

Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. He listened to what Paul was speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet!" And he sprang up and began walking. And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lyconian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was near the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd crying out, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations, he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them. But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and entered the city and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. When they had preached the gospel in that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Acts 14:8-23

"Faith, Apostles, Good News, and Tribulations"

Pastor Stephen Ridge

Beginning this morning, and going out likely to Easter in the spring, We will be reading Paul's Letter to the Galatians, which you will soon learn is a stormy, personal letter, likely the first letter Paul wrote of all the letters we have from him in the New Testament. And the wild passage I've just read to you from the Book of Acts is the story of what I think was likely Paul's first encounter with the people of Galatia. He and Barnabas were evangelizing in the hills of what is now south central Turkey, but back then it was a province governed by people the Romans knew as the Gauls, so Lystra, where all the action happens, was a city in a province called Galatia.

Which is fascinating to me because the Galatians were third cousins to my own ancestors, the Irish. Let me explain! 1400 years before Christ, at about the same time Moses was leading Israel through the wilderness toward the Promised Land, my own ancestors, the Gauls, also migrated from south central Asia due west across the top of the Black Sea, over the Danube River and then across the Rhine, flooding into and overrunning all of western Europe. The Greeks called them the Celts, and the Romans called them the Gauls. And the Gauls conquered and ruled western Europe for more than a thousand years until finally Julius Caesar led Roman legions out of Italy in a lightning campaign that tamed all the Gauls from the Alps to the English Channel.

So how could it be that, more than 50 years after Caesar, Barnabas and Paul found themselves dealing with Gauls, Greek speaking Celts, in what is now Turkey, hundreds of miles south and east from where the rest of my ancestors ended up? All I can guess is that there was some sort of family feud and one tribe of the Celts went off on their own and settled in the highlands of central Turkey where they raised horses, which they then sold to the Roman armies who invaded western Asia a generation or two before Christ. And the Romans rewarded the Gauls with their own province in Asia, a place the Romans called, Galatia.

So, to no one's great surprise, the city of Lystra in southern Galatia was the most foreign of all the places that Barnabas and Paul had tried to reach for Christ on this, their first missionary journey. The good news was that there was no synagogue in Lystra, good news because in Pisidia, the next province over, the Jews in Antioch and Iconium had rallied their synagogues against the apostles, forcing them to flee into Galatia, a wild place where the native Greek pagans were interwoven with the less civilized, more superstitious Celts.

And as we read this morning, it all began well with Paul's first address near the Lystra city gate. Amidst the hustle and bustle of the ancient city square, one beggar in particular latched onto Paul's preaching and something electric happened between the two men. Their eyes met, and Paul saw faith in the man and interrupted himself "with a great voice" to command the beggar to "Stand up straight on your feet!" And the man stunned the entire city square by doing exactly what Paul said, one leap up, then a step, then he's walking! A shock to the locals! A beggar like him would have been part of the scenery in that one spot for years!

But now the beggar is up and moving! The sight of him in motion set the crowd to guessing who Paul and Barnabas might have been to effect such a change so suddenly. And their own pagan tradition allowed for only one possible answer. The gods were on the move! So a cry arose from the crowd: "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!"

The priest of Zeus looked out over his portico and into the city square and knew this was his moment. He pulled a bull from the temple stable and dressed it in the customary decorations and headed into the city square, intending to strike the ox with an ax and start a bonfire and take the whole event under his wing so that people would come his way to be told what had happened and to be taught what it all meant. The text tells us that folks were already guessing that strong, silent Barnabas was Zeus come to save them, and that loud, flashy Paul was Hermes come to tell them why the gods had descended on Lystra that day.

The text tells us that all this talk took place in the local language, "*Lyconian*," which explains why Barnabas and Paul were slow off the mark. Almost too late, only after the bull was in the square, and people had started to bow, did Paul and Barnabas realize what was happening. So the apostles stunned the crowd a second time and tore the front of their tunics as they ran to the center of the action. The tearing was a universal sign of grief and outrage that silenced the crowd enough so that Paul could address them in proper, understandable Greek: "*Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men of like nature with you, and we bring you good news...*".

Before we go on I'd like to note two things here. The first is that the healing Paul performed here in Lystra and his initial reaction to the crowd is an almost exact echo of Peter's first miracle in the Book of Acts, performed years before on the steps to the Jerusalem temple. Peter's lame beggar also leapt up and moved to the amazement of the crowds who had seen him in the temple square for years, and, when the more orthodox crowd in Jerusalem mobbed Peter, he also rebuked them: "*Men of Israel,*" Peter said, "*... why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we've made this man walk?*"

Second, I want to note that the text goes out of its way to identify Barnabas and Paul as "*apostles*," the first time that word had been used to describe either Barnabas or Paul in the New Testament. This is going to matter because neither Paul nor Barnabas had known Jesus in the flesh, or followed him from Galilee to the Cross like the rest of the apostles had done years before. But Luke, telling this story in the Book of Acts is careful to note that what Peter had done in Jerusalem years before, Paul was able to do in the wild, pagan, hill country of Galatia because, what Jesus had called the Twelve to be back in Galilee, Christ had called Paul to be after the cross and after the resurrection, years later on the Damascus Road.

It will matter because, some time later, Paul will write a letter to the people who believed in Christ that day in Lystra, and the first thing he'll say to them is that he, Paul, was "*an apostle - not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ...*". And the reason Paul will want them to keep track of who's an apostle, and when and how, is that God inspired apostles to preach a gospel that runs counter to what men and women like us will expect or want to hear. Years before, Peter had told the Jews on the temple porch that his miracle had come from "*Jesus*," Peter said, "*whom you delivered over and denied before Pilate...you denied the Holy and Righteous One...you killed the Author of life whom God raised from the dead!...Repent therefore that your sins may be blotted out, and that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.*"

Years later, out here in Galatia, Paul will preach a similar kind of counter-intuitive good news. "*Why do you do these things?*" he'll ask the priest of Zeus in Lystra. "*We're men like you! And we bring good news that you can turn from these vain things, and worship a living God...In past generations God allowed the nations to wander in the own ways...*". The point being that now that an apostle is in town, now that the Spirit is on the loose answering peoples' faith with miracles and power, now it's necessary for us to turn from what we used to be, and trust God to make us the people we need to be to be to change the world and build his kingdom.

And the good news is that it's possible! Peter promised, "*...your sins may be blotted out...times of refreshing may come from...the Lord!*" Now, with Christ risen and the Spirit on the move and with Apostles to teach us how it works and what it means, now it's possible for us to live like new people. But all this "*good news*" hinges on two words spoken by Peter and Paul to these two very different crowds. "*Repent...*" said Peter to God's errant people on the temple porch. "*Turn...*" Paul said to the pagans at the city gate.

So it turns out that both God's people in the Holy City, and wild pagans in Galatia far from God, both will need to repent and both can be forgiven and saved in the same way, by the same Savior. But it won't be easy for either. Pagans and Jews both will struggle to believe the good news and repent going forward. In a breathtaking change of heart, the same crowds who were tempted to worship Paul that first day will riot and stone him only days later. Even those few who believed and became disciples will struggle to understand the gospel Paul taught them.

Only a tough letter from Paul in the years to come will keep the Galatian disciples on the straight and narrow path the apostles taught them. But, for now, our passage today shows us Paul and Barnabas still moving back and forth in Galatia, still teaching the small congregations there the kingdom checks and balances that we still use in our congregation today. Luke tells us that they appointed elders to lead and to teach disciples like you and me to, "*...continue in the faith, and ... that it is through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*"