslims in Europe just as He sent Ananias to Paul. And what would have happened if Ananias hadn't let himself be persuaded by God? What would have happened if he had relied on his own human understanding instead of God? If we are truly serious about God sending us into all the world to proclaim the Gospel to all people, then we must not leave anyone out. Of course, this requires a certain amount of courage. God didn't promise Ananias that he would get away without injury. Ananias had no idea what would happen to Saul. He also had no guarantee regarding his own personal safety. Even Paul himself, who followed Jesus' call, was not spared suffering and persecution at every turn. And yet he still went. It also takes courage to accept Saul, who did so much evil, as a Christian. "Brother Saul" is Ananias' greeting the first time he saw him. Ananias doesn't say that as flattery. No, behind these words is the living God Himself, Who had informed Ananias about the new Paul. Ananias believed this living God and acted solely on His Word. "Brother Saul!" We may also do exactly that. When someone among us is baptized, the living God Himself speaks, not a person. And where God has said His yes, we must not get in between. God, grant that when You speak, the scales fall away from our eyes! Just like with Saul... Just like with Ananias! God, grant that we may come to know each other in many conversations with You, the Living God. Amen.