

IN THE BEGINNING
Acts 9:1-19
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, April 22, 2012

Today's scripture is taken from the Book of Acts which is actually the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. Acts tells the story of the earliest days of the Church, beginning with Jesus' ascension, or return to heaven, forty days after his resurrection. Luke also reports the only account we have of Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit transformed the disciples into apostles, or putting it another way, from followers into leaders. The confused, self-serving, even bumbling disciples we know from the gospels suddenly embraced their potential, preaching and healing but also confronting the entrenched religious establishment with the boldness of Jesus.

The Acts of the Apostles isn't meant to be a comprehensive history of the early Church, instead it provides us with snapshots of the culture and practices of the Jerusalem Church, which was primarily Jewish, then briefly follows the ministry of Peter and finally evolves exclusively into the story of Paul's mission to the Gentiles which effectively transformed the Church from being a Jewish sect to becoming the universal Church embracing all the peoples and nations of the earth.

A great deal of the first seven chapters of Acts is about the new church's foundational moorings. Being essentially a Jewish community they continued to embrace many of the time-honored stories and doctrines that identified them as the people of the Covenant. Perhaps the greatest contribution the Jerusalem Church left us is Christianity's firm grounding in the faith of their fathers. Without the foundation of the poets, patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, Christianity could have lost its way and most probably have morphed into one of the prevailing Gnostic mystery religions of the day.

But the immediate crisis that faced the Jerusalem Church came from Jesus' old adversaries the rulers of the Temple and the enemy of their enemies, the Pharisees. As far as they were concerned Jesus' disciples were dangerous heretics who preached that Jesus, who was crucified, was raised from the dead. Hearing this, the religious establishment knew their "Jesus problem" had not gone away.

And so they harassed the Apostles whenever they dared trespassed on their turf, the Temple. But the Apostles were tenacious and kept coming back for more proving themselves to be fearsome troublemakers. What's more the Apostles' efforts produced new converts every day and so the church grew in number which threatened the religious leaders even more.

Finally the Apostles were arrested and brought before the very same Council that tried Jesus. Peter answered their demand that they stop preaching about Jesus by proclaiming, "We must obey God rather than human authority. The God of our ancestors

(there's that link to the Hebrew Scriptures) raised up Jesus whom you had killed...God exalted him...and we are witnesses to these things..." (Acts 5:29-32)

Enraged, the temple leaders were about to kill them when suddenly a level headed voice spoke, wondering out loud if maybe they might find themselves opposing God's will if they put the Apostles to death. He finished by saying "...keep away from these men and let them alone, because if the undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but, if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them." (Acts 5:33-39)

The speaker was the rabbi Gamaliel who counted among his students a bright and zealous protégé named Saul of Tarsus, who apparently refused to heed his teacher's counsel because the next we hear of Saul he's holding the coats of the men who stoned the Church's first martyr, Stephen, to death for daring to claim Jesus was the culmination of God's relationship with Israel all the way back to Father Abraham. Luke concludes Stephen's martyrdom by reporting, "And Paul approved of their actions."

It's important we never forget that Christianity emerged from Judaism. Jesus was a Jew, his disciples were all Jews and the first members of his Church were all Jews. From childhood Jesus was taught to observe the Torah and honor the prophets, which heavily influenced his teachings and ethics and, above all, his understanding of Messiahship. Christianity wasn't born in a vacuum it's deeply rooted in the life of Israel.

It was this claim that enraged Saul who essentially petitioned the Jewish Council to deputize him as a vigilante, charged with the responsibility of rooting out the heretics and their teachings.

Luke then reports a "severe persecution" was declared against the Jerusalem Church, with Saul, "ravaging the church by entering house after house, dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison." (Acts 8:3)

Ironically, Saul's persecution of the Christians didn't have the intended outcome he expected. Many of the church members escaped arrest by fleeing Jerusalem, and where they went the Gospel of Christ went with them. Instead of containing Jesus' followers, the opposite happened, the Gospel spread as the Christians fanned out all over Judea which confused and angered Saul even more.

I said earlier Luke named the sequel to his Gospel the Acts of the Apostles, but maybe it should be entitled The Acts of God, because God was certainly working out his purposes and birthing something new, all for our good. A new and great emergence was about to explode into the open. Through Christ's Church, God would finally fulfill his promise and make Abraham's descendants that city on a hill and the light and blessing to all the nations of the earth. Little did Saul the Pharisee realize that he was about to become God's primary instrument to spread the Gospel of Christ to the Gentiles. Saul, the Pharisee and Christ's greatest enemy, became Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles and Christ's greatest champion.

Today's scripture is essentially an Easter story, even though it took place months after Christ's resurrection. Just as Jesus appeared to Mary, Peter and the rest, belatedly, the Risen Christ appeared to Saul.

According to Luke, "Saul, still breathing threats and murder" wanted to expand his campaign beyond Jerusalem to pursue and arrest the fugitives who fled beyond his jurisdiction. It was on the road to Damascus that Saul was thrown off his horse by a blinding light and heard that voice from heaven, "Saul why do you persecute me?" "Who are you Lord?" Saul asked. The reply came, "I am Jesus...get up and go to the city and you will be told what to do." (Acts 9:4-6)

Unlike Easter morning when the disciples' doubts, fears and even guilt was removed after Christ appeared to them, Saul's experience on the road to Damascus had to be cold comfort in comparison. Before his encounter with the Risen Christ, Saul was self-confident, self-righteous and zealous. But afterward he had to be devastated. Everything he believed was shattered. His life's work was in shambles. You get the sense Saul's encounter with the resurrection triggered his own crucifixion, especially when you read that after he was led by the hand to Damascus, "For three days he was without sight, and neither ate or drank," which is reminiscent of Jesus' three days in the tomb.

Certainly what happened on the road to Damascus brought on a conversion experience, because after the brave and faithful Ananias set aside his justified fears and obeyed the Lord's request that he seek out Saul, restore his sight and baptize him, within days this most unlikely Apostle entered the Damascus synagogues and preached that Jesus is the Son of God, crucified raised from the dead. Luke adds, "Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah. (Acts 9:22)

It's been also said the Book of Acts is a blueprint, or better still a template, for Christian discipleship, our life together in the Beloved Community and a Spirit-led strategy for being living witnesses of Christ and his gospel to a broken, hurting world.

What's more, an important sub theme of Luke's Book of Acts is this undeniable truth: the Jerusalem Church's greatest legacy to Christianity was grounding Christ's New Covenant to God's covenant first with Abraham, the Father of our faith, then with Moses, the great liberator and lawgiver and finally the covenant with King David in which God promised David that his house would rule forever, and kept that promise through King David's greatest son, Jesus of Nazareth born into the house and lineage of David destined to reign forever and ever.

Today's sermon is meant to be informative, giving a sense of the historical and theological context of the early Church by the retelling of the amazing story of God working through believers and events to bring the Kingdom of God near to people through the gospel of Christ.

But this wouldn't really be a sermon if you weren't asked to do something bold and important and make an impact on the world by changing people's lives for the better, if only because you first let Jesus inspire and empower you.

So here's what you're asked to do this week: take the time, make the time to pick up your Bible and read the Acts of the Apostles with the eyes of someone looking to be instructed and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

I'm serious about this, pick up your Bible and immerse yourself in the story of ordinary men and women who made huge sacrifices to bring Christ to people in spite of dungeon, fire and sword. Watch these early Christians, who happened to be Jews, risk scorn and persecution from their community because they embraced the Risen Christ and realized that made all the difference.

Finally, learn from them. Follow their example. Certainly our lives aren't on the line. We aren't being dragged from our houses and thrown into prison for our beliefs. Thank God for that!

On the other hand, maybe we should ask ourselves why we aren't putting ourselves on the line by allowing ourselves to be challenged to put our beliefs into practice even if it means getting into trouble. Are you playing it too safe, protecting yourself from expending yourself, stepping back when you're being asked to step up, hiding your light under a basket instead of letting your light shine and damn the consequences?

Great question: What's holding me back from giving myself away for Christ and his Kingdom? You can take this to the bank: the time will come when you will stand before Jesus and he will ask, "Tell me about your life. Did you welcome the stranger and love the unlovable? Did you take risks for my sake or did you play it safe? Did you go through life unblemished or did you get some cuts and bruises for my sake?"

A suggestion: begin to spend your life in such a way that when at the last you present yourself to Christ, you will have scars, bruises and cuts, even broken bones and pierced hearts, because you dared to walk in the footsteps of Father Abraham's descendants - from Moses to David, from Jesus to Paul and all who followed after them. You answered the call to be a light and blessing to all the peoples of the earth especially the one who lives right next door.

God give us the freedom to be like the Apostles, bold, fearsome troublemakers before us so we can continue what they started.