

## Acts | The Incendiary Fellowship

### *The Gospel to the Pagan*

Acts 14.8ff

5.28.17

*At Lystra a man was sitting who had no strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked.<sup>9</sup> This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze on him and had seen that he had faith to be made well,<sup>10</sup> said with a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he leaped up and began to walk.<sup>11</sup> When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have become like men and have come down to us."<sup>12</sup> And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.<sup>13</sup> The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.<sup>14</sup> But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out<sup>15</sup> and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you 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.<sup>16</sup> "In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways;<sup>17</sup> and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."<sup>18</sup> Even saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.*

*<sup>19</sup> But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.<sup>20</sup> But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe.<sup>21</sup> After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch,<sup>22</sup> strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."<sup>23</sup> When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.<sup>24</sup> They passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia.*

*<sup>25</sup> When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.<sup>26</sup> From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished.<sup>27</sup> When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.<sup>28</sup> And they spent a long time with the disciples.*

We're looking at The Acts of the Apostles... the story of how Christianity spread in the first generation after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The fearful, cowering disciples undergo a remarkable transformation and they go everywhere... boldly telling what they saw – the Resurrected Man.

The Gospel (the basic message of Christianity) the message itself is a kind of character in this history and where the Gospel goes...things happen. It's a force or power and sometimes it leads to major disruptions in the places where it spreads.

It heals and it saves but it also exposes the disease and like a surgeon's scalpel, before it heals it also cuts and divides (Heb 4.12) it's able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. It disturbs the status quo.

Such is the case in today's episodes – the message finds people who may have been relatively happy and okay...and it stirs up the whole town... The News of Jesus Christ gets down to the bottom of things and finds that beneath the sometimes peaceful exterior of human lives...there are fears and forces at work and usually the best we can do is to sort of ignore these fears/forces...but the Gospel wants to expose these oppressive powers and free us.

This is the first time Paul/Barnabas speak to a fully pagan, non-Jewish audience... They encounter ways of looking at the world... spiritual approaches... belief systems that they find shocking... and this is also the case in modern South Florida. This is NOT (in case you haven't noticed) it's NOT a spiritually monolithic area of the world – it's religious pluralism. Many of us have parents and grandparents who didn't grow up in church...who never attended church...and who may have adhered to other non-Christian religions. So, how are we to think of the Christian message in this kind of climate/environment...the Gospel and religious pluralism: that's our topic today. Let's look at:

- 1) Our Common Dilemma (dust and glory)
- 2) The Blessed Interruptions
- 3) Turning to the Living God

The common dilemma we all face...which this passage illustrates is that we're all dying...AND we know it. Now I realize that's a really dismal thing to say but let me unpack it a little and I think you'll see that it's actually a WHOLE LOT MORE depressing than you think!

The great book that I've often quoted, the 1974 Pulitzer Prize winner for non-fiction called, *The Denial of Death* by Ernest Becker – in that book he draws on Kierkegaard, Freud and other heavyweight thinkers to show that human beings are in some ways like angels and in some ways like animals. We're like angels in that we're capable of contemplating these lofty ideas...and we also are like animals, we're physical and we eat and we defecate, and we are always reminded that we die... Zebras don't contemplate their death...don't write love-songs or poems about the futility of life or works of art/music meditating on the great beyond.

And because this is such a terrible burden to bear, the most well adjusted and happy human beings are the ones who most successfully deny death... if you're able to ignore it...if we can sanitize death and somehow banish it from our thinking...then we can be happy... but it's really hard to do it...hard to constantly lie to ourselves and deny reality.

You might get help from hobbies or drugs and alcohol or other addictions and preoccupations...just don't stop and think... lie to yourself and you can be happy...tell yourself the truth and depression awaits.

Becker (who was not a Christian) Becker wasn't the first to think about this ...Blaise Pascal the Christian mathematician of the 17<sup>th</sup> C said "Know then, proud man, what a paradox you are to yourself... learn that man infinitely transcends man..." (Pensées #434; 1670) In other words, "Stop denying death and face it."

And the great Scottish Anglican bishop, Richard Holloway said these great words, "This is my dilemma. I am dust and ashes, frail and wayward, a set of predetermined behavioral responses, riddled with fear, beset with needs, the quintessence of dust and unto dust I shall return."

"But there is something else in me. Dust I may be, but troubled dust, dust that dreams, dust that that has strong premonitions of transfiguration, of a glory in store, a destiny prepared, an inheritance that will one day be my own. So my life is spread out in a painful dialectic between ashes and glory, between weakness and transfiguration. I am a riddle to myself, an exasperating enigma, this strange duality of dust and glory."

And with these pagans in a small town in ancient Turkey...living life...denying death (as best as they are able) God sends an interruption into their daily routines... messengers come with a story and with a miracle. Paul and Barnabas sent from the Church at Antioch...Christian missionaries.

This is not the first interruption from God...but this is an interruption they cannot deny or ignore.

Paul is just like Peter (in Acts CH 3) who healed a man also lame from his mother's womb at the Temple in Jerusalem. Paul is also an apostle like Peter.

As Paul speaks, there's a miraculous interruption (our second point), a man born lame hears the message and believes it (somehow Paul can tell) and the man is healed and leaps up...and begins to walk.

And the Pagan crowds interpret this as an intervention from beyond, "The gods have become like men and have come down to us!" This is an inescapable reminder that there IS a beyond...a realm that transcends the natural/physical.

And speaking a language Paul/Barnabas apparently don't understand...they prepare to offer sacrifices to whom they believe are the incarnation of Zeus and Hermes. This is how the people cope with this dilemma, this knowledge that they are dust but "troubled dust"...who somehow KNOW that there is more to life than just animal life. They invent gods.

There was a myth in that region (found in the Roman poet Ovid, *Metamorphoses*) that once Zeus and Hermes came down and looked for a welcoming home to visit...knocked on 1000 doors and only found ONE old couple who invited them in...so Zeus and Hermes flooded the whole valley and drowned them all (except the old couple).

AND Paul's audience DIDN'T want to repeat this terrible mistake. So they offer bulls to the incarnate gods...and when Paul and Barnabas figure out what's happening, they tear their robes and try to stop them.

And then there's another blessed interruption – Paul begins to preach the Gospel.

He asks them, in the sermon, why they are doing this and then tells them that there is one God who made all things.

And, if only they had eyes to see, they would have noticed that God was frequently interrupting their lives...He was giving witness to His own goodness, in all the little gifts we take for granted. G.K. Chesterton wrote these great words: You say grace before meals. All right. But I say grace before the concert and the opera, and grace before the play and pantomime, and grace before I open a book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing and grace before I dip the pen in the ink." (Notebook 1850)

G.K. Chesterton was always being interrupted and Paul was showing them that creation and the way God governs it is a blessed interruption...if only we notice (v. 17, QUOTE) "that God did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."

And even with these truths ringing in their ears, the pagans try to offer sacrifices to Barnabas (Zeus) and to Paul (Hermes). They cannot ignore this miraculous, this BLESSED interruption. It's a reminder that there IS more to life than eating and drinking and reproducing and dying like the animals... there is a transcendent a beyond and even the seasons and food and drink should remind us... though mostly we deny it...and yet sometimes the interruptions can't be denied or ignored.

Superstition is a hard nut to crack and all human religion is built on the attempt to placate the gods and keep the gods at arms length...using charms and prayers and offerings and rituals and good works to keep the powers at bay. It's all built on fear and the illusion of control.

Paul and Barnabas were not able to tell the whole Gospel on this occasion...though they did return with the rest of the Story. It's the message of the God who actually DID come down...the God who DID become like men...who in fact became a Man, not to get our sacrifices but to BE our sacrifice.

The God-Man, Jesus Christ, who lived in our place so I could be credited with His obedience as if I had obeyed myself and who then accepted the blame for MY sins so that I could be acquitted and counted innocent and delightful in His sight. This is the One living God (v. 15) who is NOT our invention but who invented us...who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them... He allowed the generations to wander but now He has interrupted us with grace...He has solved our dilemma.

And the point of the sermon is (v. 15 QUOTE) “so that you should turn from these worthless things to a living God...” AND that’s our final point: what are we to do or know from this passage? How does this encounter with raw religion and superstition INFORM our lives and the life/mission of the church that lives in a superstitious place?

Well, for one thing, we learn something about people...all people. Isn’t it amazing that this scholar and devoted righteous, Jewish man, Paul could say to these superstitious pagans (v. 15 quote): “Men...we are also men of the same nature as you...”? Paul recognized that HE was just like them; we’re all the same, we are all dust, “troubled dust” (Holloway) and we all tend toward denial and superstition...try to keep God out of our business and cling to control and fear...The forces terrify us: illness that we can’t cure... superstition... we’re afraid but the gods we invent and then try to control – they can’t help us.

Only the Living God...who made all things and controls all things, the Living God who in Jesus Christ died and rose again – ONLY He can save us, not by denying death but by defeating death.

Later, the crowds turn on Paul and Barnabas and try to execute Paul...how fickle is public opinion. First they’re gods, a few days later they have to die! It’s yet another force to be feared. In our own day, public opinion in the form of social-media (do your Instagram pics measure up?...Get enough “likes” on your FaceBook post?)... are you socially sensitive enough? Here’s a recent testimony of a young woman in high-school; she tells about public opinion as a force she couldn’t beat: Instagram was an effective trigger for my already struggling self-worth as it provided me with a tangible measure of how many friends I had and how many people liked my life. It was a tool I used to damage my self-esteem daily. <https://scottsauls.com/2017/04/social-media/>

I’m not saying that social-media is evil, just that public opinion is a force, a god and only the true and living God who defeated death can save us from it.

A second, take away is that the church, as we’ve seen, is a depot. Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch, their sending church and the whole congregation gathers to hear what God is doing to bring the nations to himself. They seemed to realize, it’s not what Rome does that changes the world – it’s what God is doing by the Gospel. The church that GETS this becomes a missionary sending/receiving depot.

Third, when Paul was executed...and thought to be dead (by having large rocks thrown on him), Luke mentions it in one little phrase, “they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead”. (19) We would write a book about it.

Point is... suffering for being a Christian is part of the deal. And ONLY when we’re saturated by grace and really secure in the Gospel does it seem light and momentary as Paul later describes his own pain (2 Cor 4.17, 2 Tim 3.11ff). God has a purpose in it and even when we don’t see it, the Gospel enables us to trust Him.

Last, the missionary team didn’t get to tell the whole story...at first... but they did return. Pagans often require a kind of “pre-evangelism” where they learn that God is a Person (not a force) that God is creator and THEN that He is Redeemer. We should remember that when we interact with friends and neighbors. People often require multiple exposures to the Gospel in a myriad of ways (Tim Keller) before they actually turn to the living God...so don’t give up on people.

And...don’t give up on yourself. They returned to all these churches, “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith (22)...and “And they spent a long time with the disciples” (28).

To quote Journey, “Don’t Stop Believing” ... and to quote St. Luke, “spend a long time with fellow disciples” – that’s where growth in grace happens.