

Ananias and Saul

Acts 9:1-20

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Do you all know the term “mansplaining?” It refers to a man explaining to a woman what she ought to be feeling or how she misunderstands what a man’s intentions were when she was mistreated. There are other related terms, like “whitesplaining” where white people tell black people they are not really experiencing racism when they are experiencing racism. There’s also “gaysplaining” and “straightsplaining” and myriad others. The key here is that someone who does not understand the life experience of another person proceeds to tell them how they are wrong about that experience. It is a micro-aggression of the first order. And it comes from an arrogance that makes someone think that their experience of the world is normative.

No one’s experience of the world is normative for everyone. No one’s.

This sort of behavior betrays an unwillingness to “walk a mile” in the shoes of someone who is different. To look out on the world and see from a different point of view. To truly listen to another. To be open to the fact that the world as I know it is not the same as the world known and experienced by others.

In order to overcome that impulse to “splain” anything, most people need to be thrown into an experience that shakes their view, an experience in which they are made vulnerable and their arrogance is shattered. That’s what happened to Saul in the story from today, when he was thrown to the ground by an encounter with the living God and found that, not only could he not see the world as he had, he could not see at all. Saul, who was so sure he was right and those Christians were utterly wrong and dangerous, who believed his mission was not just to faith-splain, but to wipe them

out, breathing “threats and murder” as the scripture says. After being knocked down by Jesus, Saul found himself in the kind of vulnerable position into which he often placed those he persecuted. Everything he believed with certainty was called into question by this vision and by the loss of his sight.

He had to lose his physical sight in order to be able to see in a new way. I don't think Jesus put the scales on Saul's eyes; I think they were already there, which was why his vision about Christians was impaired. Jesus just made the scales clear so Saul could not ignore the truth of his lack of vision. Then Jesus made clear that Saul had to have that sight restored by one of the people he had been out to get.

Ananias. Ananias, who rightly questioned God when given his orders to go heal Saul. I think if the gospel were written in today's language, Ananias might have said something to God like “Are you kidding me? This guy is out to kill people like me! If he's out of commission we're all safer; why don't you leave him that way??” But God had plans for Saul. God believed Saul **could** understand and live into communion with the Christian community, despite his arrogance and hate.

Saul's experience changed his life for the rest of his life. Saul doesn't just become a believer, but someone with a significant role to play. His new vision wasn't just for his personal edification, but meant to change the way he lived his life. In this case, it worked.

As a white woman, I certainly struggle to see the world the way black women and men experience it. As a straight woman I certainly struggle to see the world the way lesbians, gay men, bi, queer and trans people experience it. As a white American I certainly struggle to see the world the way people of color and people from other nations experience it. As a person who has enough to eat and a safe home to live in, I certainly struggle to see the world as those who are poor, hungry or homeless experience it. As a Christian, I certainly struggle to see the world the way Muslims, Jews, Hindus,

Sikhs, and other faiths experience it. There are scales on my eyes that have built up over years of assuming, just assuming. I expect that whoever **you** are, you have some scales, too, about some people who are different in some way from you.

In this country right now, we are all being shaken up. Knocked down. People often say of the virus that “we are all in this together.” We're not. We need to see clearly that the virus is much worse among people of color, not **because** of their race or ethnicity, but because of a system that, over generations, has offered so many of you who are people of color inadequate health care, housing, education and nutrition, as well as enormous daily stress, resulting in many underlying conditions which make your experience of the virus worse. As we watched the video of George Floyd's murder, or read about Breona Taylor, many people had the scales finally fall from their eyes about the reality of the experience of black and brown men and women and the police. And that's just two examples out of many I could give about how these times are shaking the foundations of assumptions all around.

Saul regained his sight and found a new mission whose character was far different than threats and murder, or even just the arrogance of assuming he was right and his experience of God was the right one. The questions before us all, I believe, are: can you name the scales on your eyes? And how might you be living differently once they are gone? May each of us be blessed with an Ananias who can guide us into the future God needs us to live. Amen.