

April 30th: Humble

Good morning again, friends! This morning we continue our year-long sermon series—we've been reading through the whole Bible from the beginning to the end and seeing how these ancient texts can be relevant to our modern lives. Along the way, we've read about nomadic people, people under empire, and now we turn to a new stage of our text which is focused on the birth of a new group of people: the very first Christians.

We've finished our study of the Gospel of Matthew, and so the next step in our journey is to examine what happens to Jesus' movement and disciples after his resurrection. For these next few weeks, we'll be taking a closer look at the early church—including the writings of the Book of Acts, and the letter to the Romans. These texts require us to carefully consider the context of these writings, so our meditations will have a little bit of everything: history, theology, and application to our own lives.

We'll get started in just a minute, but before we do, let's pray together.

Most High God,

We come to your holy text this morning in search of your guidance for our lives so that we can be your disciples in our modern communities. We know that you have equipped us to be leaders and teachers and apostles, and we thank you for the gifts you have bestowed upon us—but we know that we are able to accomplish these great acts of mercy and compassion because you have first shown us mercy and compassion. Remind us this morning of your sovereign power, and inspire us to be your servants—people ready and willing to do your will and not our own.

Amen.

This morning we return to the world of the first century and the seismic shifts happening within the early church. As I've mentioned, it was a contentious time—full of disagreements, internal conflict, and external hostility—so the disciples had their hands full. But it is also a time of great growth and inspiring

conversions, all of which mean the movement started by Jesus is rapidly becoming a powerful group of people that are active in Israel and beyond.

Today we've heard a passage from Acts 14, which describes an incident in the city of Lystra—located in modern day Turkey. Last week we read about Peter and his vision of Gentile inclusion, but this text focuses on another disciple by the name of Paul, who is on a mission to bring the gospel directly to non-Jews in lands far away from Israel.

Have any of you ever been on a mission trip before? Perhaps you signed up to go to a foreign country or an impoverished area, thinking that it would be a fun way to see a new place or as an opportunity to remember how fortunate most of us are. Perhaps you traveled to a city or a neighborhood to support a local organization that desperately needed volunteers to paint a building or build a fence or hand out meals at a soup kitchen. This can be a useful framework for thinking about Paul's journeys through the Mediterranean world, but as we heard in this particular story, sometimes these mission trips don't always go according to plan.

This story comes from Paul's first of four missionary journeys, so it's still the early days. Earlier in Acts, Paul had committed himself to the Jesus movement, but it is not until Acts 13 that he is formally sent out in the company of Barnabas, another disciple. Together, Paul and Barnabas travel from Jerusalem to Asia Minor, and along the way, they begin to speak to communities of diaspora Jews, that is, Jewish people who had settled in other lands over the centuries due to war, exile, famine, trade or other reasons.

You might think it would be easy to share the gospel with their brothers and sisters in faith, but Paul and Barnabas were not welcomed with open arms in a lot of cases. They've attracted a few converts along the way, but mostly they've stirred up conflict and dealt with a lot of vocal opposition and hostility. In fact, right before our passage begins for today, we hear that Paul and Barnabas are on the run, as the residents of the city they visited prior to Lystra threatened to stone them to death.

It doesn't sound like a successful visit, does it?

This passage from Acts 14 is the first time that Paul and Barnabas are teaching in front of a purely Gentile crowd—not preaching to their fellow Jews. And we see that there is a significant contrast between Paul's experience in the previous city and his encounter with the residents of Lystra. Instead of being chased out of town, Paul and Barnabas are greeted warmly, and their actions elicit joy and hospitality.

But while Paul and Barnabas might feel some relief at being welcomed, they also know that this reaction is not good either. It's like we're seeing an ancient telling of Goldilocks, where the reaction of the first city is too cold, and the reaction of this city is too hot, but Paul and Barnabas have yet to find the city that is just right.

So what exactly happened in Lystra?

Well, while Paul and his traveling companions are in the city, they have an encounter with a man who our biblical author called lame. We don't use this language anymore, but it likely means that he was disabled or suffering from some kind of musculo-skeletal disease. The man seemed to be listening to Paul's teachings about Jesus, so our biblical author writes, "Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, 'Stand up on your feet!' At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, 'The gods have come down to us in human form!'"

For those of you who are familiar with Greek mythology, you might remember that these ancient stories often included the idea of the gods coming down to Earth and taking the shape of human beings. Zeus, in particular, was known for appearing as a mortal, often to cause all kinds of trouble. So while Jesus often performed similar miracles of bodily healing, as was common in Jewish

religious culture, these Gentiles are using their own cultural frameworks to try and understand what is happening here.

The crowd continues to be amazed at what Paul has done, and so it is no surprise that verse 13 records, “The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.”

In the ancient world, it was common to offer sacrifices to local gods and goddesses in order to receive favor or healing, so it seems natural that this non-Jewish crowd would react to such a display of power by wanting to honor their guests in some way. Again, it might seem like their enthusiasm is good, but it sounds like their adoration needs to be redirected.

So Paul and his friends respond to the crowd’s overwhelming frenzy by saying, “Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.” But this doesn’t seem to dim their appreciation for the miracle, because verse 18 says, “Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.”

You might be asking yourself—why read this passage? It’s likely one that you’ve never encountered before, and you might be wondering, why is it important to think more deeply about this random encounter?

And you’re right, this story could seem like a meaningless moment in a tumultuous time, but I think there’s a reason that our spiritual ancestors decided that it was necessary to write down and pass along to the next generation of Christians. First of all, this passage is part of a common thread that runs through the Book of Acts—it seems like Paul and his contemporaries faced this situation over and over again as they traveled to bring the gospel to new communities.

Earlier in Acts 3, when the Apostle Peter performed a similar miracle, he asked the crowd, “Why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?” And when Cornelius the Roman centurion first encountered Peter in Acts 10, he fell down to worship him, to which Peter responded, “Stand up; I am only a mortal.”

So it sounds like this was a recurring problem for the disciples as they tried to communicate the gospel.

I also think this story is included in our biblical narrative because it has an appropriate word of caution for us as we seek to be disciples of Jesus in our own times and our own communities. And I’ll tell you why.

Over the past two thousand years, the church has heard a lot about Paul, and his writings make up a significant portion of our New Testament. But I think it’s helpful for us to remember that while Paul’s leadership and evangelism gifts are noteworthy, this mission that he embarks upon is rooted in the movement of the Holy Spirit. It is God that calls Paul into service, it is Jesus that meets Paul on the road to Damascus and transforms him, it is the Holy Spirit that speaks through Paul to each of these communities.

It is God who deserves the glory, not Paul. And he knows it. But we sometimes forget.

Unlike Paul and Barnabas, I haven’t been run out of town or threatened with stoning, but ministry is not always sunshine and rainbows, and it sometimes involves difficult conversations and conflict. Sharing the gospel with people both inside of the church and outside of the church is often fraught with misunderstandings and miscommunications. Both vocational ministry done by a pastor and congregational ministry done by lay people in the community require real effort, real determination, real tenacity to do it well. It is sometimes a slow process, and we don’t see results or transformation as quickly as we might expect. Sometimes it’s tough to juggle too many things, and we make a mistake, or a relationship breaks down because of other

priorities. Sometimes outreach events are disappointing because only a few people show up, or a well-intentioned ministry fails, or a program ends because the needs of the neighborhood have changed. Sometimes mission trips go off course, or you think you're going to be running a Sunday School but what the community really needs is for a new well to be dug.

But because ministry in our world can be so challenging and full of conflict, it can be tempting to accept whatever praise or recognition we receive as our just due, and to minimize the role of God in our success.

When things DO go well or ministries DO result in important change, it can be easy to let our egos get out of hand, because after all, we were the ones to send all the emails and make all the announcements and buy all the supplies, right?

When people respond positively to acts of mission, it is very tempting to see it as evidence of our own power, because after all, we were the ones to organize the charitable donation or the ones who labored to put on a program, right?

I think that even in faithful congregations, there's a temptation to take all the credit for the victories. Even among lifelong Christians, there can be an impulse to deny that God had any part in our accomplishments. Even pastors, myself definitely included, struggle to give up control over outcomes, believing that if we just worked hard enough or long enough, the Kingdom of God would finally materialize.

There will always be a temptation to worship ourselves or to worship other humans, rather than worshiping Jesus.

So I think we sometimes need to be redirected too, just like those overzealous worshippers in Lystra.

I think as modern disciples, we need to be humble enough to admit that this is God's mission, and not our own. We need to be reminded that this is God's

gospel, not our own. We need to have perspective that this is God's plan, not our own.

My friends, as continue the task of ministry in our community and we continue to labor for the liberation and restoration of all, here is some good news: because our sovereign God calls us to this work, and because our all powerful God empowers us for this work, and because our limitless God sustains us in this work, we don't have to be anyone but our most human selves.

There's no pressure for us to be anything but mortal, because we are the ones joining God, not the other way around. We join what God is already doing, never needing to be perfect or worth sacrificing to.

All we need to be is willing and humble.

Amen.