

On the Road with Paul and Barnabas

Scripture: Acts 13:1-3; 14:8-18

Five years ago, I had the opportunity to travel in Turkey, Greece, and Italy. We followed the journeys of Paul through a variety of cities including Ephesus, Philippi, Berea, Athens, Corinth, and Rome. One of the churches we visited in Rome was the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls. The basilica was founded by the Roman Emperor Constantine over the place thought to be the burial site of Paul of Tarsus.¹ Constantine was the first emperor to stop the persecution of Christians and to legalize Christianity. But, of course, that happened several centuries after Paul died.

Inside the basilica are statues of Peter and Paul. Peter is traditionally shown holding a large key. It's the key to the kingdom of heaven, which Jesus promised to him after he declared that Jesus was the Christ, the son of the living God.² Paul is traditionally shown holding a book and a sword. The book or scroll represents his letters included in the New Testament. The sword is a reminder of how he died – martyred by beheading.

Peter and Paul, of course, are the most well-known characters in the book of Acts.³ Last week, Anita Kehr preached about Peter who plays a major role in the first 12 chapters of the book. This is where we learn about the beginnings of the church in Palestine. Anita emphasized the importance of prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit in moving us in unexpected ways and toward unexpected people. As it was with Cornelius and Peter, we must continue to allow ourselves to be formed and transformed, softened and moved, all within our relationship with God who can't be contained within the boundaries we establish.

The work of the Spirit outside the boundary of Judaism opened the way for Paul and his coworkers. Paul dominates the rest of the book of Acts where we learn about the expansion of the church from Antioch all the way to Rome.

Paul is from Tarsus, the capital of the province of Cilicia. He's a highly educated Pharisee – devoted to the Jewish faith, trained in the nuances of Jewish religious life, and committed to rigorous observance of Jewish laws. Paul has dual citizenship, both in the Roman Empire and the city of Tarsus. This is why he's known by two names, both of which he likely had since birth. Saul is his Hebrew name; Paul is his Roman name. When we first encounter him in Acts, he's working primarily in Jewish areas, so the writer calls him by his Hebrew name Saul. Later, as he moves into the wider Roman world, he's known as Paul, which is the name I'll use throughout this sermon.

Paul's status as a Roman citizen gives him enormous freedom as he travels the empire. Tarsus was cosmopolitan and diverse so he would have encountered all kinds of religious, philosophical, and cultural expressions. With one foot in the Jewish world and the other in the culture of the Gentiles, Paul is ideally suited to carry the gospel from one to the other.

We're introduced to Paul in the book of Acts as he zealously pursues and imprisons Christians. After an extraordinary encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and time with Ananias and other Christians, he proclaims that Jesus is the Son of God. After his conversion, Paul spends time in Arabia. He then travels to Jerusalem, to Caesarea, and then back to his hometown of Tarsus. It's here that Barnabas finds him.

Barnabas is a Jewish Christian, a native of Cyprus and a prominent leader of the early church in Jerusalem. This church sends Barnabas to Antioch of Syria to investigate the new developments there. Barnabas

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basilica_of_Saint_Paul_Outside_the_Walls

² Matthew 16:13-20

³ Sources consulted include Chalmer E. Faw, *Acts, BCBC*, Herald Press, 1993; Pulpit Fiction Narrative Podcast, [NL 142: Paul's Mission — Pulpit Fiction](#); BibleWorm Podcast, [Episode 441 Paul and Barnabas in Lystra \(Acts 13:1-3 and 14:8-18\) | BibleWorm \(biblewormpodcast.com\)](#); and Working Preacher Narrative Lectionary Podcast, [Working Preacher's Narrative Lectionary: Narrative Lectionary 538: Paul's Mission - April 30, 2023 \(libsyn.com\)](#).

is overjoyed to hear about Gentiles being converted and immediately begins to teach and encourage these new believers. He decides he could use the help of an enthusiastic convert he remembers, so he travels to Tarsus and persuades Paul to join him in ministry at Antioch.

The Antioch church is growing rapidly. The group is international and interracial in character. This is reflected in the list of people found at the beginning of Acts 13. Along with Barnabas and Paul, three other leaders are mentioned. There's a lot we don't know for sure, but we can make some educated guesses. Simeon who was called Niger likely is a black man from sub-Saharan Africa. Lucius of Cyrene could be the man Paul mentions as his relative in his letter to the Romans.⁴ Manaen, a member of the court of Herod the ruler, may be the most surprising man on the list. He grew up with King Herod, a Roman ruler, and now is a leader in the Christian church!

The church in Antioch soon begins to reach out beyond their own city. After a concentrated season of prayer, they decide to send Paul and Barnabas out on a missionary journey to Cyprus and Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). John Mark, a relative of Barnabas, accompanies them on this journey.

It used to be that a common way to communicate with friends and family back home while traveling was to send postcards. Now we keep in touch through social media. But Paul and Barnabas were old-school so let's look at some postcards Barnabas might have sent back to Jerusalem during their travels together.

Postcard #1

Dear Friends,

The church in Antioch of Syria is thriving. Today they sent Paul and me off to spread the word to Cyprus and beyond. We know the Holy Spirit is directing this trip. John Mark is going with us. We'll keep you updated.

–Barnabas

Paul and Barnabas are set apart and sent off by the church. True to form – as highlighted in last week's sermon – this happens in community, with the work of the Spirit, with prayer and fasting. This community commissioning empowers Paul to take the gospel out into the world. His ministry isn't based only on his amazing conversion experience and what Jesus said to him. It also takes the affirmation of his faith community.

We continue this tradition of commissioning people in the church for special tasks and new adventures. Mennonite conferences license and ordain pastors after much discernment by the individual, a local congregation, and representatives of the conference. Over the years, our congregation has also recognized and blessed high school graduates and young adults traveling to places such as Australia and Ecuador.

Postcard #2

Dear Friends,

We sailed from Seleucia to Salamis on Cyprus. It's good to be in my home country. We visited the synagogues and talked about Jesus to anyone who would listen. Next, we plan to travel across the island toward Paphos.

–Barnabas

Postcard #3

Greetings in the name of Christ,

We found trouble in Paphos! The Roman governor asked us to explain the word of God to him but Bar-Jesus, the magician, tried to stop us. Paul handled the situation. Now Bar-Jesus can't see and the governor believes!

–Barnabas

When they encounter the sorcerer, there is a struggle between Christianity and various forms of magic. The magician not only opposes the work of the apostles, but also actively works to turn the governor away from the faith.

We too fight spiritual battles. As we work for peace in our hearts, homes, community, and the world, we encounter powers such as materialism, greed, addiction, racism, violence, and hate; powers that actively turn people away from God and from each other.

⁴ Romans 16:21

Postcard #4

Dear Friends,

There are changes in our team. After we arrived in Perga, John Mark decided to return home. (I'll share the details later.) Also, it's obvious that Paul is gifted at this work, so I'm stepping back and he's taking the lead.
–Barnabas

It's not entirely clear what John Mark's role was on this trip. He may have instructed the new converts. No reasons are given for the breakup of the team. Perhaps it's homesickness, difficult travel conditions, personality clashes, or dissatisfaction with plans for the mission. In any case, we assume that it's not a happy situation. Paul regards Mark's desertion as turning back from a God-given mission. However, later on John Mark accompanies Barnabas on a mission to Cyprus. Eventually Paul comes to value Mark and even asks him for assistance.

I'm certain we can relate to disagreements over the direction of a ministry. Sometimes they can be resolved, other times they can't. The goal is always for reconciliation of some kind, even if it means going in separate ways for a while. Sometimes when splits happen, ministry is multiplied.

Postcard #5

Brothers & Sisters,

What a great Sabbath in Antioch of Pisidia! Paul preached a magnificent sermon tracing God's interaction with the people through history and ending with the news that, in Jesus, God fulfilled what was promised. Both Jews and Jewish converts believe! We've been asked to stay another week.

–Barnabas

Paul's sermon is written in Acts 13. What would you include in your story if you were asked to talk to someone who knew nothing about Christianity? This connects well with the assignment June Thomsen gave us two weeks ago. I wonder how many of us have completed the assignment. Maybe this is another nudge to do it.

Postcard #6

Dear Friends,

The 2nd week in Antioch didn't go as well as the 1st. The synagogue was full. Some of the Jews were furious and insulted us. Paul told them they had their chance. So, we took the message to the Gentiles and many Gentiles believe! Some of the Jewish leaders "asked" us to leave and we obliged.

–Barny

Some of the Jews who don't believe what Paul and Barnabas are teaching about Jesus actively stir up trouble. But the missionaries aren't discouraged. They move on and leave behind them freshly converted disciples who are filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.

It takes wisdom and discernment to know when to remain in the midst of opposition and when to move on. Here's another situation in which prayer, worship, and the work of the Spirit are needed.

Postcard #7

Dear Friends,

Greetings from the beautiful farmland of Pisidia. We were in Iconium a long time. God gave us the power to work miracles and signs. Many Jews and Greeks believed. Many opposed us too, but we decided to stay as long as we could. We left when we heard of plans to stone us! Thanks for praying!

–Barnabas

Paul and Barnabas boldly persevere even in the face of opposition. They move on when they are threatened with bodily harm.

I think of people who face the threat of physical harm to themselves or to their property when practicing or even talking about their faith. I admire their commitment and wonder if I could do the same. Especially when I sometimes hesitate to speak up about what's important to me simply because of what someone else might think about me.

Postcard #8

GREETINGS:

We made it safely to Lystra. Not many here speak Greek so we're having some trouble communicating. In fact, after Paul healed a man, they tried to worship us! We are men; it's God who should be worshipped. Paul explained this well, pointing out that it is God who supplies rain and crops. Some old "friends" came and stirred up trouble. They stoned Paul. Thank God he survived! On to Derbe.

–Barny

We've finally arrived at the scripture that was read earlier in the service. The scene here is a bit comical. Most people can't understand what Paul and Barnabas are saying. To them these strangers are gods who have come among them. The miraculous healing confirms this idea. Perhaps because of his stature and bearing, Barnabas is taken as Zeus, the father of the gods; and Paul, the chief speaker, as Hermes his messenger.

This misunderstanding isn't as outlandish as it might appear to us. The people might have been thinking of an old story they'd been told of a time when Zeus and Hermes pretended to be human and visited a town near Lystra. Only two people – an elderly couple – welcomed them into their home. The gods honored the couple for their hospitality and destroyed the rest of the town who rejected them. The people don't want to inadvertently reject gods in disguise, so they go overboard in showing hospitality to Paul and Barnabas.

But Paul and Barnabas are so distraught about being mistaken for gods that they rush to set the record straight. They are simply people who are enacting God's power. Their goal isn't to bring glory to themselves. Their mission is to point people to the living God, the one who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in it. This God has been here all along, even though the people didn't know it. None of those other gods they've been worshipping and sacrificing to are the giver of good things. The God whose power brought about this miraculous healing is the one who has always been blessing them with rain and harvest and satisfying them with food and happiness.

We do well to keep this in mind in a time of Christian celebrities – pastors, speakers, authors, social media stars, and churches – along the entire spectrum of religious belief – from liberal to conservative. Questions should always be asked. Are these popular Christians pointing people to God? Are we lifting the bearers of good news up over the good news itself? Is our devotion to God? Or is it to a particular pastor, congregation, or building? It's hard for humans to deal with a God who is invisible. Sometimes we confuse the physical forms in which we encounter God with the invisible God. How do we keep from putting our faith in people or programs or familiar worship practices rather than in God?

I'm intrigued by how Paul adapts his message to his audience. What he says to this thoroughly Gentile audience is quite different than what he said in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia. Even though he exhorts this group to turn away from idols and worship the living God, he makes allowance for their different religious background and doesn't harshly condemn them. He uses what they know about rains, harvests, and bounteous living to point them to God. Sometimes Bible translators, preachers, and evangelists are criticized for adjusting the language they use to the context they are in. God's living word can be relevant in any culture. The goal today should not be to change the entire world – or even the entire nation – into the image of a particular group of American Christians all spouting the same theology and reading the same Bible translation.

One more thought on this story from Lystra. I'm dismayed to read the account of people traveling great distances to spread their hate and opposition. I wish I could say that sort of thing no longer happens.

After traveling on to Derbe, Paul and Barnabas retrace their steps on their way back to Antioch of Syria. We'll quickly read a few more postcards from their journey home.

Postcard #9

Dear Friends,

Sorry I haven't written for such a long time. Many became followers in Derbe. Then we traveled back through Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia. We encouraged the new believers and appointed elders in the new churches. They trust God. We're confident they will remain faithful even in hard times.

–Barnabas

Postcard #10

Grace to you and peace,

The past year has been filled with much joy and hardship. This time we stayed a while in Perga and preached the gospel. Next we went on to Attalia. We've found a ship bound for Syria. I'm eager to be back with the church in Antioch. –B

It takes courage to go back through the very cities where opposition has been so bitter and strong. Paul and Barnabas don't always seek opposition or controversy – in fact, sometimes they flee from it – however, they don't let fear keep them from proclaiming the good news. May we have the courage to return to difficult situations or relationships if that is what God's Spirit is leading us to do. And may we have the discernment to know when it's time to move on.

Postcard #11

Brothers & Sisters in Christ,

We are in Antioch of Syria! We've told the church here all about what God has done in Cyprus and Galatia. God has made it possible for people who are not Jewish to believe! We plan to stay here for a long time. Thank you for your prayers on our behalf. –Barnabas

Paul and Barnabas make it back to Antioch of Syria after being away more than a year. They eagerly report about the marvelous events since God opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. They encountered danger and had many exhilarating experiences on their journey. But their adventure isn't quite over. Some people in the Antioch church who are simultaneously believers and Pharisees are teaching that circumcision is necessary for salvation. The harmonious Jew-Gentile fellowship of the Antioch church is threatened, as is the work of Paul and Barnabas's trip. So here is one last postcard.

Postcard #12

Dear Friends,

It appears I will be seeing you soon. Some have been teaching that you can't be saved unless you are circumcised as Moses taught. Paul and I have debated this with them but haven't come to an agreement. The Antioch church is sending a delegation to Jerusalem to talk with the elders and apostles there. –Barnabas

What happens in Jerusalem is important to the growth of Christianity, paving the way for Paul's future missionary journeys and the spread of the gospel to the seat of the Roman Empire. However, as Anita reminded us last week, this wasn't the end to controversy and division. And, of course, we continue to experience controversy and division concerning matters of faith. My counsel for us is to follow the examples of Peter and Cornelius, of the Antioch church, of Paul and Barnabas, who sought God's guidance together in community. Each of us has our own faith, our individual relationship with God. But we need the community of believers to be held accountable. We all share in the community that is called by God, sent out in the name of Jesus, and guided by the Spirit. We are not on this journey alone. We are on the road with Peter and Cornelius, with Paul and Barnabas, and with each other.

Thanks be to God.