A TOOL IN THE HANDS OF GOD
Acts 9:1-19a

If a builder wants to construct a house, he will probably need various tools from his tool box. He may need a hammer, pliers, a wrench, a saw and a drill. Different tasks call for different tools; in fact, a builder will quickly tell you that often it takes a specific tool to complete a task. People who like to construct often need a variety of tools, so they carry a tool box with them, may have a larger tool box with wheels or one in the back of their truck. If the builder wants to connect two pieces of wood, he will use a hammer. If he needs to cut a piece of wood in two, he will use a saw.

For the next six weeks we will use the lessons from the book of Acts to focus on how God used various people and us as tools. As the Lord was graciously explaining to Ananias how he would use Saul, he stated, “This man is my chosen instrument.” This key phrase from the account of how the Lord dramatically converted Saul on the road to Damascus can apply to all Christians. This is how God works. Because of his grace all believers are tools in the hands of God. He chooses those that he needs for specific tasks. So the focus of our sermon series will be “A TOOL IN THE HANDS OF GOD.” Some people are tools of conflict against the Lord. God dramatically changes some tools into useful instruments. God uses some tools to carry out his plan to build his kingdom.

Some people like Saul are tools of conflict against the Lord. I don’t know how much you know about the apostle Paul of the New Testament. Before he wrote many of the letters recorded in the New Testament, he was a very different man. Our text records his conversion. His given name was Saul and he was a very zealous Jew and a proud, respected Pharisee who was thoroughly trained in the law. When the Jews had stoned Stephen, Saul was present, giving approval of his death. Later in Acts 22, Paul speaks, “When the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him” (22:20). On that day a severe persecution of believers began in Jerusalem. Saul began to act like a wild animal in his efforts to destroy the church. Paul describes his actions: “I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison” (Acts 22:4).

Saul had power, position, and prestige. He was entrusted with assignment from the top Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to round up Christian heretics as far as Damascus. Our text states that “Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples.” He received permission from the high priest to go to the synagogues in Damascus and take any Christians back to Jerusalem as prisoners. The Sanhedrin provided temple guards to assist in these raids. Later in Acts Paul admitted this: “On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme” (26:10f). He rejected the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and was very zealous to stamp out those who believed in Jesus as Lord and Savior. If asked to be a tool in God’s hands to spread that message, Saul would say, “Never!”

Some people are tools of conflict against the Lord. Not only don’t they believe in Jesus as the Savior, they try to prevent or change a person from being a tool in the hands of God. Others refuse to become tools in the hands of God. The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, told the story of an emperor visiting a village in his kingdom. From the crowd in the marketplace came a young farmer with a special request. “Grant me a favor. Give me a special blessing.” The emperor thought for a moment and shocked everyone with his answer, “Get into my carriage and come home with us. Marry my daughter and become my son-in-law. Live as a prince in my palace.” At first that sounded good to the peasant, but as he thought about how people in the palace lived and dressed, he began to have second thoughts. No more Saturday nights at the tavern with the boys, and no more comfortable peasant clothes. There would be
baths every night, manners of the court, and official duties. He stopped, lowered his eyes and said, “No, Sire. No, thank you. It would be too much for me.” The peasant farmer rejected this wonderful opportunity. He was not ready. Likewise, many are not spiritually ready and reject God’s offer to be a tool in his kingdom. How about you? Are you ready to give up your own dreams for God’s plan for you? Will you reject becoming a tool in God’s hands?

The problem of our reluctance, our self-centeredness, doesn’t stop God. He has the power to overcome that. In Saul’s case, it was the bright light and voice of Jesus on the road to Damascus. From Acts 26:13 we learn that it was about noon when Saul saw a light from heaven, yet brighter than the sun. This light did not just flash from the sky, but from the dwelling place of God. Saul and his companions were overwhelmed by it and fell to the ground. Speaking to Saul in Aramaic (26:14), Jesus asked a very pointed question. “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Take note that while Saul was persecuting Christ’s disciples, Jesus informs Saul that he was persecuting him? Saul asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The Lord replied, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” The light of God’s glory and the voice made Saul realize that he was in the Lord’s presence. This vision and the Lord’s answer convinced him that Jesus really is the Messiah who came into the world as a servant to save sinners. From that moment on, Jesus would give Saul directions and tell him what to do. Jesus directed him, “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

Saul’s companions were spectators and observers of these events. For Paul testifies in Acts 22, “My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me” (22:9). His companions helped Saul to his feet and led him by the hand into Damascus, because he had been blinded by the brilliant light. We can only imagine the thoughts that went through his mind as he contemplated those words of Jesus for three days, three days of not eating or drinking anything but simply praying. He pondered the last thing he saw, the blinding vision of the risen Savior.

God dramatically changes some tools into useful instruments. The Lord responds miraculously to this tool that was being used against his kingdom. He would not let Saul continue to persecute him and his people. Jesus brought down this strong, virile Pharisee and made this proud, self-righteous persecutor dependent and helpless. For three days he was a very sick, blind man. Saul, the great persecutor of God’s church, was crushed by the knowledge that what he thought was serving God was in fact only persecuting his only Son. What do you think Saul thought about during those three long days of waiting? No doubt, he thought about Jesus as he prayed. Had he really seen Jesus? Was he really the Messiah? Why were martyrs like Stephen ready to die for him and do so with peace? Does the Lord need to act dramatically in your life to convince you he is the Savior? Possibly, the Lord has or will miraculously touch your life to convince you of his love.

The Greek word for tool or instrument is a general term for an implement of any kind. It can mean vessel, utensil, container, equipment or tool. In the N.T. it is translated in many different ways, according to the context and the way it is used. Mark uses it to describe the merchandise the peddlers carried into the temple court (Mk 11:16). It is the jar which covers the lamp (Lk 8:16). It is the “something like a large sheet” that carried the unclean animals in Peter’s vision (Acts 10:11). It is the “jars of clay” which hold the treasures of the Gospel (2 Cor 4:7). When God used skeuos, Ananias and Saul knew what he meant. They were to be used as tools to carry out God’s plan for building his kingdom.

In a vision the Lord called to Ananias and told him to go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus who was praying. At first, Ananias, which means “The Lord is gracious”, was not quite ready to serve as a tool in the hands of God. He reminded God of who his man was, of all the harm he had done to the church, and why he was in Damascus. Ananias knew Saul’s reputation as a persecutor of God’s people, and it was difficult for him to understand why the Lord would want to help such a violent man. While we are not told that Ananias was afraid, he was puzzled.
The Lord had already prepared Saul for Ananias. Saul was looking for a disciple to come and heal him of his blindness. The Lord tells him, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name.” The amazing grace of God had chosen this persecutor Saul to be his “chosen instrument”, not to persecute the Way but to show the Way. The Lord told Ananias that Saul was his specially selected individual who would teach that salvation is by faith in Christ alone. The Lord would take a Pharisee who had persecuted Jews for believing in Jesus into an apostle who would carry Christ’s name to the Gentiles. “The Friend of publicans and sinners would use a fanatical Pharisee as his chosen instrument.” (People’s Bible on Acts, p. 102)

So Ananias obeyed the Lord’s command. He followed the main road called Straight Street, which was probably named because nearly all the other streets in the city were crooked, to Judas’ house. After entering it, he placed his hands on Saul and called him “Brother Saul”, which is an expression of forgiveness and fellowship. Ananias used this term to welcome him into the communion of saints. The pastors in our synod regularly use this expression to greet each other and Christians often regularly refer to fellow believers as brothers and sisters. The Lord Jesus sent Ananias to Saul to restore his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Through the placing his hands on Saul, some-thing like fish scales fell from Saul’s eyes and his sight was miraculously restored. Through the Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit, not only was Saul’s physical blindness cured but also his spiritual blindness. While Saul had not had anything to eat or drink for three days, Luke writes, “he got up and was baptized.” The Holy Spirit was imparted to Saul in baptism. Through this sacrament the Lord Jesus has confirmed the faith of his chosen instrument and adopted him as his own. After eating some food, Saul regained his strength.

Probably through Ananias, Saul was introduced to the other disciples in Damascus and spent several days visiting with them.

So Saul was baptized, forgiven, and filled with the Holy Spirit. He was changed from self-centered to God-centered. He became a great tool in the hands of God. Now he understood who Jesus was, why he had to come to this earth, live a perfect life and die on the cross. Now he understood why he rose from the dead to bring eternal life to all who believe. He expressed that commitment later in Acts, “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and completer the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24). By God’s grace Saul was transformed into Paul and shaped by the hands of the master Potter to serve as a chosen instrument in his kingdom.

A four-year old was playing in the back yard while his parents were watching. After he tired of playing with his dog, he went to his father and began to ask rapid questions and getting quick replies. “What is Spot doing?” “Spot is running around the yard.” “What is Mommy doing?” “Mommy is pulling weeds.” “What is Daddy doing?” “Daddy is planting a rose bush.” Then in the same tone of voice and manner the little boy asked, “What is God doing?” But his father did not offer a quick reply. He had to stop and think about that one.

How would you answer? “What is God doing right now?” Do you see God at work, creating disciples through baptism and the teaching of the Gospel? God has chosen you as his instrument. When you were baptized, the Holy Spirit filled your heart and soul. He created faith in your heart, cleansed you of all your sins, and filled you with the hope of eternal life. In your baptism God has performed a miracle. God has sent many Ananiases, or pastors who have proclaimed that your sins are forgiven through Christ’s death and resurrection. Many Christian brothers and sisters have assisted you in your spiritual journey. So many different assignments and tasks require so many different tools. God has made you and I tools in his hands to carry out his plan to build his kingdom.

The next time you need tools to complete a building project, think of God. God takes down different tools from his tool board. He uses a saw to cut to the heart, a hammer to drive home the nail of the law and a drill to bore the news of gospel in people’s hearts. As his people, we don’t want to be hanging on the shelf. May God use us as his tools. Since he has called us,
changed us and equipped us, may we serve as powerful tools in God’s hands to expand and strengthen his kingdom. Amen.