

May 12, 2019 – (Easter 4, Paul and Barnabas)

Sermon Text – Acts 13:1-3; 14:8-18

- When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" ... When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, "Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them." -

We move this week from Caesarea, just 70 miles from Jerusalem, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, some 250 miles north along the coast to Syrian Antioch, which today is located in the southernmost province of Turkey. There resides the most ragtag group of disciples ever assembled. In the Antioch church, we have Barnabas, a Jew from the Island of Cyprus, whose religious practice is certainly questionable since he is not likely to have ever been able to make a trip to the temple in Jerusalem. And there is Simeon, a black man; Lucius, a North African from a city now in the country of Libya; Manean, a servant or friend of Herod Antipas (the king who killed John the Baptist); and, Paul, a Pharisee who held the coats of those who gathered for the stoning of Stephen. Wow! The early church has come a long way from that little group of mostly Galilean fishermen and their friends about whom we were hearing just two weeks ago! That is, I think, a testament to the power of the gospel to change lives and a witness to the indiscriminate work of the Holy Spirit to bring all kinds of people to faith in Jesus Christ. Now, the Spirit prompts them to choose of their number, Barnabas and Saul, who is also called Paul, and commission them for the work which the Spirit has in mind for them. They fast, pray, lay their hands on them and send the off to do their work of spreading the good news to the people wherever the Spirit leads them.

They sail first to the island of Cyprus; and, when they have traversed the entire length of the Island, they set sail again, northward to visit several cities in the south-central region of Asia Minor, known as Galatia. Wherever they go, they have success. They preach. People listen. And they come to believe, both Jews and gentiles. But some of the Jewish folk have a hard time with this new message of God's love. They aren't ready to make a change. They can't quite see how Jesus could be God's promised Messiah. They stir up trouble. And this prompts Paul and Barnabas to keep on moving. When they get to Lystra, there is a man who is not able to use his feet. He has never been able to walk. He hears Paul's proclamation and believes. Paul sees

him and realizes his desire to walk. He heals him and the man begins to walk. The people are astounded. They know that they have witnessed a miracle and they begin to proclaim that “the gods have come down to us,” meaning that the Greek gods of Mt. Olympus have been manifested before them in human form. Barnabas, they name as Zeus, the chief of the gods. And Paul, they call Hermes, the messenger of the gods, because he was doing all the talking. Then the chief priest of the temple of Zeus brings oxen and prepares to lead the people in a ritual of sacrifice, and presumably, a great feast in honor of this great thing that has happened to them.

Now, it's important to take a step back here and look at how these stories are being used in the writing of the book of Acts. Acts is telling the story of the spread of the gospel. Its two main proclaimers will be Peter and Paul. Peter, as we already have seen, proclaims the good news, has the power to heal and is worshipped as a deity. Now, Paul demonstrates that he has the same abilities. He preaches, heals and is acclaimed as a god. The stories of the two are completely parallel. They are equal in every way, as they are in their denials. Peter tells Cornelius that he is not to be worshiped. And Paul and Barnabas are grieved by the honors they are receiving. They tear their clothes and rush out into the people, telling that they are not gods, but only mortals like them. And, more importantly, it's time for the people to give up their old ways and come to believe in the living God, the God who has been with them and benefitting them all along, the real source of all that is good in their lives, the rains from the heavens, the fruit at the harvest, the food for their bellies and the joy in their hearts. It all comes from God. And now they know who that God really is, the Father of Jesus, the Christ, who was crucified and now is risen. If they are going to worship, they should worship them. If they are going sacrifice and ox, it should be a sacrifice for the true God, the maker of heaven and earth.

I don't think we can blame the Lystrians. They are simply trying to explain what they have seen within the context of what they know. In the Greek world, it was natural to attribute great events to the intervention of the Greek gods who lived on Mt. Olympus. Their stories seem a bit fanciful to us, but the writings about them are at least as extensive as the biblical scriptures and they contain much wisdom. But we live in the age of skepticism. Everything must be questioned. And truth, we have now been taught, is optional. So, what is and what isn't? How do we know? I have no doubt that a miraculous healing would bring joy to family and friends, maybe even an entire community. But, would it lead us to conclude that the gods had manifested themselves among us? Or would we see it as a triumph of science? Or an example of

good luck? Or a result of good living? The fact is that we live in a time of many choices. Take your pick. Maybe it's this. Maybe it's that. Maybe it's this today. Maybe it's that tomorrow. Things change. Explanations change. Interpretations can differ. Understandings are fluid. Take your pick. Does the power come from crystals? Pyramids? Knocking on wood? Rubbing a rabbit's foot? Secret knowledge? Special potions? Who knows? Who can tell?

Paul's response is quite harsh and clearly definitive. "You should turn from these worthless things," he tells the people of Lystra. Put away your old explanations and your previous understandings. They aren't very helpful. Here is the truth. God is the source of all good things. On that, you can count. It's always been that way and it always will be. Of course, for a long time, some people were unaware. But, now the people of Lystra have no excuse. They know the truth. And they should use it to its full extent. There is nothing wrong with that. The only mistake they can make is to ignore the truth that they now know. Seems simple, doesn't it? But the missionary enterprise is not so easy. Read on for just another few verses and we discover that some people were not so ready to give up their old ways of thinking. They grab Paul, stone him, and drag him outside the city, thinking he is dead. He is not. His mission project is only beginning. When the followers of Jesus come to surround him, he gets up and goes on his way to the next town to continue preaching the gospel. The Spirit isn't going to let this end before it gets started. The journey goes on and the good news continues to spread.

Amen.