

Paul's Sermon About The Living God

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[0 : 00] Our Father, feed our hearts and our minds by your word, even as we have shared together in this bread and wine. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is another of the sermons on the sermons from Acts, which there are ten sermons in Acts that we're going through slowly through this fall.

And this one comes from Acts chapter 14 and verse 8 following. And it's the story of Paul way in the frontier country of the Roman Empire at a small frontier city called Lystra.

And what happens is that Paul and Barnabas go through the surrounding country preaching the good news, the kind of indiscriminate preaching of the good news.

They don't know who's ready to hear it or who's not ready to hear it. They don't know whose hearts God has prepared to hear it and those whose hearts are far from ready to hear it.

[1 : 23] Yesterday, we had a funeral here in this church of a young nurse who died of cancer at age 39 called Sharon Nagai. And she had, in recent weeks, been here at church.

I suppose her condition was a secret to everybody but her. And in the quiet of, well, perhaps it wasn't too quiet, but in the course of some of the morning services here, I think she found a reality in the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And I am just very much aware of that issue for all of us, that we do come with very different agendas and we do very much need the word of God to speak to the situation in which we find ourselves.

And Paul's apparently indiscriminate preaching of the gospel was because he knew the purpose of God and he knew the grace of God and he knew that there would be certain hearts that would be prepared to receive that good news.

He knew that there were many that would be far from prepared to receive it as well. And some who would be hostile and even violently hostile. But that wasn't his concern because his commission was to preach the good news.

[3 : 00] And he and Barnabas were out doing that through all the countryside, round about Lystra, and they came into the city and they preached there as well.

And in the course of preaching there, there was a man who had been crippled, unable to walk from his birth, and he heard Paul preach the good news.

And Paul saw by watching him that he heard it, that he saw beyond Paul and beyond Barnabas to the God who in Jesus Christ confronted him in that preaching of the good news.

And so Paul, seeing his faith, reached out to him and said, stand up! And he stood up and walked. And that was an outward and visible miracle, which was to illustrate the inward and invisible miracle that is to be the part of all of our lives.

[4 : 11] that from the lethargy and the seat of the scornful, that we will stand up and walk in the way of faith.

And I would like by this sermon to reach out to you and be able to take you by the hand and say, stand up and walk, whatever the situation of your private life may be.

And you'll see another miracle in this story before it's over, but I don't want to come to that just yet. Well, the crowd that saw this totally missed the point of the miracle.

That's why miracles are fairly dangerous. I dare say they may seem fairly infrequent, but they're extremely dangerous things to have happening around the place because so many people misunderstood them.

And this was true in Lystra, too, where the miracle was very seriously misunderstood. And when the people witnessed this crippled man standing up and walking, they started to shout and scream to one another in their own tongues so that Paul and Barnabas had no idea what was going on.

[5 : 33] But before very long, the tumult had involved the priest of the local temple of Zeus. And the explanation of the miracle was that Zeus, or Jupiter, and his messenger, Hermes, or Mercury, had come among them.

And the priest of Zeus, who knew the temper of the people and the appropriate moment for such things, trotted out two white oxen, knowing that Zeus was very partial to white oxen.

And they were garlanded with flowers, a strange proximity of blood and flowers. And they were about to sacrifice these to Barnabas, whom they called Zeus, and to Paul.

And that's how this sermon began, because this was all being carried on in a tongue that Paul and Barnabas did not understand.

And so they rushed among the people, and they cried out to them. The word for cry is something like a raven's cry, something which is in the midst of a tumult and in the midst of noise, somebody shouts loud enough to get the attention over all the tumult and over all the hubbub that's going on.

[7 : 07] And Paul and Barnabas went and did that. And then, under those circumstances, with these people about, about to offer sacrifices to them as gods, they took their garments and they tore them.

I'd like to have the nerve, too, and I'd like to get rid of this, but I'll just tell you. And they tore their garments and cried out to them, and this is what they said, that we are not gods.

We are like you. But we are messengers, and we have a message for you. And this message concerns the living God.

Now, here they were, probably in the city square, in front of the temple of Zeus, where there was a great statue of Zeus, and they said, we are here to tell you not about that dead God, but about the living God, the God who created heaven and earth and the seas and all that is in them, all their contents, so to speak.

And this God, who is the creator, is the God who satisfies your heart with food and gladness. This is a God of whom you know. So to this pagan crowd that was about to do this sacrilege of offering oxen to Barnabas and Paul, they scarcely were able to persuade them not to proceed with it.

[8 : 55] And they appealed to them that what they knew of God, who was creator, who was the living God, who was the one who satisfied their hearts with good things, food and gladness, that's about the time when most of us good Western pagans come close to religious feelings.

And that's when we're surrounded with food and gladness. And we try and create moments of food and gladness in order to experience what Paul was appealing to here.

And in order that, and Paul uses it as an argument to say this is true because of God. And God has not left himself without witness, that is, without some clue by which you would know his presence among you no matter who you are, no matter what country you've been brought up in.

I have a very good friend who is two and a half years old and with whom I play hide and seek. But one of the rules of the game, if any of you are playing it with two and a half year olds, is that you don't altogether hide.

You just sort of hide because you create such fear and chaos if you disappear altogether. So you have to leave something showing in that game.

[10 : 30] And so God has not altogether hidden. Even in the midst of the pagan world, there is still a clue to his presence which people are to be held responsible for, that they do know who God is.

But even as Paul was telling them this, the Jews came in among them and turned the crowd against Paul and Barnabas. Partly because they were perhaps ashamed of what they had done and partly because it would have been so easy to say, these men are pretending to be Zeus and Hermes.

They're blaspheming our God. They're talking about a living God as opposed to the God who is right here. And within a few moments, the crowd was turned right around so that they picked up stone to throw at Paul and they apparently killed him.

They dragged him out of the city. Paul had experienced what Stephen had experienced when Paul watched. and they took him out of the city so that they wouldn't be accused of his death.

Perhaps they thought it would be better if they could excuse themselves before the Roman magistrates by saying, well, he died outside the city. But when he got outside the city, the church in Lystra was born from this preaching of the good news.

[12 : 14] It was born as a few people gathered around the unconscious form of Paul as he lay there. And it's so reminiscent of Hebrews 13, which tells you how the church is always formed.

It somehow has to be outside. And the writer says, therefore, let us go forth to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.

For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come. So they gathered outside the city, even as our Lord Jesus was taken outside the city, and as his tomb was outside the city. And in this sort of picturesque way, they show where Christianity belongs, outside the order and structure of the city. Something vital and something new happens.

Well, as they gathered around Paul, unconscious as he was, Paul rose and went into the city.

[13:31] Now, this is the other miracle, I think. It's not treated as a miracle the way it's written up in 14. And maybe it's not treated as a miracle because once you are within the Christian community, miracles are no longer miracles.

They're only ordinary events. They just take place. And they're not particularly spectacular because of that explanation of miracles, which is that if Christ is who he says he is, then miracles aren't miracles.

They're just the extended reality of who Jesus is as Lord. And Paul gets up and walks back into the city.

As you in your Christian life will find that that's got to become normative procedure for you, then when you're knocked down and dragged out, you stand up and carry on.

And I know that's happened to some of you recently. And may you be comforted by the assurance that this is standard procedure and your responsibility is to stand up and keep going.

[14:57] Well, the next day, Paul walked some 30 miles to the next city and there he preached and worked for a few days or weeks. And then he returned to Lystra to consolidate and establish the church that was there.

And if you read in the story, this was how he did it. This is what the saints needed in Lystra. And you'll see it if you look in verses 21 following.

He returned to Lystra and strengthened the souls of the disciples. That was the first requirement, to strengthen their souls.

It was the purpose, I'm sure, of singing Amazing Grace this morning, to strengthen your soul, of singing, When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died, the purpose was to strengthen your soul.

We sang, As pants the heart for cooling streams, that was that you, the disciples, might be strengthened in your souls. When we sang that great hymn, which we sang first, which was, help me quick.

[16:16] There it was. Praise my soul, the King of heaven. That was to strengthen your soul. And that's what we need. And we constantly need that strengthening.

Just as day by day, we wake in the morning full of vim, vigor, vitality, and strength. And by the end of the day, as the Bible says, our knees are sagging and our hands are hanging down, and we need to be strengthened in our souls as well as in our bodies.

May God grant that we be strengthened. And then they need to be exhorted to continue in the faith. And that's the work, I think, of teaching and building up and mutually helping one another.

That's the ministry of God the Holy Spirit, the exhorter, encouraging us to continue in the faith. And we need to be prepared for persecution.

Now, persecution sounds a word full of indignation, but it's meant, I think, simply to be standard procedure with relationship to the kingdom of God.

[17:37] When Paul says to the church in Lystra, we must enter the kingdom through many tribulations, through much stress.

The reality of the kingdom is to be entered through much stress, through persecution, through finding in that persecution the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That it inevitably must happen, and we must know the reality of that. And so Paul goes and does what we pray over and over again might happen among us.

That we might know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of persecution. That we might know the exhortation to continue in the faith as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

That we might have our souls strengthened by being reminded of the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and that fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

[18:51] Those are the things which we need to recognize must be an essential part of our ongoing life. And when we get out of earshot of that exhortation, when our souls become so weak

as almost a diminish to nothing, we need to be strengthened in our souls.

We need to be prepared for continual persecution. Not because we're weird people, which probably deserves a certain persecution, but persecution for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And that's the ongoing life of the Christian community. And having done that, Paul then took the Christians at Lystra, and with prayer and fasting, they chose elders to give structure to this new community.

Elders or presbyters. The careful selection and prayerful selection of leaders for the congregation. And how very important that is. Who are the God-appointed elders in our midst? Ordination, I think, has very much confused the issue in the Anglican Church.

[20 : 18] It may be good to have such decency and order, but within the whole life of the congregation, I'm sure there's many God-appointed elders as well.

I'm not denying, I suppose, that ordination is a God-appointed means of selecting leaders, but there needs to be more. There needs to be many whom we recognize among ourselves as the elders God has given us to guide and direct us in our life together as a congregation.

And it's very important that we recognize and honor those men and women as such. Well, having done all that, Paul commits them to the Lord to whom they belong.

Our ultimate welfare as a church is the responsibility of the Lord we serve, and we commit ourselves and one another to Him. that He might fulfill that responsibility among us and in our lives. Well, that's how a church was started. The indiscriminate preaching, the response of one man who illustrated the impact of the gospel, the total chaos that took over around that because people didn't understand it and didn't know how to relate to it, the stoning of Paul and his being raised up as God raises people up still.

[21 : 54] And then his coming back and sharing with the disciples, exhorting them and strengthening their souls and preparing them for persecution and appointing elders.

and out of this remote Roman frontier comes one of the great men of the New Testament.

And you look at chapter 16 and there it says, as the chapter begins, He came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there named Timothy.

So I wonder if standing around the unconscious Paul was a young boy by the name of Timothy. And I wonder if there was also a cripple who was no longer crippled. And out of that community began a new church of Jesus Christ.

[23 : 01] And out of that process begins the renewing of our church week after week and month after month. Amen.