

Acts 14:1-23

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Preacher: Rev. Ryan Spear

[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen. Please have a seat. For those of you I haven't had the pleasure to meet, my name is Ryan Spear. I serve as one of the ministers here. I get to work with youth and young adults and we're continuing in our series in Acts.

So we've been part of St. John's this year. We started a new series. We started with encounters with Jesus and John, formed by Jesus, still in John, and now we're in sent by Jesus in the book of Acts.

In this whole series, we're looking to reflect in two ways. To strengthen our confidence in the power of the gospel and to expand our imagination of what it means to live as Christ's witnesses in our world today.

Confidence and imagination. This whole series is a way to reflect on what you're hearing. Lord, what are you telling me about the confidence I can have in you? How are you inviting me to expand my imagination? And in our passage in Acts, which we just heard read, we've reached a pivotal moment in this series. Way back in the beginning of the book of Acts, Acts chapter 1, verse 8, we heard a little bit of a road map that the good news was spread in Jerusalem, Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

And now we're here at the beginning of the end of the earth. And we have two new characters, Paul and Barnabas. So if you're watching a TV show, it's like the story arc has reached, like who are these two new guys? What's going to happen now?

[1 : 41] Well, they're sent by a church north of Jerusalem in Antioch. And this is Paul's first missionary journey. And when they set sail, they're embarking on a huge development in the spread of the gospel.

It's kind of like the moon landing, right? It would be one small step for Paul and Barnabas, one giant leap for the gospel. So we're going to organize our passage around three Ps today.

I'm a pastor's kid. I can't escape alliteration. My dad loves alliteration. I do too. So three Ps today in our passage. The pattern, the paradigm, and the posture.

The pattern, the paradigm, and the posture. All right, so here's the big idea with all of these. As the gospel spreads into new territory and new people, we see a pattern.

Joyful acceptance and strong opposition. Yes, but also Paul's consistent priorities again and again and again, no matter where he is.

[2 : 45] And as this good news reaches new ears, it challenges their paradigms, their ways of thinking and perceiving the world. And finally, it invites us today to take some similar postures, participating in the work God is doing in our midst.

Patterns, paradigms, postures. All right, that's where we're going. And remember, there's an important feature about Acts, a little bit of a warning for how to read this book. It's a little bit like having a friend with wild stories, right?

They start a story, something like this. This is a true story. This really happened. I don't know, maybe someone like Aaron Roberts, maybe, you know? You know how he starts his stories? This is true. This really happened.

I'm not sure if I'm allowed in 2026 to affect an accent that's not my own. But it's kind of like a story where, like, things are happening. You're not necessarily supposed to be like, okay, if I'm ever in Thailand riding an elephant, I will know to or not to do this or that.

No, it's more about pointing to a different point he's trying to make, right? So when we're reading this, don't jump right in and think, okay, if I'm ever in Lystra and I heal a guy, maybe I should watch out that people are going to think I'm Zeus.

[3 : 52] We don't want to do that. Now, another minister, actually, I'm thankful that Aberdeen mentioned him, Jim Saladin preached a series in Acts, and he talked about these as case studies. That's also a helpful way to think about this, a case study, seeing how the gospel reaches a new place and what happens there.

So that's one little warning as we're about to head right into our passage. All right, we're going to get into it now. Let's look first at the pattern, verses 1 through 10. We're going to look at Paul and Iconium to the healing in Lystra.

There's so many patterns in this section. I want to chase them all down. I love rabbit trails, and I'd love to, like, take you with me to all of them. We're going to talk about only one pattern in particular, Paul's priority in the midst of mixed results.

So look at verse 1, chapter 14, page 923. It says, Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. Of course, the they here is Paul and Barnabas. Most of us here know Paul. If you don't know Paul, super fast recap. Paul was Saul previously, and he's, like, the number one opponent to the Christian faith.

[5 : 09] It wasn't just something he did. It was his whole identity. He was standing by while Stephen was martyred. He was about to chart his whole career on this course of chasing down this new way of believing.

But Jesus literally stopped him in his tracks on a Damascus Road encounter and met him in a powerful way. So if you don't know anything about Paul, I'll stop there and just tell you, read the rest of Acts.

It is amazing. You'll catch up. It'll be incredible. So that's who Paul is. And it's super surprising that he's the key player in this moment. At the expansion of the good news into the end of the earth, he does something interesting.

This is the first time Saul goes by Paul. There's language for this. It's called code switching, right? Being in a new context, switching the way you're referred to.

And Paul's doing that as he heads out into a Greek context where this Greek name will put him more on equal footing with those he's talking to. So Paul and Barnabas are speaking in a synagogue in Iconium.

[6 : 11] This is the capital province of Galatia. It's in modern day Turkey. And if you look at the next few verses, it tells us the results. A great number of both Jews and Greeks believe.

But right after that, it says, but the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. Who are these unbelieving Jews?

This word unbelieving means actually like refusing to believe. Not that they're just not yet convinced, but they've heard it pronounced clearly and compellingly. And they say, we utterly reject this.

This challenges our whole way of life. And we're starting to see this pattern develop. Wherever the good news goes, it provokes strong reactions. Joyful acceptance among some.

This is the very thing I've been waiting for. And complete and violent rejection among others. But despite this mixed result, and actually because of it, Paul sticks to his priority.

[7 : 10] That's the pattern we're after. The priority he has in all of his journeys. And simply put, his priority is Jesus. As he put it later in a letter to a church in Corinth, we preach Christ crucified.

We preach Christ crucified. That's his priority. Now, our passage simply says that he spoke in such a way that a great number believed. But we have insight into what he was saying from the previous chapter.

Luke records nearly an entire sermon. We hear the heart of the message he preaches in that synagogue in a nearby town. He says, Forgiveness of sins, freedom in a new life.

This is the good news that's both for Jews and for Greeks. For the in crowd and the out crowd alike. But we see in verses 4 to 7, this priority to preach Jesus rocks the world of those who hear it.

Again, some to joyful acceptance, others to strong rejection. That's the pattern. Preaching Jesus. Keeping Jesus at the forefront. Jesus as the priority. Now, I included verses 8 to 10 in the pattern section.

[8 : 32] The scene where the man is healed. For an important reason. I'm only going to mention this part briefly. Because this is drawing us back, like Zoe talked about with the kids, to a pattern we saw before.

Drawing a line from Paul to Peter. From Peter to Jesus and Luke. That those who are paralyzed encountered a power that heals them. Now, Luke includes it to show this pattern. The power of Jesus was with Peter. And was with Paul. The same presence. And what happens to all of these men, these paralyzed men, is a living parable. And what happens to all of us when we receive Jesus. Our paralyzed souls leap up in new life at the forgiveness of our sins. So that's why it's included in the pattern part, right? But this is where the strong reaction, the paradigm shift needs to happen. We're getting into that in a moment. So what's our takeaway in this section? This takeaway that the pattern of Paul is to give priority to preaching Jesus.

[9 : 31] Well, first of all, we're called to stick to the same priority as the church today. And it's really a simple message. Only in Jesus can everyone, everyone in this room, receive forgiveness of sins, freedom, and a new life.

Forgiveness, freedom, new life. And we too can expect mixed results. Now, why is this such a big deal? Why preaching Jesus? Sounds pretty straightforward, right?

Sunday school answer. Well, it's incredibly tempting to make our presentation of the good news, Jesus plus. C.S. Lewis famously talked about this in one of his books, right?

We always want to add something plus to Jesus. And oftentimes, these are things that the gospel means. When we bring Jesus into our life, into our community, of course, it plays in a lot of wonderful ways.

And how we treat the communities we're in just ways, how we treat the creation, how we relate to a lot of things politically and so on. But the temptation is for the plus to keep getting bigger and bigger and bigger.

[10 : 34] Until actually Jesus becomes kind of just a way to get to the plus, not a goal in and of himself. No matter where Paul goes, Jesus is a priority.

That's his pattern. To preach him boldly and trust God with the results. All right, that's our first P, the pattern. The pattern to preach Jesus. Pattern to give priority to Jesus.

Now we're moving on to a paradigm. These are our next verses, verses 11 to 18. Man is healed.

The crowds think Paul and Barnabas are gods. And it seems as if Paul now has to backpedal what is going on in these verses.

So first of all, what's a paradigm? Why have I used that word? So a paradigm, it's kind of like having a series of shelves in your mind. Where you like put all of your experiences, right?

Like your little baby and you encounter your first dog, right? You're like, furry thing, has eyes, probably not a human. I'm going to put this into like maybe a new category for like furry thing, not a human.

[11 : 35] It's a paradigm. We're organizing our reality around it. But whenever we encounter something that doesn't fit, it creates what's called dissonance. We know dissonance as an auditory word.

But think of it like being handed a huge package. And then you turn around to put it on like one of your shelves. And you're like, I have no idea where this fits. Maybe I'll like move this part over or that part over.

And you're left holding it and the weight feels heavier and heavier while you're trying to figure out where to put it. That's cognitive dissonance. And we see that happening among this crowd. They're trying to fit this presentation of the gospel, this healing of the man, into their existing ways of thinking about the world.

So we look at verses 11 to 13. Their shelf is, we believe, in Zeus and Hermes. And they see this dramatic thing happen. And they think, this must be that.

So why would they think this? Why would they think this? Well, Paul and Barnabas are in a brand new part of the world where the gospel has not made it yet. I mean, chances are there have been some travelers that have brought news about this.

[12 : 37] But this is the first time that they've come to present it in its fullness. So there's an old legend that was around this area about Zeus and Hermes, Greek gods.

And the legend goes like this. That one day, Zeus and Hermes decided to make a visit to Earth, to this part of the world. And as they went around, they sought people to bring them in and invite them over for dinner.

Wonderful. Well, they went to first one house and then another. People turned them away, turned them away, until hundreds of people turned them away. And finally, an elderly couple invites them in, shows them hospitality. And then they finally reveal themselves as Zeus and Hermes. And they bring blessings upon this household, which sounds amazing, like the wonderful end of the story. But then they turn around and destroy all the other homes that didn't welcome them in. So that story is likely in the background and imagination of these people. They see this dramatic act happen, and they suddenly think, maybe not just, oh, yay, Zeus and Hermes are here, but, oh, no, Zeus and Hermes are here.

[13:40] What if we didn't show proper welcome? What if we didn't do the right things? So this is the paradigm that they're confronting. And what Paul does here is he invites them into something called a paradigm shift.

It's not just making room on the existing shelf. It's rethinking your whole system to begin with, right? We've all had these paradigm shifts. Moment where we've learned something or experienced something.

And sometimes it actually seems like the ground shifts beneath our feet. So he begins this paradigm shift with these words. They run out into the crowd.

They rend their garments. And they say, looking down, they say, I'm looking here at verse 15. Men, why are you doing these things?

We are also men of like nature with you. And we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

[14:42] So what's going on here? Why is he doing this? You can actually take the entire story of what Paul just said, map who they thought Zeus was, and Paul is providing a point-by-point correction.

He's saying, okay, this Zeus thing is not quite the way you need to be thinking about reality, right? These are vain things. These are pointless things. These are things that won't get you anywhere. But all the good things that you thought you could attribute to Zeus actually was a power behind that the whole time. And I'm here to tell you who that power was. It reminds them first that they themselves aren't gods, that Zeus isn't a god, and that the living God has been the source of all good things in their life.

It's like he went back into their history, their imagination, to show them that God was there all along, leaving signposts for them.

Now, who here has seen the movie Interstellar? Okay, good show of hands here. If you haven't, it's been out long enough. I'm going to spoil it for you right now. But I think the Statue of Limitations is like five years is long enough, and you should have watched it by now.

[15:47] It's an amazing movie. Matthew McConaughey, Jessica Chastain, Anne Hathaway. Anyways, they enter... Okay, be nerdy for a second. I'm trying to explain this simply. There's a scene throughout the movie where Jessica Chastain's character is the daughter, and a series of seemingly random things happen in her life, seemingly coincidental.

And as the story progresses, you're trying to make sense of it yourself as a viewer. Towards the end of the movie, Matthew McConaughey's character, her father, he enters this space where he's able to manipulate the past, manipulate time.

And it's this beautiful scene. The way they shot it is incredible. If you're nerdy, he's like in a tesseract, like a four-dimensional thing. You can look into that later. And in this scene, you see him rushing throughout this space, seeing different moments in his daughter's life where he's able to influence what's happening in her space.

And you suddenly realize all of those random things that were happening was her father all along. He was guiding her towards discovering how to get out of the predicament they were in.

And she realizes this later in life as well. This is like what Paul is doing here. He's showing them all the good things they've experienced in life, the crops, the seasons, the satisfaction, the fullness.

[17:05] The fullness that was God all along. So he corrects them. He finds common ground, and he offers them this paradigm shift. Now, what's the result?

Well, I'd love to be like, and everyone was super happy, and happily ever after. It went really well. No, it's mixed. It's so much so that Paul, he barely gets past explaining this.

He barely gets past this beauty when the crowd, his past, literally catches up to him. Look in verse 18. So it says here that the crowd has, even with these words, these amazing words, they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifices.

And his past literally catches up to him in the next few verses. He's been making this word known everywhere he's been preaching. And not only has there been opposition, but it follows him. And they drag him out of the city. They stone him nearly to death. And you have to wonder in that moment what's going through Paul's mind.

[18:07] Lord, I just preached for you. What's happening? Why are people responding in this way? It makes you wonder what keeps Paul going as he's attempting to do these paradigm shifts.

Now, this morning with our youth, we watched a little clip from the Bible Project. Have you ever heard of the Bible Project? They do those amazing illustrated previews of what different books of the Bible mean.

It's incredible. If you're new to faith or you're considering Christianity, I really encourage you to check out the Bible Project. They're a great way of grasping what's going on. We watched a little clip about this particular passage.

And it's a beautiful scene where it shows Paul collapsed on his knees outside of some unnamed city. Clearly, he's beaten and bruised. But as he kneels, scenes flash before him of all that Jesus did for him.

And all that Jesus showed him. We see scenes of Jesus' death, his resurrection. Scenes of Jesus showing up on the road to Damascus. He then raises confidently to his feet with his eyes fixed on the glory set before him.

[19:18] That's what keeps Paul going. Not the reactions of the crowd. Not how many people respond positively. But knowing the goodness of Jesus that goes before him.

So what? How do we react to this paradigm shift today? What does this mean in our context? Well, we know by reading between the lines that Paul was a student of his culture.

Just as much as he was a student of God's word. And we live in what people call today a post-Christian context. Now, some of you hear this as post and think, This is terrible.

There's a lot to mourn about the decline of the influence Of Judeo-Christian values in our society. But this post-Christian context also is full of opportunities.

We meet more people who might be actually further away from some stereotypes Of what they think Christianity is all about. What they think Jesus is all about. We have new opportunities to present it in fresh ways.

[20:17] So the invitation for us here is to be a reader of God's word And an interpreter of culture like Paul and Barnabas were. And we might translate it differently, right?

He went with Zeus. He pointed to the book of nature. They didn't share since they were coming from a non-Jewish context. They didn't share in Hebrew scriptures where Paul could usually point them to. But he could point them to the book of nature.

And that's where he brought them back into for their paradigm shift. For us it might be something different. Maybe a conversation of what does it mean to be fully or authentically human. Or maybe we can talk to people about what is the quest for transcendence.

For rising above what seems to be just the normal things of life. Maybe it's the hunger for love and community that we all feel. Especially in a city like Vancouver that can be quite lonely for many.

Or maybe it's the search for freedom or the longing for personal significance. Whatever it might be, there's a hook in every opportunity. A chance to translate this good news into a new paradigm. But wherever we begin, as one Anglican minister, John Stott, said, we shall end with Jesus Christ, who is himself the good news.

[21:30] And who alone can fulfill all human hopes. So the takeaway here from this paradigm shift is both to realize this good news will involve a shift.

It will encounter ways of thinking in the world that will not mesh with this new reality. But ultimately it's the Holy Spirit that will do this work to shift it.

We see that from the reaction of the crowds. So I think this invitation here is an opportunity. This opposition is an opportunity. It's an opportunity first to find common ground like Paul and Barnabas did.

Where men like you speak their language, translate it into their context. And to share a story of good news. That all the good things in their life, God has been the source of.

Alright, with this pattern in mind, with this paradigm shift in mind, we're going to close here with some postures. What I mean by postures is this. I really enjoy watching my son Griffin play volleyball this year at his school.

[22 : 28] And a posture, you know, posture in sports. You get ready for the ball to come, right? You're not just kind of... I watch the people serve and the young men with their hands behind their backs so that they didn't get nailed in the back of the head with a volleyball.

Right? That's a posture. You want to prevent your head from getting hit with a volleyball. Right? There's a posture to be ready for the ball to come. There's a posture to be ready to bump or set it. It's being not necessarily the right tactics, but being ready from whatever direction something might come.

That's what I mean here by a posture. So what do we get into? How do we get into a position out of these passages here? So our passage ends in verses 21 through 28.

And the outcome of all this, again, is mixed. We see Paul seemingly doing something I wouldn't normally think to do. He backtracks in his journey. If you're reading along closely, you'll see he goes back to all the places he was stoned.

He was chased away from. He was threatened. He goes back to all those places. And what is he doing? Well, it says he goes back to strengthen the souls of those who believe, the disciples, encouraging them to endure, and reminding them that they too can expect trouble.

[23 : 36] It's part and parcel of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. And finally, they leave the church in the hands of godly leaders and in the hands of the Lord.

So what was the legacy of this mission, his first missionary journey? Lots of different legacies, but there's two interesting clues I'll leave with you as breadcrumbs to follow up on your own. The first is a convert named Timothy.

I've heard of Timothy. Timothy is most likely from Lystra or Iconium, one of these two places. And Paul either converted him here or met him here and brought him under his discipleship, under his mentorship.

We have the beautiful letters of 1 and 2 Timothy as a testimony to that relationship. That's one of the outcomes. You can go and read that and see the work God did through Paul's faithfulness.

Another legacy is the book of Galatians, written by Paul to the same group of churches later.

If you want to know, if you're someone who likes watching the extended versions of movies and reading the appendices at the back of the book, read Galatians to get a sense for what happened afterwards. So out of this Acts case study, as we close, what kind of postures do we expect?

[24 : 47] The first two we already talked about. I won't go through them. First of all, just mention them briefly. Posture one is to follow the same pattern as Paul. We follow the pattern of keeping Jesus at the center, the priority of preaching Jesus and the work he did on the cross.

That's the best news people can hear. Posture two is the paradigms. We pray for the imagination to see in every opposition an opportunity and to find common ground and show people the goodness of God.

Remember, it's good news that Paul goes around proclaiming. It's good news we get to proclaim as well. And one final posture. We see this in the closing verses here.

A posture of prayer. We pray for a few things. We pray for a door to be opened to those who haven't yet heard the good news.

We pray for strengthening of our souls as disciples of Jesus. And we pray for encouragement to stay faithful in the midst of mixed results.

[25 : 55] And finally, we pray for confidence. Not in us, but that would lean into the confidence in Christ in us. And for him to expand our imaginations for what God is doing in our midst.

Amen.