

May 1, Easter 3 (Acts 9:1-6, 7-20)

The apostle Paul's overlooked supporting cast

by [Kiki Barnes](#) in the [April 20, 2022](#) issue

“It takes a village to raise a child” says the African proverb, made widely known by Hillary Clinton. This resonates deeply within me. When I raised a child as a young single mother, being surrounded by supportive family afforded my daughter an upbringing and lifestyle I alone could not provide. It also provided me the space to reimagine a life filled with purpose and a launching pad to pursue a call to ministry. Along with living as a testament to the power of love and sacrifice, my daughter embodies our family narrative in a way that seeks to honor the many stories she has heard from family members. Instead of growing up under the shadow of one person’s season of struggle, she was raised to find her path to flourish amid a cast of characters. They have become her cloud of witnesses, influencing her every step.

This week’s texts encapsulate the need for such a cast of characters, a village of voices, to guide us as followers of Christ. Both the Acts text and our Gospel reading from John 21 highlight God’s use of different personalities, in different positions, to shape our lives in Christ.

Often when we read the famous Damascus road story in Acts 9, we end with verse 6, when the just-blinded Saul has just been told by Jesus to go into the city, where he will be given further instructions. The focus tends to be on what happens there on the road—the effect of Jesus’ words on a man who has delighted in the pursuit and persecution of those who followed Jesus’ way. We see this passage—especially those of us in ordained ministry—as the apostle Paul’s call story.

I’ve learned from my years in and since seminary that one’s call story has many versions, depending on how long one has to tell it. I used to quip that I had a long version, a shorter version, and an elevator pitch for quick interactions. I enjoy telling the long version, because it gets to the heart of my state of mind when I was called—as well as to my initial reaction and the pertinent events surrounding my discovery that the direction of my vocation had fundamentally changed.

The long version of my call story also includes something else important: the voices and influences that buoyed me as I moved toward acceptance of God's call, the unknowing and unlikely contributors to my particular narrative, whose words help to mark the path to my purpose. The lectionary places verses 7-20 in parentheses, marking them as optional to the reading. But without these verses, a great part of the story is overlooked: the role of the men who are traveling with Saul, and the role of Ananias.

I don't know about you, but for me, traveling companions can make or break a trip. Jesus isn't the one who leads Saul by the hand to Damascus after he's been blinded. God chooses people to do God's work. Our current Christian superstars may only be accessible to those in the same spheres of influence, but the great apostle's initial mission is completed with the help of unnamed co-travelers—and of Ananias, who is described simply as a disciple. This longer version of the story highlights those we tend to overlook, the supporting cast members—and the way the cooperation of everyday people can raise a superstar who pushes the conversation forward.

Listen to any prominent person review their life—they tend to highlight the loving guidance or influence of family members, the role of teachers (in public school, in Sunday school), or even the prodding of a bully who provoked them to see exactly who they were. It is this supporting cast that turns our Saul the persecutor into arguably the greatest contributor to the New Testament, the apostle Paul. This Acts text lets us know that in every setting, our lives and work for Christ matter. There is room for all of us to “put our hands to the gospel plow” and be used in powerful ways. In the origin story of what we now know as the church, God uses a group of people who are not named to help another who is not expected to become the first great missionary.

My daughter's story includes a set of grandparents, an aging great-grandmother, an aunt, cousins, church members who became honorary grandparents, friends and seminary classmates turned godparents, and a host of others who have added to her journey in numerous ways. There are things she knows that only they could have taught her. She holds and embodies their stories, committed to live a life displaying her gratitude for their various influences. God has used all of these cast members to shape and guide her history, her story, her offering to the world. We are all the better for it.