



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

Paul's Wild Ride

by Rev. John Strommen on Acts 13:1-3 and 14:8-18

Sunday, May 12, 2019

The book of Acts was written by the Luke as sort of the part II to his Gospel. Acts covers the spread of the Christian church after Jesus' ascension. It begins with the giving of the Holy Spirit within the Jewish community to those Jews who believed Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. This community of Christ followers spread of course, famously, to the Gentile world. This meant Christ was sent by God to be the savior for anyone who believed. This was the major theme last week with the bizarre vision Peter had about the inclusivity of Christ.

OK, the book of Acts covers so much geography, we simply have to pull out a few maps to see where everything is going. Here's a map of where Christianity spread during the time of Acts. You can see in the first 150 years after Jesus, the reach was the purple sections, including most of what is today Turkey and was then Galatia, as well as parts of modern-day Greece, Italy, and north Africa. Whereas Jerusalem was initially the center of this new Christian thing, Antioch (modern day Syria) became the center as Gentiles were converted. 300 years after Christ, when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, it extended to the green regions, including Spain, France, the rest of Italy and the Balkans.

Here's a map of who went where. The apostle's traveled to all these parts of the region, proclaiming the crucified and risen Christ, and the rest is history, as they say. Thomas made his way over to India, James and Paul to Spain, Andrew to what is today eastern Europe. Peter, Paul and Barnabas worked the heart of the Roman Empire, which was primarily Greek speaking. Today we're going to look more closely at Galatia or modern-day Turkey, a Greek speaking region, since this was in the pre-Islam days.

Paul and Barnabas were a team: Paul did the public speaking, Barnabas was in charge of logistics. They had replaced Peter and John as the next generation principal witnesses to the Gentile world. We begin today in Antioch, where the Holy Spirit says, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Paul for the work to which I have called them." Then the Holy Spirit sent them off, first to Iconium, a diverse city in the region of Galatia, where Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time (this is in the first part of chapter 14, not in

our lesson today). The Holy Spirit allowed them to do signs and wonders and many are becoming believers, including both Jews and Greeks. But some of the non-Christian Jews who were there began to poison the gentiles against Paul and Barnabas. These Jews had positions of power and privilege and were not interested in sharing with these Christians. Also, they were jealous – jealous of the kind of success Judaism could never have because their message was not for gentiles, only Jews. Eventually the undermining efforts of the Iconium Jews paid off. When plans became known that Paul and Barnabas might be stoned, they left town and tried again in a town called Lystra.

Now we're right back into our lesson. In Lystra, right in front of a temple belonging to Zeus, Paul told people about Jesus. Paul was a persuasive speaker, and he spoke about the God who made everything, the God who came down to us in Jesus of Nazareth, who taught, healed, and forgave sins, was crucified and rose again, then releasing his Holy Spirit into believers. Many believed, including a man listening intently to Paul who had been crippled from birth and could not walk. Seeing his faith, Paul told the man to stand up and walk, and he did. He was healed by the power of the Holy Spirit!

The people shouted, "*The gods have come down to us in human form!*" Paul and Barnabas, of course, were surprised and bewildered. They didn't know the people were likely thinking of a story told by Ovid, the Roman poet: Ovid tells of the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes, in the guise of humans, visiting a righteous old couple not far from Lystra. The couple offers hospitality to them even though they did not know they were entertaining gods. As a result, they were rewarded lavishly by Zeus for their hospitality! So, these Greeks thought Barnabas was Zeus and Paul was Hermes, so they immediately began to bring Paul gifts and sacrifices. The humor of this situation is clear, the people stumbling all over each other to ingratiate themselves and pay homage to Zeus and Hermes, that they might be rewarded!

Paul and Barnabas, however, see no humor in it, but are aghast at this misunderstanding. So, they tear their clothes in an act of protest and grief. They were protesting the people's expectation that if gods came down, they could be bought; that by bringing gifts, people could demonstrate their worthiness or their ability to pay the right price! So, let the lobbying begin! Paul is thinking no doubt about himself now. *If there ever was an unworthy person, it was him! Saul of Tarsus, persecutor of the Christians, and yet **God came down** to him, full of grace and truth, giving him a new life. Paul knew that *no one was worthy to approach or lobby God*; that everyone's sincerity and motives are suspect, yet **God came down** even to the least of us, to the most unworthy. God came down in Jesus and gave us nothing less than his life...and all its riches! And it's free!*

So, Paul tells the people, “we are not gods, just people like you! *Put away these worthless things* you are bringing to us and *turn to the living God*, the God who has already given you heaven and earth, the rain that falls and the sun that shines!” In other words, without doing anything to demonstrate your worthiness, Paul is saying, the one, true God has already given you sun and rain, food and clothing, 5 senses to experience the world, mountains and lakes, hobbies and passions, friends, mentors, life partners, children, and mothers, etc., etc.

And if God has already bestowed this level of grace upon you, it’s nothing compared to the gift of God’s own self in Jesus. So now, just as God fills your bellies with food and drink, God fills your hearts and minds with the Holy Spirit that has been poured out upon all flesh! God gives you abundant life!

Now, the high regard with which the crowd at Lystra held Paul and Barnabas was short lived. Jews from Iconium had *followed them like a pack of wolves*, poisoning the crowd there, and soon the crowd has turned against them in Lystra – the same crowd that just minutes earlier was ready to crown them Zeus and Hermes! Now Paul does get stoned. They dragged Paul out to the edge of the city, leaving him for dead. But the followers of Jesus who had received Paul and Barnabas’ message surrounded Paul and he got up and walked away. As if Jesus himself showed up, picked up Paul and raised him from the dead!

So, what does he do now? That was a close call! Time to retire from this business, we might think. How many of you would throw in the towel now?? The text simply says in the sparest of terms that Paul joined Barnabas and they continued with their mission in the next town. What? No medical treatment? No counseling? No stiff drink? No. Just...move...on.

What we’ve seen in this story was *typical of the church in Acts* all over that map we looked at. In it, you get a snapshot of the *DNA of the church* – the church of which we are a part. The church of Acts is an incredibly agile, adaptable and irrepressible movement. Paul and Barnabas will not be deterred. There were simply no excuses. *What possessed Paul and Barnabas* and many others to spread the message of Jesus in the face of such odds?? Two things: *First, the Holy Spirit* which swept through the hearts of its followers and throughout the region. In the movie, “Lincoln,” there is a moment while fighting for the abolition of slavery, when Lincoln says, “I am the president of the United States, and I am clothed in immense power!” We too are clothed with immense power: the power of God’s Holy Spirit.

Now, it may not feel like we have immense power on most days. When we can’t remember where we put the keys, or, when men see their chest move down to their

gut, or, moms, when you can't even get the males in your world to put the toilet seat down, no matter how many times you say it...well, we don't always feel so powerful. And it's not so much that we are powerful, of course, but that *God is*, and that God is at work in us, as we love our neighbor and help him or her to have faith, hope and love.

Which brings us to the second reason Paul and Barnabas would risk life and limb to spread the good news of Jesus: people just had know that in Jesus, GOD CAME DOWN. Clearly, there are some things that are worth living and even dying for.

What obstacles do you face as you share the good news that God came down?
Amen.