

April 22, 2018  
National Presbyterian Church  
**Wide Open To The World**  
Acts 8:1, 26-38; 11:19-26, 13:1-3  
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In our Sermons since January we've been looking at the life of the Early Church – getting back to our “Roots”- and doing so through the lens of a book in the Bible called *The Acts of the Apostles*.

Last week we began to think of the remarkable transformation of the early church from its beginning as a small group of followers of Jesus (all Jewish; largely country, not city people, but local and parochial in orientation) into a world-wide movement that included Gentiles – non-Jewish foreigners – people of other races, like most of us here today.

This was a transformation that was by no means guaranteed to be successful, even though Jesus himself – the Risen Jesus – clearly wanted it and told his friends so, on at least a couple of occasions.

One of these occasions is in Matthew's account of Jesus' ministry, in chapter 28, where Jesus says, “*Go and make disciples of all nations (“all THE peoples” = all the tribal and racial groups) baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*”

And then in our own book, in Acts 1:8, he says:

*“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

In other words, Jesus says to them:

I have work for you to do! I have a plan for you to follow!

You must not keep the message about me just to yourselves  
but you have to share what you know and you have to do it:

- Right here where you live; (Jerusalem)
- fairly close to where you live (Judea and Samaria)
- and then – “far, far away from where you live” with all those strange people who live at the ends of the earth.

So, Jesus shares the vision and gives the world-wide command to move from being “Followers of Christ local or national” to being “Followers of Christ International, Inc.”

BUT STILL there was no guarantee that this would actually happen! No guarantee that Jesus' disciples wouldn't get stuck in their own little rut or wouldn't push beyond their own natural limits and boundaries. Though, thank God, of course, they didn't! Instead – those early followers stretched themselves and gave themselves sacrificially to the expansion of Christ's ministry and the church, until, within less than a generation the movement grew and expanded inconceivably, into the heart of the massive Roman Empire and beyond: the very empire that had crucified Jesus!

And ONE OF THE GREAT MOMENTS in this expansion occurred – in the story we looked at last week in Acts 9 and 10, when Simon Peter, Jesus’ closest friend and the unquestioned leader of the church, forced himself to rub shoulders with a person of a different race, a Roman soldier called Cornelius, who became a follower of Christ.

It was a seminal event in the life of the early church, and so too were the events recorded in Acts Chs. 8 and 11 in the stories that come before and after the story of Peter and Cornelius.

In Acts 8, for example, we heard about the conversion of an African government official from the royal court of Ethiopia (which at that time probably also encompassed what we might call South Sudan) who was the equivalent of Secretary of the Treasury. He had been traveling to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage, and when we meet him, he’s on his way home in a pretty desolate area near modern day Gaza when someone comes up to him and speaks.

The person who approaches is a man called Philip who had himself recently left Jerusalem (though in his case, he was fleeing for his life in face of the first wave of anti-Christian persecution), and now God was leading him to this deserted road in the middle of nowhere – except that it wasn’t!

There was a chariot there: not a “Ben Hur racing chariot,” but more like a carriage, ahead of him. And someone in it was reading out loud! And Philip recognized what was being read. It was a passage from the Bible – from the prophet Isaiah (chapters 52-53) about a servant of God who would suffer and die for the sins of others. And when this African “Secretary of the Treasury” asked Philip to explain the passage, Philip pointed him straight to Jesus as the one Isaiah was speaking about; as the one who lived and suffered and died for our sins, and then rose again to life.

And the man was so convinced by Philip’s explanation that he put his trust in Christ and was baptized, and headed on his way home, a new man.

We have no record of what happened next to this African or about the impact of his new-found faith on his own people. But what we do know is that by the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the church has begun to grow in Ethiopia, and today Ethiopia is about 60% Christian. And while Christian faith seems to be on the decline in the west, Pew Research estimates that by 2050 (30 years from now), sub-Saharan Africa will be home to 40% of the world’s Christians. Something that all began with this remarkable one-on-one encounter!

So, the fledgling, provincial church, very early on, began to expand to the south, into Africa. And at the same time, because of the same violent persecution, the expansion began to happen as well in the north. Let me read you Acts 11:19-26:

<sup>19</sup>Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews.

<sup>20</sup>But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene (in modern day Libya) who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Greeks also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus.

<sup>21</sup>The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord.

<sup>22</sup>News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup>When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to

remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; <sup>24</sup>for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord.

<sup>25</sup>Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul [whose Greek name was “Paul”], <sup>26</sup>and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.

So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called “Christians.”

The name “ANTIOCH” is probably not a name well known to most of us. But Antioch was the major port at the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea, where modern day Syria meets Turkey. And back then, it functioned like a rail-head for all the trade coming from Persia and the far east and heading toward Rome.

And next to Rome itself, and Alexandria in Egypt, Antioch was the next biggest city in the Empire with an estimated population of 500,000, which means it was five to ten times the size of Jerusalem.

(See Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, p. 83; and “Antioch” in Wikipedia, quoting Glanville Downey, *Ancient Antioch*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963.)

So that for anyone coming from Jerusalem, Antioch was huge and as foreign as it could be: it was both cosmopolitan and pluralistic – racially, morally and religiously all over the map!

And it was there – in this city – that for the first time ever, people who had no connection whatsoever with the Bible, or with the God of ancient Israel heard about a personal creator God who loved them, a God revealed in the Book we call the Bible, a God who out of sheer love and mercy entered this world in flesh and blood in the person of a Jewish peasant named Jesus, and suffered and died for each of us to reconcile us to himself. And it was there in Antioch, says Acts, that great numbers of people became believers in this Jesus, and were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:21, 26).

And in time (Acts 13 tells us) Antioch would become the missionary base for the expansion of the faith and of the church even more deeply, into the heart of the Mediterranean world.

It’s a remarkable story, with many lessons: three of which I want to share this morning.

1. The first is this: a reminder **that God is passionate about the whole wide-world and not just about us, or people like us.** (Though he is indeed passionate about us!)

God is passionate about the whole wide-world! And so the church must always be an organization that not only looks inward, that needs to be healthy on the inside, but that must at the same time turn outwards – beyond itself, with a belief that God will use even us to be his ambassadors to people we’ve never met before. The people in Acts, and in Antioch, were not superstars, but ordinary people, who became open to God’s work in the WORLD!

And this is one of our goals at NPC. So if you look at the list below you’ll see some of the work National supports – your tithes and offerings support – across the world:

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In this last category, you'll see that in our capital campaign for our building there's a mission component – it's for a million dollars – to carry out God's work in the name of Christ both in inner city Washington, DC, and with refugee families in camps in the Middle East and East Africa.

So, first, God is passionate not just about us (though he is!): God is passionate about his whole wide-world!

2. The second thing is this: that, like the early church, **the Bible is and must remain foundational to our ministry.**

In Acts 8, Philip comes up to the Ethiopian official, and helps him understand the Bible he is already reading, and it's in this reading and studying and explaining of the Bible that his life is transformed. He already knows it a little, and God uses what he already knows to keep working in his life.

In Acts 11, in Antioch, it's different: the church is starting from ground zero – no one has a clue about the book or what's in it. So a man called Barnabas is sent to Antioch, and realizes the best Bible teacher he knows is this man called Saul (whose Greek name is Paul), who was previously

a persecutor of the church, but was also a Jewish Biblical scholar! And Barnabas brings him to the city.

In Acts 11 we read that:

<sup>25</sup>Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup>and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And so it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people,

So here in Antioch the church was established through this systematic teaching of God's word – something I hope we do, not only from the pulpit, but in our Sunday School Classes for both children and adults, and in our mid-week small groups, and in our support of seminaries that train pastors around the world.

- So if you know nothing about the Bible – you are in good company: today is the day you need to commit yourself to join the gang from Antioch!
- And if you know something? Well, maybe God's call is for you to be like Philip or Paul, and share what you know: teach – or facilitate a group, or like the Ethiopian official, probe deeper until the message transforms you!

In the early Christian church, the Bible was central to this expansion of the church to the World.

3. And so too, in the third place, was **a belief in the absolute sovereignty of God**: a belief that God was in control of history, whether things were going well or not.

Let me put it like this: whereas, on the one hand, with Peter, God used *a miraculous vision* to break him out of his limited horizon, on the other hand, with the spread of the Gospel to the south through Philp and the Ethiopian, and with the spread of the Gospel to the north through the city of Antioch, God used – *even the evil of persecution to accomplish his work*. Acts 8:1 reads –  
When a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.

And one of these was Philip who without the persecution might never have found himself on that dusty road in the middle of nowhere.

And then in Acts 11, at v. 19 we read this:

<sup>19</sup>Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen (the same persecution that mobilized Philip) traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch

In other words, God was at work in the least expected way, at the very moment when God seemed to be most absent. And if that was true then, for them, it surely is still true for us today

You know the short piece “Footprints” by Mary Stevenson?

One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord.  
Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky.  
In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand.  
Sometimes there were two sets of footprints,  
other times there were one set of footprints.  
This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints.  
So I said to the Lord, "You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life, there have only

been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?"

The Lord replied, "The times when you have seen only one set of footprints, is when I carried you."

See Deut.1:31; Isaiah 63:9

God clearly carried the early church when it was *nothing*, and when it could so easily have become stuck in its own little sphere and rut, and turned it into the channel of his grace for the **WORLD!**

It's a remarkable story incredible Good News, which God invites us to share in

1. Placing our lives into the hands of this God made known in Jesus
2. Seeking fellowship with him through his word in the Bible
3. And committing ourselves to be a part of his world-wide mission

Will you do that today?

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