

Sermon Series "Acts" - Paul's First Missionary Journey
Acts 14:21-28 / Acts 13:1-14:28
Colebrook Congregational Church
July 23, 2017 / Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

Like last week, the selection for today's reading is the summary of an Apostle's Journey, as an efficient overview of the larger portion that I will be preaching from today, the story of Paul's First Missionary Journey.

This story of Paul's First Mission is bracketed by the Church of Antioch. Barnabas and Paul are sent out from Antioch, they travel, and then they return to Antioch to report on all that God has done through them.

Now, at this point, Antioch has replaced Jerusalem as the center of the Church's missionary activities; and Paul and Barnabas have replaced Peter and John as the principal prophetic witnesses. This is also the turning point in the Book of Acts, where previously Peter had been the primary person that we followed, from now on, Paul will be at the forefront.

What's happening in this part of Acts is that the Antioch Church has sent out Paul & Barnabas at the behest of the Holy Spirit to travel to several important Roman cities in Asia Minor. Paul proclaims the Word of God and performs "signs & wonders" in the synagogues of urban centers to mixed audiences and he suffers because of it. His efforts typically resulted in many conversions among Jews and Gentiles, and the establishment of many churches similar to Antioch, their sponsor.

What we see in this story about Paul, is that he parallels the experiences of Peter that we heard about last week. Both rebuke a practitioner of magic, both convert a sympathetic Roman, both heal a crippled man, and both have their religious authority mistaken as something else in the shadow of a temple.

Starting from here, we will also see a different portrait of Paul than what we see from his own letters. In Acts, Paul is a central figure in God's Plan of Salvation, with personal authority as a devout teacher, a virtuous person, and a persuasive orator, with religious and social standing. In Paul's letters, he seems more modest; but they include details of conflicts among the early church leaders. Acts does not explicitly mention these, but seems to be aware of them, addressing them without that context.

So, Chapter 13 begins with a listing of the leadership of the Antiochian Church, the prophets and teachers. What is interesting about this is the social and cultural range of the leaders: A Levite from the island of Cyprus, a black man, a north African, a childhood friend of King Herod, and a Pharisee trained by a very famous 1st century rabbi and Sanhedrin leader.

While they were fasting and praying, they discerned that the Holy Spirit wanted Barnabas and Paul to go on a missionary journey. So the congregation laid hands upon them and set them on the way, and this point, Acts indicates that Saul starts going by Paul.

They sail to Cyprus and start at Salamis on one side of the island and they preach their way across to Paphos. They were also joined by John Mark, whose home Peter had found refuge in after escaping from prison, he went with Paul & Barnabas from to Antioch after they delivered food to the Jerusalem Church, and he is traditionally thought to be the Mark that wrote the Gospel of Mark.

In Paphos, they meet with the Roman provincial Proconsul Sergius Paulus, who is described as an intelligent man. Now, in Acts, Luke attributes virtues with their receptivity to the Word; and on the flip side, maliciousness with spiritual failure. Anyway, during their meeting, they were confronted by a Jewish magician and false prophet named Bar-Jesus or Elymas, who was likely an adviser to the proconsul. Back then, these were the archetypes of what they saw as the typical Gentile convert and the typical Jewish opponent. Elymas' motives even seem similar to that of Simon Magus, the accumulation of political power, and these missionaries were intruding in his territory.

When Elymas tried to interfere, Paul rebuked him, and made him go temporarily blind, proving to the Roman Proconsul the primacy of the missionaries and their message.

They then set sail from Paphos to the coast of Asia Minor and traveled inland to Perga. John Mark leaves them then and returns to Jerusalem, where he pop up again next week.

They continue to travel inland to Pisidian Antioch and they attended the local synagogue, where Paul was invited to give a “word of exhortation.” That is a technical term in Jewish liturgies for an “edifying homily concerning God's saving acts in the history of Israel.”

Paul does this. And in this speech, Paul said stuff that was very much like the speech Peter gave at Pentecost and Stephen gave to the Sanhedrin before he was stoned to death, just longer and more detailed. He recounts the highlights of Israel's history, like I have done in several past sermons, to give context to the proceedings.

This time, Paul emphasizes Jesus' connection to the royal House of David, where the Messiah was supposed to come from. He then adds the Gospel story of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection, as the fulfillment of God's Promise. He then called for the repentance of sins, and proclaimed that salvation is now accessible to all who believe.

The response to Paul & Barnabas was positive and they were invited back to speak on the next sabbath. That time, word had spread to the rest of the community, so there were many many more people in attendance, and a group contradicted Paul and they argued; and Paul & Barnabas gave a harsh pronouncement because of their rejection of the Good News.

They converted many, both Jew and Gentile, but there was still opposition to them. Those groups then incited the authorities to drive them from the region. In a scene right out of the Gospels, Paul & Barnabas shook the sand from their sandals and departed to Iconium, filled with Joy and the Holy Spirit.

They did the same thing in Iconium, gaining many converts, but also more opposition. Paul & Barnabas stayed until they heard that there was a plan to stone them, so they left.

They ended up in Lystra, near the Temple of Zeus, and Paul was preaching there. He then healed a crippled man. When the people, who were pagans, saw this, they thought that the gods had come down in human form. They thought that Barnabas was Zeus, because he looked like he was in charge, and that Paul was Hermes, because he talked so much.

When Paul & Barnabas figured this out, they were not amused and they reacted poorly. They tried to redirect the crowds, but they could not be swayed.

Those that had opposed them in the other cities arrived and won over the crowd against them, and convinced them to stone Paul and then they dragged him out of the city. They thought that Paul was dead, but he stood back up.

Paul & Barnabas continued their missionary journey, returning to all the churches to strengthen them and organize them, then they returned to Antioch to report on all that God had done through them.

When Jesus preached the Good News, He did so in field, on water, in villages, and in orchards, and on mountaintops. He did preach in Jerusalem, and depending on which Gospel you read, it was anywhere from once to a half-dozen times.

Paul, on the other hand, is an urban missionary. Here in Acts, the church's missionary activities are primarily concentrated in important cities, first in Palestine and then across the Roman Empire. Why was this? The reason was sociological and practical. Paul evangelized in the cities because that is where the most people, diverse in their cultures and backgrounds, were congregated. It was efficiency. And also look at the titles of Paul's Letters...most are named for cities.

However, that urban ministry also expressed the intention of God to save all peoples. In Acts, the cities became a religious symbol of God's universal salvation. From Luke's theological point of view, a congregation cannot gather in isolation from its surroundings, without any interest in reaching out. And we are doing that in this Congregation, though updated for our modern time, with websites and social media, email newsletters, telephones, and cars. We live in a golden age of communication, and with that, we can fulfill what Jesus commissioned us to do, to share with all, our loving service to others and to let all know of God's Good News and salvation.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

Loving God, as Paul reached out to as many as he could, inspire us to use our gifts and resources to reach out to all that we can, modeling Your divine love for all, and proclaiming Your Good News to all, Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

Loving God, it is with awe and wonder, joy and gladness we offer You our thanks, and pray for Your creation, its nations, and peoples, for your church, for ourselves and all in need.

We give You thanks for all Your gifts to us—for food, for health, for each breath we take; for Your guidance, for our Joys, and for our loving friends and families. And thank You for all who have sacrificed of themselves for us.

We ask Your forgiveness, for sins known & unknown. We know that we can do better and be more aware of ourselves and of those around us.

We pray for those around us who need your care. We pray for those who hunger or are homeless. We pray for those in pain—the abused, broken-hearted and lonely. We pray for the sick in body and in mind, and for those who grieve. We pray for the caretakers who bring comfort to those in need. We pray for all who put themselves between us and harm in this chaotic world. We pray for the victims of terrorist attack and for their families.

Help us to see Your presence burning in the hearts of others; grant that we may all be united in a fellowship of love and prayer; give us the courage to pick up our cross and respond to the needs of the world, give us the stamina to follow You, to be Your hands and heart in the world; and enable us to witness to Your grace and mercy.

We also pray for:

The Suddath Family
Sean Larose

Deanna Muzzulin

Sue Kenny

We offer these prayers in confidence and trust, as well as the prayers of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 16

Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, ‘You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.’ As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight. Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink-offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips. The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage. I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.

Acts 14:21-28

After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, ‘It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.’ And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe.

Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From there they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed. When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. And they stayed there with the disciples for some time.

[Sermon preached on Acts 13:1-14:28]

[<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=367781625>]

[Bulletin insert]

