

Sermon – November 19, 2023  
“We bring you Good News”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 14:8-17

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill open hearts, anoint the sharing of these words, and bless your people through them. Fuel our continuing transformation into Christ's image with your words and lead us out into fruitful labor in Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. May the peace of Jesus reign in your hearts now and forever. Good morning and Happy Thanksgiving. Today marks the last sermon in the series from Acts. I feel like I should give everyone who heard all of the sermons in the series a certificate. You did it! You stayed with me and let me preach from scriptures we rarely hear preached. Congratulations to those who have listened to all of the sermons. If you missed any, I believe they are still up on the church's Facebook page and can be accessed on the website. And also, welcome to those who are hearing their first sermon of the series this morning. We will be taking a break from Acts and moving into Advent after Christ the King Sunday next week. But don't be concerned if you read all of Acts and are expecting to hear the next fourteen sermons soon. We will come back to Acts after Pentecost and complete the rest of the chapters. I pray that you have been blessed as I have been

from a deeper dive into the acts of the apostles and the early church's work in the in-breaking kingdom of God.

As we wrap up the first half of the series, let me remind us of some of the many themes found in the book of Acts. My list is not in any priority order. We have seen the theme of Holy Spirit empowering, guiding, and acting through witnesses for Jesus. We have seen the theme of the church in prayer and fasting, and let me remind us that Fairfields will be open for prayer on Wednesdays during Advent. We have encountered the theme of signs and wonders being done by Jesus through the apostles. We have encountered the theme of the movement of the Gospel from Jerusalem outward to the ends of the earth. Acts 1:8 has been our call to worship throughout the series and I hope that we all have that verse memorized. If you are with some other believers and one of them makes the comment that they know God has a plan for their life and they want God to let them know what it might be, your moment to be a prophet has arrived. You can share with them that Jesus has one job for them: to be part of his continuing mission, to be Holy Spirit-filled people moving out to the ends of the world as Jesus' witnesses. If we were in Good News Club at the elementary school and I was helping you memorize Act 1:8, I would ask for volunteers to come and stand before us and share. Can we all say that verse together one more time this morning? "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."<sup>i</sup>

We have also encountered the themes of persecution, suffering, and witnessing. From all these themes, I would like to highlight the theme of witnessing. Let's look back at some examples of witnessing we have encountered in Acts. Think back to the arrival of Holy Spirit at Pentecost when Peter, filled with power from on high, stands up and witnesses to those drawn to the sound of a mighty rushing wind and the mighty acts of God declared in native tongues. Peter, the fisherman, boldly stands before the crowd and explains what is happening. Thousands hear the Good News and they begin to follow Jesus. This happens in Jerusalem, the first place Jesus' followers were to be Jesus' witnesses. Recall also that when Peter and John go into the temple to pray, they see a man lame from birth begging for alms. They look at him intently and tell him, "In the name of Jesus Christ stand up and walk." The man lame from birth is healed and begins leaping and praising God. People are drawn to this sign, and again in Jerusalem to Jews, Peter shares the Good News with the crowd drawn by the praise of the lame man. Thousands believe

and start following Jesus. Peter and John are jailed and are able to witness in Jerusalem to the leaders of Israel and are released with a warning not to witness in the name of Jesus. They choose to listen to God and not to the leaders of Israel. Stephen is chosen to serve widows and after being falsely accused, is also a witness to the leadership in Jerusalem, and for his faithful witness, he is stoned. We might recall that following Stephen's witness, great persecution breaks out in Jerusalem, and Philip, who flees Jerusalem to avoid persecution, is a witness in Samaria. Peter and John hear what Philip has done. They come, lay hands on the new Samaritan believers, and Holy Spirit is poured out on them. The Gospel moves out to Samaria! Saul, as he goes to Damascus, is converted after an encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and stops persecuting the church, and instead becomes a witness for Jesus. Peter is sent by Holy Spirit to Caesarea to a Roman centurion, and as he witnesses to these God fearers, even before he has shared all of the Good News about Jesus, Holy Spirit is poured out on them, and the Good News moves outward from Jerusalem and Samaria, heading towards the ends of the world. Do we see where this is headed? All of the sharing of the Good News, all of the witness has been to those who are Jews or God fearers, those who know about the one God and seek to worship the one God with the Jews.

We have one last part of Acts 1:8 to begin, witnessing to the ends of the world. Saul, or Paul as he is called in Roman areas, and Barnabas have been in Caesarea as witnesses, have been building up the believers there, and after a time of prayer and fasting by the church, are sent out on the first mission trip of the church to take the Good News out to the ends of the earth. They start in towns that have synagogues by going to those Jews and God fearers who have gathered for worship, but after many Jews reject the message, they begin to witness to pagans, those who have no experience with or knowledge of the one true God. The early church begins to witness to the world, to witness to the people at the ends of the earth. The ends of the earth is where we live. The ends of the earth is where Holy Spirit has sent us to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. Let's take a brief look at how Paul and Barnabas witness to the people of Lystra, to people who are at the ends of the earth, as what they do has application for our own witness.

As we look at their witness, keep in mind that the people of Lystra worship the Roman pantheon of gods, the host of gods who are worshiped by citizens of Rome. As Paul begins to share with the crowd in Lystra, he sees a man sitting, a man who has been lame from birth. When Paul sees him, he sees the man has faith to receive Jesus' healing touch, even if he does not yet

know Jesus. The lame man is listening carefully to what Paul is saying, and Paul stops his sharing and tells the man to “Stand upright on your feet,”<sup>ii</sup> and when the man hears Paul, he springs up and begins to walk. Don’t miss the parallel here to when Peter and John encountered the lame man from birth at the Beautiful Gate to the temple and they tell him, “In the name of Jesus, stand up and walk” and he does and thousands believe in Jesus. Or the paralyzed man let down through the roof by friends whom Jesus tells to take up his mat and walk. Our expectation is for something similar to happen in Lystra. The lame man is healed, but the crowd has a very different reaction to the healing from the crowd in Jerusalem. The crowd in Lystra is a pagan crowd. They cry out in the Lycaonian language, which Paul and Barnabus most likely do not understand, “The gods have come down to us in human form!”<sup>iii</sup> Some background from a myth found in Lystra will help us understand why they react as they do. There is a myth in their community that about fifty years before Paul and Barnabus arrived in Lystra, Zeus and Hermes came to the area in disguise and sought hospitality. They were turned away by 1000 homes before an older couple invited them into their home. In response, the gods blessed the elderly couple but sent a flood and destroyed the people who would not welcome them.<sup>iv</sup> The people of Lystra, having seen the healing of the lame man, fear the gods are again among them, thinking Paul is Hermes and Barnabus is Zeus. They are preparing to sacrifice oxen to them in order to honor them as gods in hopes of not being punished, as the myth held that those who do not show hospitality are punished by the gods. The garlands the priest of Zeus brings are signs of sacrifice. Because of the language barrier, it takes a while for Paul and Barnabus to realize what is happening, but when they do, they tear their clothes and run into the crowd. The tearing of one’s clothes is not an action we understand today. If we tear our clothes, we replace them with something new. In the first century, it required hundreds of hours of labor to make a piece of clothing. All of the labor we have mechanized had to be done by hand. To tear one’s clothes was to destroy one of the most valuable items a person owned. To tear one’s clothing, to ruin your most valuable asset, would be shocking to those present. Jews were required by the oral tradition to tear their clothing when they heard blasphemy. The people are about to sacrifice oxen, calling mere mortals, Paul and Barnabas, gods, which is blasphemy, and Paul and Barnabas must stop them before they sacrifice the oxen. In response to their actions, Paul begins to witness to the people of the crowd, but he does not start his witness with Jesus. In fact, he does not mention Jesus at all at this point in his sharing. The people of Lystra have no knowledge of Jesus. They

have no knowledge of the one true God or his prophets and they lack an understanding of sin, that which does not honor God. Paul is seeking to witness to people in this context, a context devoid of God-fearing Gentiles or Jews. Paul starts his witness where the people of Lystra are. He meets them at their understanding of many gods and begins to introduce to them the one true, living God. Paul's witness is that he and Barnabus are not gods come to them in disguise but that they are mortals who have come bearing good news, good news that can heal a man lame from birth. Paul tells those in the crowd that they are to turn from worthless things, and turn to the creator of heaven, earth, the sea, and all that is in them. The God they are to turn to is the living God who has in the past let the nations follow their own ways. Paul tells them the living God has a witness: the rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, the full stomach, and hearts that are filled with joy from these blessings. By starting with a witness to something they know, the gifts of the living God, Paul and Barnabus are able to convince the crowds they are not gods and to keep them from sacrificing oxen to them. They begin their witness to the pagan people of Lystra where they are in their understanding of God. Now there is more to this story. Jews come from Antioch and Iconium where the Jews are seeking to stop Paul from being a witness, win over the crowds, and Paul, who was about to be worshiped, is stoned, dragged outside the city, and left for dead by the same crowd that was seeking to honor him as a god. The disciples, those in Lystra who now believe in Jesus, surround him and Paul gets up and continues to witness for Jesus. Paul and Barnabus are witnessing to people who have no knowledge of the Old Testament or of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul and Barnabus are witnesses for Jesus among those with a world view we increasingly find ourselves as we try to be witnesses for Jesus. Today we also find a world view like that in first century Lystra, a view that has no concept or understanding of Jesus or the living God.

Some of us will have seen in the news recently where soccer star Megan Rapinoe suffered an Achilles injury and shared with the world that her injury proves there is no God. Her thoughts are that if there were a God, her injury would not have happened, that God would have prevented her from sustaining a career-ending injury. Forgetting the gifts God has given her that she has used in her soccer career to become one of the most successful players in history and unaware of how God works to bring good out our struggles and challenges in this life, she concludes that her injury is proof there is not a God. My prayer is that a witness for Jesus will be able to go to her, place a hand on her, and pray with all of the kindness and gentleness of Jesus

for her that she might experience the love of God, that a witness for Jesus would be bold enough to meet her where she is and let her experience the love of the living God she denies and witness to her by meeting her where she is as one without a belief in God and lead her into the kingdom of God through an experience with Jesus Christ. Megan is an example of where we are seeking to be Jesus' witnesses today. We are at the ends of the earth, a place where God is not known and is not part of the culture. It is difficult to understand where people are in their relationship and understanding of God and how to meet them where they are and walk with them until they meet Jesus. Yet that is our one job, to be witnesses for Jesus to the ends of the earth, to be witnesses for Jesus in this new context where God and Jesus are increasingly missing from the world view of those we meet. If we ask people in the USA today if they believe in God, only 81% currently respond they that do. Eighty-one percent is a record low since that question was first asked in 1944. At one point it was as high as 98%. In 2007 it was 87%. The numbers of people around us with a concept of God and God's steadfast love for His people is rapidly decreasing. Yet we are to meet people where they are and to walk with them until they come to belief in Jesus. Paul and Barnabus are successful at witnessing to many people in Lystra as Luke tells us that disciples surrounded Paul when he was stoned and dragged out of the city. By the time of the stoning, Paul and Barnabus had made many disciples of Jesus in Lystra.

In a few weeks we will move into the season of Advent, and Christmas is not far away. These are great times to reach out and witness to our neighbors. Let me suggest we try something as simple as inviting our neighbors to come to our homes and read the scripture that leads up to the arrival of the Christ child. Offer our friends and neighbors an opportunity to encounter God's word for themselves and to encounter for themselves the reason for the celebration of the Christmas season. Seek to meet people already in our lives where they are and lead them to the cross where the blood of Jesus was shed so that they might find forgiveness of sins and be reconciled to God. We will not be successful with every person; many will reject our offer. Our job is to meet people where they are and to help them meet Jesus. If you would like to try my suggestion and need a list of scriptures to read with friends and neighbors, let me know and I will share with you the scriptures I have used.

I pray that we have been challenged by our journey through Acts and that our hearts are stirred to be those who are witnesses for Jesus. Let me close with Acts 1:8: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in

all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”<sup>v</sup> Let us wait for power from on high and then get to work, learning about Jesus and heading out into the ends of the earth here in Northumberland, meeting people where they are, and becoming witnesses for Jesus.

*Pray with me. Jesus, would you bring to our eyes those who have faith to be healed by you and those who will listen to your word? Lord, give us courage to be your witnesses right here, right now as long as it is today. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen*

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<sup>i</sup> NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (pp. 3256-3257). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, Acts 14:10.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, Acts 14:11.

<sup>iv</sup> Stott, John. The Message of Acts (The Bible Speaks Today Series) . InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>v</sup> NRSV, Acts 1:8.