

What a Way to Go

Acts 13:1-12

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Sunday, May 4, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let's start at the end of this story. Sergius Paulus is the Roman official in charge of the island of Cyprus. This is good duty. The nickname for Cyprus was Makaria – the Happy Isle. This is sort of like Disneyland being called the “happiest place on earth.” It has been described as a place where “its climate [is] so perfect and its resources so varied that you would find everything necessary for a happy life within its bounds.” Sergius lives on the western side of Cyprus, in Paphos, a city known for its worship of Venus and the Graces that accompany her. Venus was the goddess that would give romantic delight, but working with the Graces, she was also supposed to be a source of all good things in life – charm, beauty and talent. All of these are things which make life pleasant. Who could ask for anything more? Well, Sergius could and he did.

All the pleasures of Cyprus did not satisfy him. He seems to have a deep need to know what is true and right and he seems to have judged that Roman culture is not going to give him what he needs. We see this in his choice of a court magician. Many political leaders had sorcerers – sorcerers manipulated political ends in favor of their clients. We're familiar with that! Like his colleagues, Sergius had a court magician, but instead of drawing from his own culture, Sergius picks a Jewish sorcerer, Elymas.

Sergius, we are told, is an intelligent man – he had a ready and inquiring mind. He doesn't yet know that Elymas is a false prophet, just that he claims to represent the Jewish God – the one God. Something in Sergius draws him to this God. Something in Sergius is yearning to know what is good and true and right.

It would be easy to dismiss Sergius as a religious dilettante. It would be easy to dismiss Sergius as a political operative of an oppressive empire. Even more, it would be easy not to give him a second thought – what does he need? He's got a cushy job in paradise. But you know in your heart of hearts that you can have it all and still to be as empty as a church on Monday morning. So, here's Sergius Paulus who needs more than life in “the happy place.” How will he hear the word of Jesus? And doesn't it matter? Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, you alone can fill the empty spaces in our lives. We ask now that, by the power of your Holy Spirit, you would make yourself known to us in your Word. Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your Word, which never changes. Amen.

Now, we'll go back to the beginning of this story which starts with a description of the church at Antioch. It is a great church – the center of Christianity has shifted from Jerusalem to this city in Syria. It is a vibrant and diverse church. It is filled with leaders who come from around the Mediterranean basin, including North Africa and Nigeria.

They are not thinking about Cyprus or how to preach to a Roman governor. They are doing what every church should do. They are worshiping. Their preachers and teachers are engaging them in the Word of God. And they are fasting. Now fasting is not a very popular thing these days. Why, you could go hungry! And, since we're saved by grace, we don't need to fast – that's too legalistic. We're free in Christ.

And if you think fasting is not popular now, it wasn't even popular in the early centuries of the church. St. Chrysostom, known for his great preaching in the 4th Century, said in a sermon on this very passage: “I am not enacting a law that there should be fasting, for indeed there is no one who would listen!” But do listen to this definition of fasting. Fasting is the setting aside of normal appetites and activities for the purpose of hearing the word of the Lord. Fasting means: stop what you're doing...stop from what you are consuming...take a break for all those things that fill you up and crowd out what God wants to do in your life. You are fasting from the business and busyness of your world by being in this sanctuary this morning.

Like those Antiochan Christians, you are listening to the word of God.

While they were doing what you're doing now, the Holy Spirit showed up and gave them clear direction about the mission and ministry of their church. It told them to send off two of their best leaders. And here is where things get vague. The Holy Spirit tells them who is getting this new job assignment, this new calling. But there's nothing here about where they are supposed to go or exactly what they are supposed to do. You'd think that if God had a plan for their lives that he'd give them the details, the itinerary. He doesn't.

You know how they feel. Many of you, right now, are wondering what God wants you to do. You're trying to make decisions about the next steps in your life. You may even be pretty sure that God is calling you to something new and different, but you're not sure how to get there. That's pretty much where this congregation was when the Holy Spirit spoke to them. So what do they do next? They do what they were doing the first time they heard the Holy Spirit speak – they prayed and they fasted. They continue the conversation with the Lord.

The next thing that we see is that Saul and Barnabas head out on a mission trip. There is still no detailed set of instructions that was dropped from heaven. How did they know where to go? We can pull information from other passages of scripture to know a few things. First, Saul knew that he had been called to be an apostle to the Gentiles and he has been waiting to fulfill that calling. We know that several of the Antioch leaders were from Cyprus. It would make sense that if you were going to the Gentiles; you'd go where you knew a few people. And Cyprus...who wouldn't want to go to Camp Happy?! It is what my youth group in Louisville would say about their mission trips to Mexico that passed through Cancun – we're suffering for Jesus.

Clearly the Holy Spirit spoke and clearly the Holy Spirit guided their thinking and decision-making process. They evaluated all the assets God had given them – gifts, relationships, their sense of calling and, most importantly, what they knew of the life and power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As they worshiped, studied, fasted and prayed, they must have thought: "We've been privileged to learn the gospel; now we need to learn what to do with this gospel – this story of Jesus that leads to salvation and life. What should we do next?"

The church together made their Spirit-led decision and then released this team to the work to which God had called them. What a way to go! They were on their way with the backing of a congregation that was unified in its vision. This is what the Holy Spirit can do in the midst of any church that stops to listen to the word of the Lord before it acts. This is what the Holy Spirit can do in your life, as well.

But we can't hear the Holy Spirit when we're filled with business-as-usual attitudes and self-reliance. We need to fast from all of that so that there will be room for God. Chrysostom speaks eloquently to this. (Actually, his little side-trip on fasting went on for pages and could well be a manifesto for a Christian fitness club.) Anyway, and in paraphrase, he said: "You really want to be filled with good food? Then nourish your soul, give your soul the food she is used to. Do not kill your soul by starvation...Christ is pining away through hunger and you are wasting away because you try to satisfy all your desires."

When Pope Benedict preached at Nationals Park last month (by the way, have you noticed that since that sermon on the mound, the Nationals have gone 7 and 3?)...When Benedict was here, he reminded us that the Holy Spirit has been poured out in the world, poured out poured out in the church, in our hearts and on the ones sent out to spread the gospel. The early church believed that and paid attention to the guidance of the Spirit – they tuned in to the signals available to them by way of word and worship. They heard the Spirit and they acted.

But that wasn't the end of the Spirit's work – in addition to moving them into a new mission, the Spirit accompanied them on their way. The Spirit called and the Spirit sent. And this is where the beginning and the end of our story meet.

Our merry band of missionaries ends up in the provincial capital of Cyprus. They not trying to gain the ear of powerful people, but when Sergius Paulus (remember him...yearning to know more of God?)...When he

hears they are in town, he summons them because he wants to hear what they have to say.

You know that God has done this and you know that God is in it, because that sorcerer, Elymas, starts throwing up roadblocks all the way. Paul and Barnabas represent a threat to his position and power, such as it is. Just because the Spirit has called us, equipped us and sent us on our way doesn't mean that we won't encounter major difficulties. But what we learnt from this passage is God, who began this project, is going to finish it. So, the Holy Spirit is right there, filling Paul with the very power of God to stand firm against anything that would get in the way of the message of the gospel.

This sorcerer, who is supposed to have magical powers, is powerless and is temporarily blinded, groping for someone to guide him. This sounds harsh but it also sounds familiar, doesn't it? It is the story of Saul at his conversion. He, too, was temporarily blinded so that he could stop...he could fast from what he had been doing...long enough to think about the Lord who just confronted him. The blindness was a part of his salvation.

Well, when Sergius sees this, he is astonished and he believes. But note what the text says – he believes not because of the miracle. He believes because of the teaching about the Lord. The Holy Spirit removed the distraction of the court sorcerer and Sergius could hear what he had been longing to hear – a clear and true word about God.

The Spirit did it all and did it all through disciples of Jesus who were willing to listen and then obey what they heard. They had no idea that they would be responsible for the conversion of a high government official. Led by the Spirit, they just went step by step to the place God had planned all along. But you see, the Spirit wasn't just with them – you can see, can't you, that the Spirit had also gone before them and had prepared Sergius to receive them.

Paul was the answer to Sergius' unconscious prayer and Sergius was the purpose of Paul's calling. What a way to go – guided, accompanied and filled with the Spirit. The Spirit bound this team to Christ and Christ's work and in doing so, revealed the glory of God in all that they did! But here's something to think about. Was the gift of the Spirit just in the calling and sending? Indeed it was and we would all be happy just to know that our lives are in sync with the plans and purposes of God. But there is a gift here that goes beyond knowing that we're doing what God has called us to do.

The mission of the church in Antioch was, from the beginning and before all time, an answer to someone's prayer – unknown to them. Everything God did among the Antiochan congregation he did in order to focus on Sergius Paulus to salvation.

About ten years ago, I had the privilege of sharing a meal with the head of the Protestant church in Zambia. We got to talking about the James Michener view of missionaries as agents of colonial imperial powers. I asked him how he saw it and he said something I will never forget. He said he saw it differently – he said that without those missionaries they would never have learned of Jesus Christ. He said, "You must know that you did not bring God. He was already there, working in our hearts. But we were standing at a crossroads, confused about God and you brought the gospel." Those colonial missionaries, for all their flaws, were an answer to the Zambians' prayers.

When I was a little kid, I would spend time with my grandmother. My grandmother's ears to the day she died were especially tuned in to us grandchildren and when we would call for her, no matter where she was or what she was doing, she would immediately yell, "I'm a-comin'!" ... "I'm a-comin'!" It was comforting and our little hearts were set at ease.

There are people in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our city and around the world who are knowingly or unknowingly calling out for God and God is calling back, "I'm a-comin'!" ... "I'm a-comin'!"

God said to the Zambians, "I'm a-comin'!" and sent those missionaries. God said to Sergius Paulus, "I'm a-comin'!" and sent Paul and Barnabas. And somewhere, someone today is calling out for God and he's calling back to them "I'm a-comin'!" And we're the one's He's sending in the power of the Spirit. Are we listening? Are we ready? Let us pray.

Gracious God, you fill us with your Spirit so that we may bear the good news of the Savior to a world waiting for you. May we stop long enough to hear your Spirit so that we may do your will and in doing your will bring joy to someone who is waiting for Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.