

May I speak in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We've had two big and important readings this morning, and they feature four main characters: Jesus, the devil, St. Paul, and Ananias. If this was a film, if they were all in a film together, then three of them would have their names in big, bold letters at the top of the film poster. "A film starring Jesus, the devil, St. Paul," and at very small writing, "Ananias". This is the only time that Ananias features in the New Testament. He comes from nowhere and goes to nowhere. If this indeed was a film, then Ananias has the ultimate walk-on part. He walks on, does his stuff, walks off again. Yet it's Ananias that I want to talk about today because I think there are things that Ananias can teach us as we get ready for Lent.

Firstly, we find in the story Ananias paying attention to God. When God addressed him in a vision, the first thing that Ananias is recorded as saying is, "Here I am, Lord." He was listening to God. Ananias was attuned to God. Because Ananias was paying attention to God, he heard that God had a very important mission for him to do.

Lent is a time to pay attention to God. I was playing bingo on Tuesday at the pancake party at the rectory, which was great fun. If you weren't there, you missed a great time. I played a lot of bingo. At the start of the evening, it was very easy because the party had just started. There were not many people there. When the numbers were called out by the caller, I could just fill them in on my sheet and away we went.

The later we got in the evening, as more people came, the noise of excited children increased. The sugar from the pancake took full effect. The noise increased. It was much harder to play bingo because I couldn't hear the numbers that were being called by the caller, so I didn't know what to fill in on my sheet. I couldn't pay attention to the caller because of all the background noise.

Lent is a time to turn down the background noise in our lives so that we can better pay attention to God. I'll leave you to figure out where the background noise is in your life. For me, it comes from the news. Yes, it's good to be informed and know what's going on in the world, but doom scrolling is unhelpful and distracting.

The second thing about Ananias is that he not only paid attention to God, but he heard God and was obedient. He ended up doing something completely ridiculous. God told him to look for a man named Saul and lay hands on him. Well, Ananias knew very well why Saul was in his hometown of Damascus. Saul had come from Jerusalem as it says in the reading, "breathing threats and murder against the followers of Jesus." He was a man on a mission to seek out and persecute any Christians he could find. This was someone that Ananias and his fellow believers were keen to avoid. Yet this was the very man that God told Ananias to go and visit.

I suppose Ananias could have refused. He could have said, "That's ridiculous. I'm not going to see Saul," but he didn't. Ananias took up the call.

I'm all for people taking up something for Lent. It just seems more positive than giving something up for Lent, to take something on. We could be inspired by Ananias to do something ridiculous for Lent. I think that would be great. If someone says, "What have you given up for Lent?" you could reply, rather than saying something boring like, "Oh, I've given up chocolate for Lent," you could say, "I'm doing something ridiculous for Lent." I look forward to hearing what ridiculous things you get up to this Lent season.

Thirdly, the actions of Ananias led to significant change, and Lent is a time to effect change. In the story from Acts, Saul, who's yet to become Paul, let alone St. Paul, is a completely broken man. He's cowering alone in a strange room in the city of Damascus. He's gone for three days without any food or drink, and he's blind. His life is about to be turned around. Ananias, the bit part actor in the

Christian story, comes and lays hands on Ananias. His sight is restored, and life begins again for Paul, and he begins his journey as a great Christian missionary and theologian.

In this Lent, our sermons on Sundays are going to be following Paul and his missionary journeys as we see him go around on his adventures round the Mediterranean. But we must remember that none of these journeys would ever have taken place if Ananias, the bit part actor, hadn't made the journey, the short journey, down Straight Street in Damascus to see Paul. That's where it all began.

What can we do this Lent to effect change? It might not be a coincidence that Lent, which is a six-week period, is just the length of time that psychologists say is needed to form a habit. Making something a habit is a great way of bringing about change. For instance, if you want to become a more thankful person, you might this Lent try starting each day by giving thanks to God for five things. By the end of Lent, you might be transformed and changed into a more thankful person.

Fourthly, and the final thing about Ananias which I'll draw out, is that he reached out to someone with whom he didn't have much in common. Note that that's a very English understatement. Ananias reached out across the bitterest of divides to someone who had until recently wanted to kill him.

I really enjoyed, as I'm sure many of you did, listening to Father Greg Boyle last week who had many good and memorable things to say. One of my favorites was a quote he offered from Anne Lamott, who said this, "You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates the same people that you do." That's a very powerful statement, and its power comes from the fact that when I heard it, it hit home. When God looks at his creation, there is no us and them.

Each week, our Lenten Collect begins by reminding us that God hates nothing that he has made. It's we

who created the divide. There is only us. What can we do to take down the walls that divide us?

I'm struck by how Ananias greets Saul. He lays his hands on him, and he says, "Brother Saul." He was prepared to see the persecutor Saul in a new light. He saw him not as an enemy, but as a brother.

Lent might be a time that we can ask God to help us see someone in a new light, to reach out to see if a new start can be made in a relationship.

Four things that Ananias can teach us this Lent: to pay attention to God, to be obedient to God, to bring about change, and to reach out. May Ananias inspire us to keep a holy and transformative Lent. Amen.