

Acts | The Incendiary Fellowship

Voyage of Discovery: The Barbarians

Acts 28.1-14

8.13.17

When they had been brought safely through, then we found out that the island was called Malta.² The natives showed us extraordinary kindness; for because of the rain that had set in and because of the cold, they kindled a fire and received us all.³ But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened itself on his hand.⁴ When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they began saying to one another, "Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live."⁵ However he shook the creature off into the fire and suffered no harm.⁶ But they were expecting that he was about to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.

⁷ Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us courteously three days.⁸ And it happened that the father of Publius was lying in bed afflicted with recurrent fever and dysentery; and Paul went in to see him and after he had prayed, he laid his hands on him and healed him.⁹ After this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured.¹⁰ They also honored us with many marks of respect; and when we were setting sail, they supplied us with all we needed.

¹¹ At the end of three months we set sail on an Alexandrian ship which had wintered at the island, and which had the Twin Brothers for its figurehead.¹² After we put in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days.¹³ From there we sailed around and arrived at Rhegium, and a day later a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli.¹⁴ There we found some brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days; and thus we came to Rome.

We've been looking at The Acts of the Apostles this summer – and we hope to finish the book next week but today...we reach the goal of the book: Rome.

Paul is headed for his "day in court" – that's what brings him to Rome... and through some unusual events (of which we'll be reminded in a moment), Paul finds himself on the island of Malta and his experience there is a voyage of discovery ...unexpected kindness in a strange place.

He and those with him fall into the hands of the "natives"...that word (vv. 2 & 4) is the Greek word "barbaros" or Barbarian... They fall into the hands of the Barbarians and... they find... not headhunters or cannibals but hospitality and honor ...just kindness.

And THIS becomes an opportunity for US to sort of examine some of our categories... we assume that we know people and that we know certain types or groups... We may go back in our minds to school where people FIRST started to gather themselves into groups and YOU and I began to form our opinions about those groups...the jocks...the goths... the nerds... the mean-girls...the motor-heads etc.

And this passage not only EXPLODES the stereotypes that keep people IN their own groups and keep people from interacting with OTHER groups... BUT IT ALSO shows what amazing resources are IN the basic Christian message, i.e. how the Gospel equips us with a new way of seeing weird people...a new openness to discovery and a nuanced way of appreciating people, ourselves, circumstances AND a new way of enjoying God. So today, let's look at:

- 1) Discoveries Among the Barbarians
- 2) Discoveries in Victorious Disaster
- 3) Discoveries in a Gospel Outlook on All of Life

Paul appealed the ruling of the Roman Governors who wanted to send him back to Jerusalem to be tried by the Jewish clergymen... Paul wasn't into that because they'd already shown that they wanted to execute him and he would definitely NOT get a fair trial in Jerusalem.

So, as a Roman citizen, he exercised his right to appeal to the Supreme Court – to Caesar himself.

As he was being transported to Rome for the hearing, he was shipwrecked and all 276 passengers and crew were spared... They washed up on an island unknown to them that turned out to be Malta (an island directly south of Sicily and Italy in the Mediterranean Sea).

It was inhabited by Barbarians... and that's not to say that they were cave men or like "Conan the Barbarian" but that they were NOT Jews and NOT Greeks... probably spoke a little Greek but they were "exotic".

And yet as the ship is being evacuated the natives, the Barbarians show up NOT to eat the castaways or to attack them but to welcome them, v. 2, "The natives showed us extraordinary kindness; for because of the rain that had set in and because of the cold, they kindled a fire and received us all."

That's an important word, "received us" – the Greek word "proslambano" – to accept or welcome (Rom 15).

To show hospitality was an extremely important virtue in the ancient world and NOT a virtue one would expect to find among the uncultured natives on an unknown island that turned out to be Malta.

And Paul and the whole company go “from rags to riches” – one moment in severe danger of dying and eating hard-tack, stale, soggy bread and THE NEXT moment, warm at a fire and taken in by the wealthiest man on the island, a man “named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us courteously three days”. (7)

Now, WHY amidst everything that happened, why did Luke the historian include these little episodes?

And I THINK what Luke’s showing is that if we are open and observant, we will find traces of God and His imprint on ALL PEOPLES. There are whispers of truth, beauty and goodness in virtually all cultures even where you would least expect to find them. So, be “culture positive” as much as possible, “whatever is honorable, whatever is right...pure, ...lovely, ... of good repute, if there’s any excellence...if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.” (Phi 4.8)

And isn’t it a great IRONY that these important virtues DO show up in the Barbarians and often DON’T show up where we might expect them?

Paul had been in the most refined, sophisticated religious spot in the world – the Temple at Jerusalem – and the crowd turned on him like a bunch of wild animals...like a bunch of... BARBARIANS!

Paul had been in super-sophisticated Athens, the intellectual center of the world and they showed him ZERO hospitality and berated him as an idle babbler (“a seed picker”- 17.18)... And he’d been at Ephesus, a great commercial and tourism center...home of the very sophisticated Artemis cult...and temple (one of the wonders of the world) and THERE they had a riot that ended in this mindless chanting and screaming for TWO HOURS...they acted like barbarians!

And the point is: better to be a kind/hospitable barbarian than to be cool, sophisticated, refined jerk.

Our Peru Team is back... they will likely be able to tell some stories from the jungle...where barbarians live... STORIES OF POOR PEOPLE in the Amazon Jungle (and I don’t mean amazon.com!) stories of people with very little material wealth or education but who are open and generous and receptive to strangers – and then WE with all of our stuff...resources...sophistication and we can be so...GUARDED...fearful...private...CLOSED... and the question IS: “who’s the REAL barbarian?”

See, Luke is inviting us to see the world with NEW EYES and to discard our old categories...to know that there are traces of the Image of God in places you would NEVER expect.

AND...these barbarians are ALSO...deeply flawed. Luke does NOT believe in the “noble savage” – he doesn’t believe these people are ignorant therefore innocent...he sees that THEY, like all other people and categories of people, all are fallen and have lost the ability to know God...THAT’S WHY LUKE includes this very sad picture of fear and superstition that enslaved them.

When a poisonous snake bites Paul, these hospitable people immediately revert to a way of seeing the world in their own crude/simplistic categories.

When he’s bitten they assume he must be a murderer... and when he survives they assume he must be a god. It’s like the Munchkins who wanted to ask Dorothy, “Are you a good witch or a bad witch?” - ONLY TWO categories. You must be a bad person or you must be a good even super person!

That brings us to Paul. He’s making discoveries among those barbarians because of his own prior discoveries of what we might call victorious disaster, that, because of Jesus Christ, tragedy is often the path to life...and things rarely as crude and simplistic as the natives and everyone likes to think. “When the natives saw the beast (θηρίον) hanging from (Paul’s) hand, they were saying to one another, ‘Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.’” (28.4)

The natives believed the goddess of Justice (ἡ Δίκη) was out to get Paul because he was evidently a murderer...and while she failed to finish him off in the shipwreck she was going to get him now!

THEY think if you're succeeding, God must love you and if you suffer, God must be punishing you... for Paul that’s barbaric.

Paul’s been learning to interpret life through the lens of triumphant defeat. Sometimes what looks like disaster is only the set-up for New Life/blessing.

Starting in like chapter 20 Paul has heartache (20.36ff) trials prison, beatings, riots and now a shipwreck...and the idea that “if you just obey and believe, God will make your life easy and successful and smooth” – Paul knows that’s NOT how the Christian life works!

Paul has really begun to see that the WHOLE message of Jesus Christ is a message of life coming out of death...a message of strength coming out of weakness ...of victory coming through disaster.

Sometimes things look clearly disastrous...total train wreck...a shipwreck and yet out of death comes life.

The Crucifixion/Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the new paradigm for Paul. Out of history's worst possible moment, when the Creator was rejected by His own creation, when He came to His own and His own disowned Him (John 1.11)...but out of that moment came redemption/resurrection – life out of death.

And because THAT is Paul's interpretive grid for seeing all of life THEREFORE he knows that things are often NOT what they seem. What looks like a curse must be a blessing – WHY? Because there's a God who raises the dead! That's what the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ communicates.

That's why things aren't crude and formulaic for Paul – it's not “Hey, that guy was bitten by a snake – he must be a murderer!” or “Hey, that got survived a snake bite – he must be a god!”

Fact is: Paul WAS a murderer... but that's NOT why the snake bit him...and Paul was a son of God but that's NOT why he survived... Paul knew that Jesus Christ took the venom FOR him...Jesus Christ dealt with the justice Paul deserved when Jesus died to under Paul's punishment.

And from now on...while Paul may undergo major difficulties and suffering...NONE of it was because he was being punished – Paul's punishment was already OVER – Jesus Christ already accepted it in Paul's place!

Paul must've been thinking, “You people think I'm a murderer? You don't know the half of it!...But this is NOT why the snake bit me...my Savior was bitten and took all the venom of justice FOR me...and He defeated the Beast...and cast him into the fire for me.”

Paul are you a good witch or a bad witch? Are you a murderer or a god?

Answer: it's NOT that simplistic – I am a murder who has been treated like a god...I'm the chief of sinners (1 Tim 1.13-16) now adopted by God Himself – a son of God embraced, cherished, by the Heavenly Father who never plays, “he-loves-me/he-loves-me-not” and therefore I don't have to wonder about what my present circumstances say about how God feels about me – He loves and accepts me and that will NEVER change.”

Now, to close, some Discoveries in a Gospel Outlook on All of Life – what can we take away from this odd little episode?

First, say what you want about the barbarians – they are hospitable and...in a sense that really is THE most important thing. Remember, Jesus Christ sent His disciples into the villages to look for people who were hospitable to their message.

John's Gospel opens with the words, “He came to His own and yet His own did not receive Him” – same word at the end of v. 2... To receive God in Jesus Christ is the most important move you

will ever make, “as many as received Him to them He gave the right to be children of God i.e. to all who believe in His name” – it changes everything! It transforms murderers into children of God...

Second, this is a reason to be hospitable to other people too. God came in Jesus Christ and gave us welcome so that we TOO might welcome others...to open our lives, our homes and our arms to others.

Third, be open to different people... don't discount the “barbarians” in your life (however you define them). Sometimes, radiant vestiges of God's image can be found in the least likely places. Learn to be culture-positive wherever you can be – to see whatever is true, whatever is honorable...right... pure...lovely... of good repute, of excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.” (Phi 4.8). Yes, there signs of depravity...but look for the good. Sometimes manners appear in the oddest places. (“These FISH have manners!”)

Last, practice this “Third Way” kind of thinking. We ourselves, who are believers in Jesus Christ – are we good people or bad people?

I love how Brennan Manning put it: “When I get honest, I admit I am a bundle of paradoxes...Aristotle said I am a rational animal; I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer.”

Truth is: we are big sinners for whom the requirements of justice have been met...met by Jesus Christ...and whatever difficulties we now face AND whatever pleasures...THEY are all for our good.

Paul stayed in a beautiful Mediterranean Mansion AND he suffered a harrowing shipwreck – NOT because God loved him one day and despised him the other...IT WAS ALL MEANT to work out God's plan in Paul's life...it was all an expression of God's love...to strengthen and shape Paul. No wonder he wrote these words: “I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4.12-13)