

Companions Along the Way

Acts 18:1-11

Dr. M. Craig Barnes
Sunday, April 9, 2000

I am continuing in my series of Lenten sermons on the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul. We join him today as he arrives in Corinth, where he is reminded that he is not alone. Paul has more of a spiritual community in Corinth than he realized. So do you. None of us will survive the journey of faith alone. *** When we left Paul last week, he was preaching in Athens at the Areopagus, which was the esteemed center of discourse where Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle had spoken. Paul himself was so eloquent there. What you worship as unknown this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth does not live in shrines made with human hands, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things... For in him we live and move and have our being. It was a fine sermon. Maybe the finest Paul ever gave. But when he got done, Athens did not break out in revival. In fact, some who heard this great sermon scoffed at Paul. Then he left town.

It was about a fifty-mile hike to Corinth, where Paul went next. Fifty miles is a long walk, certainly long enough to feel the sting of things not going so well in the intellectual center of Western society. Athens was the birthplace of classical civilization, democracy, and Greek philosophy. The best and the brightest were gathered listening to that sermon. This was Paul's one shot at converting the wisest people he would meet. But when he started about the resurrection, they laughed at him. (We are also told that some believed, but it is always negative reviews that we have memorized.)

When Paul later wrote his first letter to the church in Corinth, he described his arrival there. I was with you in weakness, and fear, and much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom (1 Cor. 2:3-4). That's discouragement talking. When you are discouraged, as Paul was at this point on the journey, you tell yourself things like, "I'm not very good at what I do." You think you are the worst preacher, mother, lawyer, or nurse. You wonder, "What was God thinking giving me this job?" Then you start to think that no one really understands what you are trying to do and say. You are the only one.

In those same verses in I Corinthians, however, Paul goes on to say that he has resolved in Corinth from now on to just talk about Jesus Christ, and him crucified. That may sound foolish to the wise, he claims, but the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom. Now that is a major turnaround. How did Paul go from leaving Athens lonely and discouraged over the wise scoffing at him to now being confident in the gospel he was called to proclaim? What turned Paul around? How did he get back his confidence and vision for speaking about the cross of Jesus?

According to our text today in the 18th chapter of Acts, Paul received a vision from the Lord in Corinth that told him, "Do not be afraid. Speak and do not be silent. I am with you... There are many in this city who are my people." Paul, you are not alone. That is how you get your vision back. You have to stand on the shoulders of others who can lift you above your discouragement to see that the Lord is with you.

A number of years ago when I was standing on the side of the street watching a parade, I noticed next to me, a small boy sitting on his father's shoulders. So I said to him, "My, you sure are tall." With grave seriousness, he looked down at me and said, "This isn't all me." I remember that often, when I am thinking about the life of faith. It isn't all us. Like that little boy, we stand on the shoulders of others.

We tend to think of Paul as an apostolic lone ranger who single-handedly converted the empire. But Paul was part of a community of believers. When the journey was hard, as it often was, he had to stand on the faith of those around him. When Paul got to Corinth, he only preached on the Sabbath. Either out of discouragement or because he was broke, he spent the workdays making tents with a couple named Aquila and Priscilla. We don't know how Aquila and Priscilla became believers, but Paul didn't convert them. They came to Corinth from Rome, where Paul had not been yet. But as they talked over their canvases, it was they who converted Paul back from discouragement.

Then Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, bringing a love offering for Paul from the churches there (2 Corinthians 11:8-9). Plus, we know Luke, who wrote this story, was with him. When Paul got kicked out of the synagogue again, he held church in the home of Justus, a man identified as a believer. And one of the rulers of the synagogue, Crispus, also became a believer. That is seven colleagues in ministry he had there, who are all identified before the Lord tells him that there are many others in the city. It takes a lot of people for him to recover his vision. So if even the Apostle Paul had to stand on the shoulders of others, don't you think we need others as well?

You need the church! You may not understand it, agree with it, or even want it, but you cannot believe without it. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Christ in my heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of the brother." (Life Together, p.23) Bonhoeffer wrote those words shortly before the Nazis arrested him for participating in the resistance to Hitler. He was then executed in Flossenbergr Prison on this day, April 9, 1945. The prison doctor, who witnessed his execution, made a journal entry stating that the last thing Bonhoeffer did was to fall to his knees and pray before they hanged him. So here is a man who kept the faith that cost him his life right to the gallows. Yet even he states that the Christ in his heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of the brother. Notice that he emphasizes that the stronger Christ is in the word of the brother. Ours is a faith that must be spoken. As we speak it to each other, we encounter Christ in that word and then stand on the Savior's shoulders. That is what happens in worship.

So as the author of Hebrews writes, "Do not neglect to meet together as is the habit of some, but encourage one another." This is why worship is so important for your soul. You need the encouragement of the Holy Spirit found when many meet together to encounter the word your brothers and sisters speak and sing. There is no end to the excuses to neglect meeting together. You've got a lot of

work to do. You're the only one. The weather isn't very nice. The weather is too nice. (Apparently the best going-to-church-weather is just a little overcast.) But if the Apostle Paul needed the word of his brothers and sisters to overcome fear and discouragement, and if Dietrich Bonhoeffer needed their word to face the gallows, you too will need this word to face the trials that await you in the week ahead.

What is the word of encouragement that we have for you here? It is not a new word. No, God save us from new words. The only words that will do are the historic words of faith that the church has been proclaiming for 2,000 years. When you stand, Sunday after Sunday, to say the creed, you are doing something quite radical today. You are proclaiming that your beliefs did not originate in your own heart. That's because there are just too many reasons to doubt. Every time we pick up the newspaper, we are overwhelmed with opportunities to become discouraged. It takes a lot of faith to see beyond all that. If you are like me, you do not have that much faith. You will have to stand on the shoulders of others to see God.

The historic faith of the church was hammered out over centuries of conflict and persecution, so that you can become a man or woman of vision. When Aquila and Priscilla nursed Paul back to spiritual health, it was so you could continue to hear the gospel. When the martyrs of the Early Church died for the confession that Jesus is Lord, it was so you would receive a faith worth dying for. When the bishops gathered in Nicea in 325 to struggle over the divinity of Jesus, it was your own faith that was on the line. When the monks struggled to keep the texts of Scripture accurate in the Middle Ages, it was so that you would have a Holy Bible; and when Luther, Calvin, and Ignatius reformed the church, it was so you would inherit a Holy Church. When Pilgrims left oppression and crossed the waters, and when African slaves sang their spirituals, it was so you would inherit the freedom they longed to find. These are the strong shoulders of faith. Standing upon them you are invited to rise above your discouragement over your failures, hurts, and your sins to see that throughout history God has been faithful to save his people.

Even within your own life span, your faith in God has been built up by people who helped you to see with faith. I remember Sunday School teachers who struggled with flannel boards to tell me the great biblical story. And a youth group leader named "Buddy", who taught us to sing Amazing Grace to the tune of House of the Rising Sun. I remember missionaries who thrilled me with stories of God's activity around the world, teachers and professors who made me unafraid to pursue truth wherever it was found, and a pastor who found me when I had lost my way. Most of all, I remember my parents who gave me a faith stronger even than themselves. So when I stand up here in this pulpit, you have to realize this isn't all me. You can't see them, but I'm standing on the shoulders of others.

Now, how about you? Take some time this afternoon to make a list of those who have lifted you up in the faith. And give thanks to God that a Bible didn't just drop out of heaven for you to read and figure out on your own. Give thanks that there was someone to tell you the story in word and deed and lift you above discouragement so you could see Jesus Christ. Give thanks for that.

Then ask yourself, who is now on your shoulders?

God of all the ages, from the time your Son first commissioned us to make disciples of all nations, we have each received faith as an inheritance from those who've gone before us. As they were faithful, so may we serve as good stewards of the grace we have received. Amen.