

Judea and Samaria

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[0 : 00] I have one Christmas joke. What did Adam say to Eve the night before Christmas? It's Christmas Eve. Let's open the Bible.

Now this reading, Acts chapter 8, is a fabulous passage for us to look at on the last Sunday of 2003 as we think about going into the new year.

But when you open the newspapers yesterday, the commentators who are speaking about the year past describe it as the year of disasters. The SARS in Toronto, West Nile virus, mad cow disease, the power blackout, the hurricane, the fires in the Okanagan and only in the last couple of days we hear of the Iranian earthquake and the death toll which may reach as many as 40,000.

As we turn back to the book of Acts, I think if you were here when we looked at chapter 7 you'll agree it was a disaster for the early church.

Stephen was one of the seven people chosen as a server, one who would serve tables, full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit, appointed to leadership. But before we get a chance to see him serving tables, he has to preach a sermon in front of the entire Jewish council.

[1 : 23] And what a brilliant sermon it is. We know how good it is because his congregation were enraged. And they put their hands over their ears. And they yelled out so that they couldn't hear him anymore.

And when that didn't work, they dragged him out of the city. And I was going to give you a colourful description of what happened next, but there are children present.

And this has to be a G-rated sermon. I was going to describe how he was B-R-U-T-A-L-L-Y-M-U-R-D-E-R-E-D.

But I won't. Still he is the victim of mob violence. This brilliant young leader in the church.

And if that's not bad enough, look at verse 1 of chapter 8. In the second line, On that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem.

[2 : 24] They were all scattered throughout the region of Judea, Samaria, except the apostles. Verse 3, but Saul was ravaging the church. Going into house after house, dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.

And we read later that he was committed to giving them the maximum possible penalty of their lives. It was a disaster. This was not part of the strategic plan for growth for the church in Jerusalem.

This is not how you attract people to the gospel of Jesus Christ. There's nothing warm and pastoral about persecution.

And I think the question we need to ask at the end of this year and at the end of this chapter is to say, Where is God? What is God doing in all this? Is he still in control?

And as part of an answer, I want you just to keep your finger in chapter 8 and turn back to chapter 1 for a moment to remind us of what the risen Jesus said with his plan in chapter 1 verse 8.

[3 : 32] Why don't we read this verse together? Chapter 1 verse 8. But you shall receive power and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

That is right. And even though there are tremendous setbacks, the apostles arrested and beaten, the gospel seems to grow and flourish but this is different.

Now Stephen has been put to dare things far more serious. What then is God's plan? And as we go back to chapter 8, I want to tell you there are three things we can learn about God's plan from this chapter which are very important for us at St John's.

And the first is this, it is God's plan to drive them out. Let's go back to 8 verses 4 to 8.

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word, literally evangelising the word.

Philip went down to a city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ and the multitudes with one

accord gave heed to what was said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs he did.
[4 : 54] Unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed, crying with a loud voice. Many who were paralysed or lame were healed and there was much joy in that city. The great persecution led to a great dispersion and the great dispersion led to the evangelising of Samaria.

And in verse 4 it says, those who were scattered went about evangelising the word. That is not the apostles. That's individual Christians. As one commentator calls them, nameless amateur missionaries.

One whose name we know is Philip. He's another one of the seven who was chosen for leadership in the congregation in Jerusalem, serving at tables.

He is scattered out to Samaria and he begins speaking about Jesus Christ and remarkably the Samaritans not only listen to him but God works wonderful signs and wonders through him.

And I just want to pause and say it's very difficult for us to understand what a massive cultural barrier it is for someone from a Jewish, even a Greek Jewish background to go to Samaria.

[6 : 07] This is a hostility that was hundreds, even thousands of years old. There was suspicion and hatred built up over generations. You know, the Jews had a saying that if a Samaritan shadow passed over a plate it was unclean and you couldn't eat from it.

It took the reality of persecution to force the early Christians out of Jerusalem. If God had not allowed the persecution in Jerusalem the Christian church would still be in Jerusalem enjoying the comfort and fellowship there.

This is the plan of God. And repeatedly through the book of Acts and repeatedly throughout history this takes place. See, when the gospel comes to a new place men and women hear about the Lord Jesus Christ and boys and girls come to hear and they believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and God creates a new community where the bonds of grace and the bonds of love grow for one another and a community develops which grows content and comfortable and cosy.

And it takes something distinctly uncomfortable to drive the church to the place where they move forward where we move forward with the gospel and fulfil the purpose of God.

There is no evidence that Philip sat down and said I think I'll do a preaching tour of Samaria in obedience to what Jesus said back in chapter 1 verse 8. He was on the run and yet even on the run he was obedient to speak the word of God.

[7 : 49] Mustn't minimise how difficult this was for the Christians who were kicked out of Jerusalem. Families were separated. They were cut off from the apostles. They lost their buildings, the temple.

They could no longer meet there. They had no idea what was going to happen to them in the future. But it was through this difficulty that God was working his purpose and plan.

What looked like disaster was in fact the plan of God. Now, this is a little bit unfair but I wonder if the early Christians could visit with us at St John's.

I wonder if they would describe us as content, comfortable and cosy. I wonder what you think of that. You know, we've had African bishops who've visited with us over the last couple of years.

They have come from a place where there is a genuine danger of physical persecution and suffering. I wonder what they really think of us. I've asked them but they won't say. You see, we serve the same God that the early Christians do.

[9 : 01] We believe the same gospel and God's plan and God's purpose remains the same. The gospel grows, the kingdom of God spreads, not in spite of opposition but through it.

And while we do not yet face the threat of physical violence and I don't know the full outcome of our troubles in the Anglican Church, this I do know, that it is God's desire to spread the gospel and he remains committed to creating amateur Christian missionaries.

And I wonder if one of the reasons why he is pushing us out of our comfort zone is so that each one of us might take responsibility for spreading his word. That's the first thing we learn about the plan of God.

God's plan is to drive out. The second thing we learn from this passage is that God's plan is to overturn. This is the first of two remarkable episodes recorded for us in the book of Acts where the gospel goes across a huge boundary marker.

And Samaria and the main city in Samaria had been dominated by a religion which was embodied in this character called Simon the sorcerer. And he kept the people of Samaria amused and amazed by his use of magic.

[10 : 27] And you know that throughout the Greek and Roman world the predominant view of spiritual things was a combination of superstition and magic. If a couple couldn't conceive and have a baby they would go and see the local magician.

If your child was sick if you wanted something very bad to happen to your enemies he would go and visit with the magician and he would help for the right price.

Simon had been wonderfully successful at this. But when Philip arrives and speaks about Jesus who is the Christ Simon's power is confronted by something completely beyond his control.

And Simon cannot figure out this Philip. I mean Philip prays for people without charging money for it. And Philip speaks about a message which is not focused on himself but on the person of Jesus Christ.

And Simon is so impressed that when Peter and John come down from Jerusalem he follows them round like they are rock stars and when they lay hands on people and people receive the Holy Spirit he offers them a good deal amount of money because he wants to have the same ability.

[11 : 41] Look at what Peter says to him in verse 20. He says your silver perish with you because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money.

You have neither part nor lot in this matter for your heart is not straight before God. What Simon was trying to do was to take this new gospel about the kingdom of God and Jesus and to incorporate it into his old magic religion.

I don't think he thought that he was outright rejecting Jesus he was merely trying to combine Jesus with his old religious practices the Samaritan religious world view.

He wanted to mix the new religion with the old to fold the new thing into the old one to adapt the Christian gospel to fit into his religious system and it is a constant attractive temptation for all of us but it is not possible to do.

You can't have a two way bet with Jesus you know a little bit on Jesus and a little bit on something else. We cannot adapt Jesus to our favourite beliefs either he is Lord or he is not either he overturns our way of seeing things or we find that we are worshipping a Jesus of our own invention.

[13 : 10] The gospel constantly challenges our most cherished cultural assumptions and it is very important part of our Christian faith to allow the gospel to continually confront contradict and change our beliefs about reality.

See what do you do and what do I do when the Bible contradicts something from within our culture something that everyone else holds to be self-evidently true. We must allow the word of Christ to overthrow and to transform our beliefs.

That's the second thing we learn about the plan of God. The first is it drives out the second is it overturns and third and finally the plan of God draws in draws in the Samaritans.

Something very strange happens to the Samaritans. In verse 12 they believe the gospel and are baptised but if you look down at verse 14 to 16 they don't receive the Holy Spirit they have to wait for Peter and John to come down from Jerusalem they pray for them, lay hands on them and they receive the Holy Spirit.

It is a two stage conversion. Now why does God hold back his Holy Spirit? Why do they have this separate experience?

[14 : 36] It's very odd in the light of the fact that the New Testament teaches that our initiation into Christ is one experience where we repent and believe and receive forgiveness and the Holy Spirit all in one and the Apostle Paul himself says if you do not have the Spirit you cannot belong to Christ.

Well I think it's partly because of that verse that we read together from chapter 1. Jesus says you'll be witnesses in Jerusalem Judea, Samaria and then to the ends of the earth and this is much more than just a simple geographical expansion.

This is a cultural and religious boundary marker that Jesus himself spoke about and the fact that the gospel goes across this boundary marker is no accident.

It is the plan of God and I think the reason the Spirit is held back is so that the Apostles themselves will give witness that the Samaritans are genuine Christians and the reason for that is that the people who are going to have the hardest time accepting that the Samaritans are real Christians are not the Samaritans but the Christians back in Jerusalem and God wants to signal to all Christians his full reception of the Samaritans by giving them the Holy Spirit in this unusual way.

Do you not think that the biggest hindrance to the spread of the gospel in the world are not the boundaries, the different religious, cultural and ethnic barriers but comfortable Christians who cannot believe that it's necessary or helpful to cross boundaries with the gospel.

[16:23] But I say to you it is still the plan of God to draw in Samaritans and Gentiles and Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus and agnostics and New Age eco-warriors and atheists and hedonists and decent Canadians who have no idea that they need Jesus Christ.

It is still his plan. And I think that's why this passage is such a wonderful passage for us as we head into the new year. It is still God's plan to draw people in through Jesus Christ.

It is still God's plan to overturn our cultural assumptions and it is still God's plan to drive us out with the gospel. And I want to leave you with this one thought.

There's one word that occurs three times in this chapter and I want to show it to you. Going backwards in verse 25 in the second half of the verse we read it is the apostles who return to Jerusalem evangelising the gospel to many villages of Samaria.

And then in verse 12 we read that it is Philip who evangelises the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ and back in verse 4 it is those who were scattered who evangelised the words.

[17:55] The word I'm sorry. Nameless amateur missionaries. Christians. And I have some questions for you. Do you think when Jesus said that the gospel that we are to be witnesses to the ends of the earth he had Vancouver and the lower mainland in mind?

Do you think it is still God's plan to reach those who live around us? Do you think it is still God's plan to reach Vancouver primarily through amateur Christian missionaries?

Do you think it would be better to have one large St. John's or five small St. John's to do that?

That's a naughty question and I shouldn't have inserted it but leave it as it is.

Let me ask you a more personal question. Do you think you have a part to play in God's plan in this? What might that look like?

What can we do as a community here at St. John's to reach the community to which we belong? If this is the plan of God I want to rededicate myself to God and to his plan and I want to invite you to do the same as we bow our heads and pray.

[19:13] Father at this time of year we are so conscious of your kindness and goodness and love and mercy and grace towards us in sending Jesus for us.

We thank you that you are a missionary God and we thank you that you have revealed the Lord Jesus to us. we pray that you might open our hearts, that you might challenge our assumptions, that you might drive us out so that others may be drawn in and we pray Heavenly Father that you would use us individually and as a community not for the sake of this church but for the sake of the kingdom and the glory of your Son in whose name we pray.

Amen.