

Sermons in Acts: “The Call to Faith”

Acts 12 tells us that the circle of Christian witness was getting wider and wider. Maybe you'll remember that last week, following the persecution that began after Stephen was stoned to death in Jerusalem, the church fled out of the city to Judea and Samaria. But in chapter 11 we read:

Meanwhile, the believers who had fled from Jerusalem during the persecution after Stephen's death traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the Good News, but only to Jews. However, some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. The power of the Lord was upon them, and large numbers of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord. (11:19-21)

The circle now includes Cyprus and Cyrene as well as the move up the coast to the north to Phoenicia and Syrian Antioch. By the way, we differentiate this Antioch with the Antioch that's in Asia by referring to the larger region that each city is a part of: so, Syrian Antioch and Pisidian Antioch. We'll come to this Antioch of Pisidia today because that's where we hear Paul preach for the first time.

Good news from Syrian Antioch reached the church leaders in Jerusalem and they sent a man named Barnabas to follow up, to strengthen the work that had started there. Barnabas, in turn, went further, to Tarsus, which is where Saul, later called Paul, was living. Barnabas brought him back to Syrian Antioch where he and Saul taught and strengthened the church over the course of the next year. Chapter 12 takes us back to Jerusalem and the continuing persecution of the church, but chapter 13 takes us back to Antioch and that's where we pick up the story.

One day, five leaders of the church of Antioch of Syria were gathered for worship and fasting and during their time together, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart Barnabas and Saul for the special work I have for them.” (13:2) After more prayer and fasting, they laid hands on these two and sent them out, because their special work was a missionary journey to Cyprus and the Asian Province called Galatia. After significant ministry on Cyprus, they sailed across to the port of Perga and from there inland to Antioch of Pisidia. On Cyprus, Saul is first referred to as Paul and in Asia he is always referred to as Paul.

In Antioch, on the Sabbath Day, Paul and Barnabas head to the synagogue for the service. After the readings were completed the synagogue leaders asked Paul and Barnabas if they had a word of encouragement for them and Paul began to speak:

People of Israel and you devout Gentiles who fear the God of Israel, listen to me. The God of this nation of Israel chose our ancestors and made them prosper in Egypt. Then He powerfully led them out of their slavery. He put up with them through forty years of wandering around in the wilderness. Then He destroyed seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to Israel as an inheritance. All this took about 450 years. After that, judges ruled until the time of Samuel the

prophet. Then the people begged for a king, and God gave them Saul son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, who reigned for forty years. But God removed him from the kingship and replaced him with David, a man about whom God said, "David, son of Jesse is a man after my own heart, for he will do everything I want him to." And it is one of King David's descendants, Jesus who is God's promised Savior of Israel!

But before He came, John the Baptist preached the need for everyone in Israel to turn from sin and turn to God and be baptized. As John was finishing his ministry he asked, "Do you think I am the Messiah? No! But He is coming soon - and I am not even worthy to be his slave."

Brothers, you sons of Abraham, and also all of you devout Gentiles who fear the God of Israel -- this salvation is for us! The people in Jerusalem and their leaders fulfilled prophecy by condemning Jesus to death. They didn't recognize Him or realize that He is the one the prophets had written about, though they hear the prophets' words read every Sabbath. They found no just cause to execute Him, but they asked Pilate to have Him killed anyway. (13:16-28)

Let's take a little break and see what Paul has chosen to select out of Israel's history. What is he setting up in the minds of his audience in the synagogue? I think Paul is building bridges of common understanding that will allow people to cross over to faith in Jesus. He starts with God choosing Israel, prospering them in Egypt -- which can only mean that they became a large nation there, a million and a half people -- and then He powerfully led them out of slavery. This shows God as the One who blesses and rescues His people. But not only are the people in need of rescue, they are also a stubborn, independent lot. God "puts up with them" in the wilderness and then allows them to have a king when they beg Him for one. Like Stephen, Paul is not about to glorify the Israelites, but will consistently declare the glory of the God of Israel. Then, right after describing God's choice of David to be king over Israel, Paul jumps to Jesus as being David's descendant.

His purpose is not to tell the whole story of Israel's dealings with God and of God's blessing and care for them. His purpose is to say simply that God has a long history of caring for His chosen people and has made great promises to them. As soon as Paul mentions the words "Savior" and "Messiah", the people listening to him are thinking about the promises made by the prophets of old. With the coming of God's Savior and Messiah, there is a need for repentance, for turning back to God in a whole-hearted way. That's why Paul talks about what John the Baptist did to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry.

So, in what appears to be a fairly random selection of events from Israel's history, Paul has established that God is Israel's redeemer, that Jesus is the descendant of David who was promised by God as the Savior of His people, and then, in the final paragraph that we've read so far, Paul says that the leaders and people of Jerusalem killed their Savior, without just cause, but because they didn't recognize Him for who He was.

Now, we return to the message Paul is preaching:

When they had fulfilled all the prophecies concerning His death, they took Him down from the cross and placed Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead! And He appeared over a period of many days to those who had gone with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem - these are His witnesses to the people of Israel. (29-31)

These are the core statements we find in all of these sermons: Jesus has been raised from the dead and we are witnesses of His resurrection -- He appeared to us!

And now Barnabas and I are here to bring you this Good News. God's promise to our ancestors has come true in our own time, in that God raised Jesus. This is what the second psalm is talking about when it says concerning Jesus: "You are My Son, today I have become Your Father." For God promised to raise Him from the dead, never again to die. This is stated in the Scripture that says, "I will give you the sacred blessings I promised to David." Another psalm explains it more fully, saying, "You will not allow Your holy One to rot in the grave." Now this is not a reference to David, for after David had served his generation according to the will of God, he died and was buried, and his body decayed. No, it was a reference to someone else - someone whom God raised and whose body did not decay.

Brothers, listen! In this man Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins. Everyone who believes in Him is freed from all guilt and declared right with God - something the Jewish law could never do. Be careful! Don't let the prophets' words apply to you. For they said, "Look you mockers, be amazed and die! For I am doing something in your own day, something you wouldn't believe, even if someone told you about it." (32-41)

We have seen some of these themes before: Peter also explained, in Acts 2, the psalm in which David wrote that God would not allow His Holy One to rot in the grave. Peter also proclaimed the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name and, of course, the theme of "Good News" has been repeated again and again in the sermons of Acts.

Let's do a quick review of these final paragraphs before we move on to the way Paul ends his sermon.

1. Jesus was executed unjustly by the Jewish religious leaders, but God raised Him from the dead.
2. The disciples, now called apostles, were chosen beforehand to be the witnesses of Jesus' resurrection
3. The witnesses now have "Good News" to announce to everyone: God's promises have come true!
4. AND, through Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins: "Everyone who believes in Him is freed from all guilt and declared right with God, something the Jewish law could never do."

So these are the themes of the Gospel that we have seen presented over and over again in the first half of the book of Acts. Jesus is the Messiah, God has raised Him

from the dead, we are witnesses of His miracles and of His resurrection, and there is on offer forgiveness for all who believe in Jesus.

Now we come to Paul's warning, something that doesn't appear in the earlier sermons: don't be unbelieving, don't mock and be cynical and try to stay aloof from the Good News we are bringing you today. This is serious Good News and we are serious about it - we ask that you take it seriously. Paul is calling for a response of faith and faith is the key to human reaction to God's actions. Do we believe it or not? Do we make up some fantastic explanation for the resurrection, or do we trust that God is more than capable of winning the battle against death? Do we believe the writings of the Old and New Testaments or do we trust skeptical historians who are constantly rewriting their views on what happened 2 or 3 thousand years ago and for which they have very little evidence? Do we believe that God loves us enough to send His own Son to die on a cross to pay the justly deserved penalty for our sin ... or do we believe in a random universe with no purpose or meaning, evolving from nothing and ending in oblivion?

The times we live in are not that unusual in terms of how people respond to the message of Jesus. There have always been the cynics and doubters and those who looked for reasons not to believe. Our day is probably more like the times that Paul spoke in, where the doubters and cynics were in the majority and where skepticism about incredible claims was the expected response. This expected response seems to have been on Paul's mind as he bursts out his warning:

Be careful! Don't let the prophets' words apply to you. For they said, "Look you mockers, be amazed and die! For I am doing something in your own day, something you wouldn't believe, even if someone told you about it."

1. The first warning is simply, "Be careful!" Often we can treat something dismissively, without care. We can label something a 'conspiracy theory' and think we've dealt with it. We can call an idea revolutionary and think we've sold it. But certain issues require careful thought, a search for evidence, a reasoned discussion - and Paul is alerting his audience in Antioch of Pisidia that this is one of those issues. He's warning them not to take it lightly, or dismiss it without careful thought and investigation.
2. The second part of the warning is "don't let the prophets' words apply to you." When God's prophets spoke, they spoke the truth of the future. They told people what was going to happen: Israel will be defeated by Assyria, the Jews will go to Babylon, God will deliver His people from slavery in Egypt, and later from exile in Babylon. The prophets spoke many words predicting the coming of Messiah and the things He would accomplish. These words were not to be taken lightly because they spoke of things that God had seen taking place in the future. One of the things God had seen was the response of the mockers to something He would do in the future, something that they wouldn't believe even if an eye-witness were to tell them about it. As a result of His action, they would be amazed -- but their choice to not believe would lead to their death. Very serious consequences and Paul is warning them to avoid those consequences

3. What was God going to do that they would be so amazed at, that they wouldn't believe even if someone were to tell them about it? In the original prophecy, in Habakkuk 1:5, God was raising up the Babylonian nation as the new world power and as His instrument to judge His own people. If you told a resident of Jerusalem in the mid-600's that Babylon would be the power in the Middle East, stronger than Assyria or Persia, more formidable than Egypt, they wouldn't believe you. These other nations had been rivals for power in the Middle East for generations - what would bring Babylon to the fore? In the same way, if you told a devout Jew in the first century A.D. that God's plan was to send His Messiah to earth in weakness and humility, allow Him to be executed and then raise Him up on the third day, they would laugh at the thought. That's crazy! That's not how we read the prophets and certainly not how we expect God to act.
4. The final part of this warning is the phrase, "even if someone told you about it." The sense in this verse should not be read as, "even if you heard a rumor", or, "even if you read it on the internet." The sense is much more, "even if someone who you normally would find credible and trustworthy told you this." Here he's not talking about internet bloggers, but about eye-witnesses. He's talking about people who have seen the risen Jesus, who have experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit, who have witnessed miracles of healing, deliverance and even raising the dead. The prophets were warning that people will not believe something that is well attested by people who are trustworthy and experienced. They will be so caught in their negative, unbelieving world view that they will refuse to believe what God has done.

Now, how do these warnings relate to us and to the world we live in? What can we apply from this message preached in Antioch of Pisidia?

1. Prophetic warnings are usually intended for God's own people. They are calls for us to pay attention, to be alert, to not get caught unaware of how the world is pressing us into its mold. There are many such calls in the New Testament as well as the Old, and we are frequently urged to be watchful and alert. What should we be watching for? Following the lead of those biblical warnings, I think we need to be alert to at least these three things:
 - a. we need to be alert to the state of our own heart, to our devotion to Jesus, to our daily walk with Him.
 - b. we need to be watching out for the attacks of the enemy, the way he is shaping the world to oppose the things of God. We need to be alert to the schemes of the devil in moving a passive culture away from its roots in the moral teachings of the Bible and the values taught by Jesus, and
 - c. we need to be watching for what God is doing. You won't usually find this on the evening news or in the local paper, so you have to dig deeper. I get a regular email newsletter from Holland about what God is doing around the world. In addition, I read books and listen to speakers who know their way around when it comes to what's happening in the worldwide church. When we take time to find out what God is doing, we will be much more encouraged and hopeful for the Lower Mainland of B.C. Being alert or careful means we will be on the lookout in those three areas - our spiritual health, the forces at work in the world, and what God is doing and where.

2. The second main application speaks to the place of doubt in our thoughts. Doubts may be raised by the mockers described here, by the hardships we face in life or by any number of other factors. When the world mocks, there's something that says, "If you're smart, if you're educated, if you're with the right crowd, you'll be joining them." When some university professor writes a book that says that Jesus didn't really rise from the dead, there's a little voice that says, "You were always afraid that might be the case, weren't you?" The scholars and mockers of our day want you to believe that miracles are impossible and so the Bible can't be true. They want you to believe that, because that's what they believe, not because it's true. Miracles happen every day, in every part of the world. If you're reading the stories of God's amazing works of mercy and power, you'll know this is right. And if these so-called experts were really honest and really objective in their comments, they would say, "I don't experience miracles in my office on the university campus, therefore I don't believe in miracles." But they are far from objective and honest and so they make foolish claims. Jesus once said an important and profound thing about faith to His disciples. After teaching them about the faith of the persistent widow and how she was able to gain justice through her persistence, Jesus ended by asking the question, "But when I return, will I find faith on the earth?" That's the key question for the individual Christian. Will we be molded by the skeptics and mockers, will we want to fit in with their doubting world view, or will we stand, firm in our faith, asking our honest questions and pursuing God for the answers? The call in this sermon from the apostle Paul is a call to the people of Antioch of Pisidia to put their faith in Jesus. He is worthy of that, worthy of our trust in every aspect of our lives. The promises that He makes are promises for those who keep the faith.