

**The Fourth Sunday of Easter**  
April 26, 2015  
Haven Lutheran Church  
Readings: Acts 13: 1-3; 14: 8-28

*Grace and peace to you from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen*

It's one of those puzzlers. "You're driving a bus. There are eleven people on the bus. Four people get off at the first stop, and eight get on. At the next stop, no one gets off and two more get on. At the last stop, fifteen people get off. Now then: "What color are the bus driver's eyes?"

"The point of the story is that we sometimes get caught up in the wrong details."<sup>1</sup> When we feel overwhelmed with circumstances, expected or unexpected, we can become like that deer frozen in the headlights. The situation just doesn't seem to compute. The pieces don't seem to fit. You feel like you don't have what it takes to figure it out. Those first disciples of Jesus felt that way. The growing Christian movement we read out in the Acts of the Apostles often felt that way. Paul and Barnabas certainly felt that way in Lystra. When it comes to how to be a church today that reaches others with the gospel, we can feel baffled and scared, too. The answer to that puzzler is the color of your own eyes. I started out by saying *you* are driving the bus. The answer seems clear now that someone points it out. In the Acts of the Apostles, we're to see that the Holy Spirit will point out to us the way to go — if we ask... if we'll listen... if we'll trust our Lord even when we don't fully understand.

That early Christian community was changing. Consider those names of church leaders in Antioch that we first heard. There's "Simeon who was called Niger," likely a convert from north Africa. "Lucius of Cyrene," not a local but from the area we now call Libya. "Manaen, a member of the court of Herod the ruler," a man of the Jewish aristocratic class. Barnabas is a Levite and a native of Cyprus (4:36) and Saul, a Pharisaic Jew from Tarsus. (22:3, 23:6) They're a diverse bunch united in their faith in Jesus. While worshiping, the Holy Spirit gives them a direction. "Set apart Saul and Barnabas for work to which I have called them." To confirm that it's really God's prompting and not just their own idea, they first fast

and pray. Only then do they lay hands upon Paul and Barnabas, designating them to be missionaries, charged by God to carry the good news of Jesus. I hope you see echoes of that prayerful process whenever we install Council members, Sunday School staff and Vacation Bible School workers. We are setting them apart for work to which the Holy Spirit has called them. When asked to serve on Council or help in a ministry, it's not meant to be a desperate hunt for any warm body, but a search for those whom the Lord has prepared and called for that particular role. Which is why nominating teams pray before they make calls and you are asked to pray before you give an answer, so that the Holy Spirit has a part in such discernment.

We pick up Barnabas and Paul in the city of Lystra. Before this, they usually began their work in any town in the local synagogue, among fellow Jews with whom they shared beliefs and faith practices. But in Lystra, there is no mention of a synagogue. They're missionaries without a strategy for a different situation. Paul speaks, likely in the Greek language of the empire. We get no idea if anyone is listening. *Except*, we're told Paul notices a man unable to walk who seems to be drawn to God's Word. Paul commands him to stand and he does. The miracle acted like a confirmation of the message Paul was preaching. NOW there is definitely a crowd. A crowd to hear the gospel where there wasn't one. With no time-tested plan but to share Jesus as best they could, God does the rest.

What happens next is both surprising and a bit comical. Seeing this miracle, the Lyconians get very excited and begin to talk in their local dialect. Paul and Barnabas mostly likely can't understand what they are saying but may be rejoicing about the excitement they see among the people --- An excitement they imagine is about Jesus. Actually, the locals are jubilant because they think Paul and Barnabas must be living embodiments of two gods. Who else could accomplish this miracle. There was a local legend that two mythical gods had come to a nearby town disguised as beggars. A couple had welcomed them in their home, offering food and lodgings, not knowing their true identity. Later the couple was greatly rewarded for their hospitality. Maybe the

people of Lystra had that in mind when they identified Paul and Barnabas as Zeus and Hermes. The townspeople are all excited. Paul and Barnabas think they're excited about their message, until the local priest from their temple to Zeus comes with plan for an all out worship service and sacrifice in their honor. Then the light goes off. It's not the Lord God about to be worshiped but them! Paul and Barnabas are appalled, "Friends why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you..." It seems like their efforts are a failure or are they?

"This impromptu pagan worship pageant became an opportunity for the gospel"<sup>2</sup> to be offered yet again to the people of Lystra. Paul tells them of the one true, living God who is creator of all things and who provides them with rains and fruitful seasons, filling them with food and their hearts with joy. Paul tells them of a God who loves them. Did they understand? We're told even then they could scarcely restrain the crowds from offering sacrifices to them. Success? Failure? Jews from neighboring cities come to Lystra and turn the crowds against the disciples. They stone Paul and leave him for dead outside the city. It seems a failure for sure? Yet.... it says Paul was surrounded by disciples as he got up and went on to the next town ---- disciples, plural, more than Barnabas. Later we heard Paul and Barnabas stopped back in the towns where new Christians communities were starting after their visits. They appointed elders for each church and, "with prayer and fasting, entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe." They did this in Iconium, Antioch and Lystra. Lystra, where things did not work out as they might have hoped yet God still became real to a small group of people who wanted to follow Jesus, despite the misunderstandings and the crowds who turned hostile.

"Go make disciples of all nations," Jesus tells his disciples," baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey

everything that I have commanded you. AND remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:19-20) We know that’s what our Lord wants us to do and still most of us hesitate to share our faith, even in small unobtrusive ways. We’re back at our puzzler wondering how we’re to know the driver’s eye color when we’ve been busy doing the math of people getting on and off the bus. How are we to spread the gospel to others in our daily living? How are we to bring the gospel as a church? How do we communicate in a way that makes sense to people not steeped in the church? How do we know what is critically essential from what has simply become comfortable tradition? I, we can be so overwhelmed by what we don’t fully understand that we do nothing.

If we listen to our Lord in the book of Acts, the answer is as simple and challenging as this — we follow the Holy Spirit. We follow the Holy Spirit, God loose in the world and in us to bring about God’s saving work and kingdom. We may not see the complete path. We may not understand how God can possibly work through you and you and you and me. We may want a pass on being anything more than a pew sitter. Despite all those if, ands and buts, believing in Jesus... being a baptized follower of our Lord... being a Jesus community means that being God’s instrument for spreading the gospel is not optional — it’s an essential part of who we are. Bearing the grace and good news of our Lord is what church is about. How do we do that? Where does the Holy Spirit want us to venture? God’s ways are often unexpected and may seem wild.. Sometimes we may be misunderstood and other times we may plant a seed that only much later blossoms into a love of God. We may be baffled at how to invite others into this mysterious, life-giving faith that has somehow captured our hearts. We may not know, but God does. We may not be sure we’re up to the task, but God’s only asks that we be available not an expert.

Each morning, pray, “What is it I’m to do for you today, Lord?” and be on the look out. Each gathering of a team or committee or class, let’s pray, “What is it you want of us, Lord? Where is it you want to lead us?” God will show up. Paul and Barnabas set out on that first missionary journey without a manual or financial backing but the Holy Spirit’s directive to “Go make disciples.” It wasn’t easy. It’s still not easy. But when Paul and Barnabas returned they had a load of “God sightings” to share with their community — they told “all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles.” God promises that will be true for us, too, when we walk in faith and follow God’s lead. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 4/25/15

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1. Timothy Smith, “How Will God Use You For His Kingdom Today” as posted on <http://spinewulm.org/church/sermons/smith> (St. Paul's Lutheran Church, New Ulm, Minnesota [stpauls@newulmtel.net](mailto:stpauls@newulmtel.net))

2. Timothy Smith