

“The Shift”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Acts 13:1-3; 14:8-18

June 30, 2019 - Third Sunday after Pentecost

Way back, just before Christmas, we started a journey through Matthew’s Gospel, coming to its dramatic culmination with the resurrection account at Easter. Matthew has the risen Jesus sending the apostles to make “disciples of all nations” and since we read those verses we have been hearing the words of the early church through the writings of Paul and the stories of the apostolic efforts in the sequel to Luke’s Gospel known as the Acts of the Apostles.

Acts begins with Jesus telling them: “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” We then hear about the wild scene of Pentecost, with the Holy Spirit allowing the apostles to speak in the languages of all who were gathered in Jerusalem. Last week we heard about Peter welcoming a bunch of new believers in the Gentile city of Caesarea Maritima, directed by the Spirit to reformat his understanding of who is in and who is out.

Now the story shifts north, away from the hub of Jerusalem to modern-day Syria and the sweet congregation of Antioch Presbyterian Church. (Full disclosure: I have no evidence that that’s what they called themselves.) We will hear about folks in that local congregation being sent out, and about one of their many attempts to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth, this time in modern-day Turkey. Listen for God’s Word to us this morning from chapters 13 and 14 of the Acts of the Apostles:

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

In Lystra there was a certain man who lacked strength in his legs since birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. And Paul, looking at him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And the man sprang up and began to walk. When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.

The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates; he and the crowds wanted to offer sacrifice. When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, “Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations God allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet God has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.” Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Have you heard this one before? God works through a rag-tag bunch of misfits to bring God's hope where there was none. Not only could we fill up a whiteboard with a long list of stories like that, it's practically the mission statement of this congregation!

This Antioch congregation isn't much to look at, at least not yet. Show me your prophets and teachers: Barnabas? Well that's a pretty good start. He'd been an early member of the church in Jerusalem, he sold a bunch of land to help out the community, and he'd introduced Paul to the leaders there. He was sent to Antioch to help out this budding congregation. But then it's Simeon, who some scholars believe was an African Gentile who'd found his way to Antioch, but we truly don't know much about him. And there's Lucius from Libya. And then Manaen, who lists Herod on his résumé — this is the Herod who had John the Baptist killed and who mocked Jesus and sent him back to Pontius Pilate. Finally, we've got Saul — which is simply how Paul is known to Hebrew-speakers — who just a few chapters ago was happily persecuting followers of Jesus.

The great and prolific, the well-known and misunderstood, the beloved and reviled St. Paul begins his world-changing evangelism not from a cathedral or basilica, not from the holy temple, not from the site of Jesus's tomb, but from the sanctuary of Antioch Presbyterian, with the kids running up and down the aisle and the coffee-stained carpet and that guy who claims it's been his family's pew for generations, even though Jesus walked the earth only three decades ago.

Jerusalem has been the center of everything since Jesus rode in on that donkey. Of course, it had been the center of *everything* for long before that. But here the energy shifts to Antioch. None of the original apostles are there. And what happens there isn't cleared by a committee at denominational headquarters. This is a local congregation that responds with prayer and action when the Spirit shows up and starts something. They've been reaching out to their neighbors, and now they are pushed to extend their work in a new direction and — I hate to spoil this for you — it eventually encircles the globe, finding its way to Glasgow and Cape Town and Sydney and Shanghai and Sao Paulo and Calgary and Birmingham.

Here in Birmingham, as in Antioch, the Spirit opens up possibilities and calls forth leaders and starts something. I look out and see people who weren't here just a few years ago but who are now integral to keeping this community on its feet (and on its toes). I see folks who were engaging with this congregation in one way who are now doing something completely different and, perhaps, unexpected. And I see faces of friends who have been brave enough to dip their toes in the Edgewood waters to find out where the Spirit will lead them.

I see a congregation that has continued to support work that builds a better world in Birmingham and Haiti and the Democratic Republic of the Congo while finding new ends of the earth where disaster strikes and children suffer and refugees appear and when the Spirit guides us to fountains of hope like the Magic City Acceptance Center or UKirk Birmingham or the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

God sends Barnabas and Paul to many different places to spread Good News. Today we are focusing on this comically weird situation in Lystra. Paul heals a man and all Hades breaks loose. If you've spent any time with Greek mythology — or read the young adult *Percy Jackson* series about those myths — you know that gods like Zeus and Hermes aren't generally all that helpful to humans. They usually use humans as their pawns or playthings or worse. So aside from being very

wrong, it's a big heap of wishful thinking for this crowd to decide that the gods have come to earth in the form of Barnabas and Paul to heal with warmth and grace. At the very least, we'd expect them to be suspicious: "I'm getting to meet Zeus! I'm in one of those stories! Wait a second, those usually don't end well for us. O gods, we're all going to be turned into goats before the day is done, aren't we?"

What happened before their eyes was so hard to understand that the crowd had to put it into a box they could wrap their brains around. So they try to make sacrifices to these two apostles of the Antioch church. The Lystrans didn't have a framework for a God like this. Paul and Barnabas try to explain about the God they serve, about their congregation, about who they know Jesus to be. But the people of Lystra are unable to make the shift from what they already know about divinity and power. They know the stories they've been told, and so they believe they know who Paul and Barnabas are. And so they roll in the oxen and the garland.

I imagine most of you have not had sacrifices made in your honor when you have tried to explain about Edgewood Presbyterian Church. But I know that many of you have had the experience of talking about the God you serve and the people with whom you worship and who you know Jesus to be and seen the box forming in the mind of the person politely listening to you.

They know this story. They know who you are. Some know that you are peddling a distortion of the Gospel that starts with questioning scripture and ends with your eternal damnation in a fiery pit of rainbow flags.

But others know this story and know who you are in a different way. They were raised on a God who helps those who help themselves, and doesn't give us more than we can handle, and who lets everything happen for a reason.¹ They were inside the church and found that this God had nothing to offer when life turned into a Tilt-a-Whirl. Or they served this God faithfully, sacrificing of themselves, and then found that their church would not love them as they were created. Or they were warned about the church and how hateful it could be and told to keep their distance.

Or, as the Rev. Lillian Daniel — a pastor and author in Iowa — puts it, some well-meaning person wanted to let them decide about religion for themselves, but never gave them any relevant information, like a parent who wants their child to choose the type of literature they prefer, but neglects to teach them to read.² And so their idea of what church can be is restricted to the box they see on television, with religious folks defending vile child detention facilities and cruel laws and misogyny and transphobia.

Three years ago Lillian Daniel wrote a book called *Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don't Belong To*. She calls on Christians who spend so much time hand-wringing over an image of Christianity that isn't theirs and trying to get people to like them and defining their beliefs within the framework of a story folks already think they know to just *tell a better story*. A story "[of] a progressive church where your questions are welcomed but where we learn from a tradition older than we are. Where we

¹ Rev. Debi Turley, Narrative Lectionary Group

² Lillian Daniel, lecture at 2019 *Festival of Homiletics*, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

worship a God who invented us and not the other way around. Where we gather in church not to entrap God but to take God seriously in the company of other people.”³

She wants us to claim as worthy of evangelizing a church that is:

Reasonable, where you don’t have to check your brain at the door

Rigorous, in that it requires something of you, like time and talent and treasure, but — even more — worshipping something that isn’t, well, yourself.

And real, in that it is aware of and talks about the fact that we are human beings with bodies and sexualities and mental illnesses and financial worries and family problems and the capacity for brave acts of love and that life can be really, really confusing.⁴

Of course, even then, folks will sometimes still see Zeus and Hermes or Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell, Jr. I’ve been keeping a secret from you. This trip to Lystra was a big ol’ flop. After our reading cuts off, the people of the city get riled up by opposing teachers and end up stoning Paul and leaving him for dead.

This looks like a failure in evangelism.

Stuttgart, Germany. 1963. For Herbie Hancock and the rest of the Miles Davis Quintet, it was a “hot night” — the music was flowing beautiful. Everything was going right. And then, as Miles himself cut the air with a fierce solo, Herbie came in on the piano with just the most wrong chord possible. To even untrained ears, it sounded like a mistake. Herbie threw his hands up around his ears. But Miles didn’t hear it as a mistake. He heard it as something that happened and knew that it was his responsibility to find something that fit. He paused for a second, and then played some magical melody that made the chord...right. Herbie was astounded by the choice of notes that saved the night.

Paul will return to Lystra. And there he will find a congregation of Christ-followers. And among them, a man named Timothy, who will become Paul’s disciple and travel with him far beyond Lystra. Follow the Spirit and God will improvise to spread Good News.

The Spirit is in this place, setting each of us apart for the work to which we are called.

The Spirit is in this place, giving us a new-old story to tell about who we are and about the God we serve and who we know Jesus to be.

The Spirit is in this place, matching our shortfalls with overflowing grace to bring harmony to a dissonant world.

The Spirit is in this place, calling us to gather and to feast, to share Christ’s peace, and to proclaim God’s Word in joy and struggle, in laughter and silence, when the notes are hot and when Hades is all around us, to the ends of the earth.

Amen.

³ *Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don't Belong To: Spirituality without Stereotypes, Religion without Ranting*, Lillian Daniel, 2016.

⁴ Merritt, Jonathan, “Why Christians need the church: An interview with Lillian Daniel”, *Presbyterian Outlook*, August 2013, at <https://pres-outlook.org/2013/08/why-christians-need-the-church-an-interview-with-lillian-daniel/>