

EASTER 4 - Acts 13:1-3, 14:8-18 - The Commissioning of Paul

The Acts of the Apostles or Luke-Acts as it is also known, is Part Two of Luke's two-volume work. His Gospel is Part One. This work claims to be a record of eyewitness accounts of the Apostles. During his travels, Luke encountered both Peter and Paul, taking notes during his association with them and other Jerusalem disciples. This narrative takes place well after Pentecost which along with the Ascension, took place in the first chapters of Acts.

Acts is not just a historical narrative of the early days of the church. Luke did not set out to simply name the key events and places that marked the growth and development of these early communities of believers. Important figures, chronology and key places are not the main focus of Acts. Our understanding of Acts would not be well-tested by taking a quiz on the whos, whats, and whens of its protagonists; it's the *whys* that matter most to Luke. And so Luke's relentless attention remains focused on God throughout this narrative. God is always the "*why*".

And so we can point to Paul's various missionary journeys in the Book of Acts, taking note of the bold ways he preaches the good news in the cultural cauldrons that dotted the ancient Mediterranean world. From Jerusalem to Philippi to Athens to Lystra and eventually to Rome, Paul travels the ancient world, leaving an indelible mark upon these communities. And yet Paul's missionary journeys are never really about

Paul himself. Paul is not the hero of Acts but merely the courageous and powerful vessel through which God works. Clearly, God is the primary actor of Acts.

This does not mean that the names and exploits of the leaders of these churches are unimportant. Today's story opens with a naming of various "prophets and leaders" in the church of Antioch. Luke's lists are significant for understanding of Acts, as the lists are suggestive of the character of the communities they represent. So, for instance, we learn about a certain "Simeon who was called Niger" which translates as black. Why was he called "Niger"? Was it because of his origins or ancestry? Do we here have identified an African man, whose presence in the church in Antioch needs no explanation or rationalization? Is the presence of and leadership by people like Simeon characteristic of these early churches? We also meet Lucius of Cyrene, another individual not local to Antioch, but a Manaen, a member of the court of Herod the ruler. From the courts of the powerful to the foreign sojourner, we find not just members of these communities but their prophets and teachers. This is a community ~ and more importantly, a community whose God draws people from the ends of the earth.

In Antioch we find a very diverse community: Jews, Gentiles, members of Herod's court, prophets, teachers, pagans and foreign sojourners as well as Simeon, a black man. In the midst of worship and fasting, the Holy Spirit speaks to this community. That is, *God* acts and commissions

Paul and Barnabas to be sent from Antioch. The community, however, participates in the discernment and sending as well. In **laying hands** on these two brothers and sending them on the path to ministry elsewhere, God's commands and human obedience intersect.

Paul's missionary journeys are definitively empowered by God's word, but they also do not bypass the blessing of human hands. The laying on of hands and blessing can certainly be thought of as an ordination - one of the earliest ordinations. Consider the possibility that Paul's and Barnabas' ordination may have been carried out by a black person, something most of us never imagined or thought of.

These various interactions between the human and the divine come to light in today's narrative. And the confusion of human and divine initiatives is at the centre of the narrative.

A little girl was told by a friend that he had a surprise for her. He had slipped a lizard into a plastic bucket ~ one with shiny smooth walls that a lizard could not climb. He said, "Look inside the bucket, and tell me what you see." She looked inside, and her eyes got wide and bright. "What is it?" He asked. She said, "It's an alligator!" She had never seen a lizard in her whole life, but she had seen plenty of alligators, in her picture books. "Alligator" seems to be one of the popular words that begin with "A" in alphabet learning books. Lizards on the other hand, rarely show up in children's alphabet books. So when the girl looked

inside the bucket she automatically interpreted what she saw by using her own past, by using what she had already seen, or heard of, in her life. She saw an alligator. And, since it was a green chameleon, it did indeed look sort of like an alligator. How she interpreted what she saw, is how we all interpret what we experience. Not one of us can explain what we see ~ except by using what we have already seen in our lives. Our descriptions of new things use the images of things we have already seen. So if we have never seen a lizard, but have seen plenty of alligators, it is inevitable that our first lizard is going to look like an alligator.

This phenomenon probably followed Paul and Barnabas throughout their missionary journeys in the first century, and today's story in Acts is one of the most amusing accounts of this incident. Paul usually gets credit for all his missionary journeys. But he almost always travelled with a companion, sometimes Silas, but more often it was Barnabas.

Most people do not know that Paul was a funny looking man ~ at least according to legend. Some of the literature of the first and second centuries indicate that Paul simply did not cut a very attractive figure. Apparently, he was small and bow-legged, his eyebrows ran across his forehead and met in the middle, and he had a big nose and was bald-headed. He was, however, according to these same sources, also strongly built, sort of stocky, and, of course, he did a lot of talking. Barnabas, on the other hand, looked a bit more dignified, and usually

was quieter, letting the great preacher Paul do most of the preaching.

Well, after the two of them had been run out of Iconium, they arrived in Lystra. The scene in Lystra begins with Paul's healing of a man who could not walk as he had been lame from birth. While preaching, Paul "noticed him and realized he had faith to be healed", so he cried out, "Stand upright on your feet". The lame man jumped up and started walking. And then all the townspeople started carrying on in a language that Paul and Barnabas did not speak nor understand.

Historical evidence reveals that the lower classes of the interior of Asia Minor still spoke in their native tongues as late as the first century. This was in contrast to the more heavily populated areas along the Mediterranean coast, where native languages had largely disappeared in favour of Greek. Thus, Luke's reference to a native dialect in this inland city is accurate, yet we can assume that the residents understood or were familiar with Greek as well.

This is where the great misinterpretation begins. Paul and Barnabas probably did not know exactly what the townspeople were saying. Maybe Paul and Barnabas were proud that everyone was happy ~ most preachers appreciate that response. Maybe they were thinking, "If only everyone acted this way when there was a healing in town!"

What the people of Lystra were really speculating, was that some of the

Greek pantheon ~ some of the Greek gods ~ had come down to pay them a visit. Paul and Barnabas were in territory that was foreign. These people had their own religion. In fact, the townspeople believed it was none other than Zeus, the chief of the gods ~ and Hermes, who was, according to their religion, the chief speaker and messenger for Zeus.

So, they said Paul, the speaker, must be the odd-looking Hermes, and the more dignified looking gentleman, that is Barnabas, must be Zeus himself ~ an interesting and plausible conclusion by the townspeople. The populace of every locality in the ancient world worshipped deities that were considered to be the patrons of their city, town, or area. Archeological evidence supports the theory that the Zeus-Hermes combination was the local cult of the city of Lystra.

Now, to make things just a little more complicated, there was a local legend at that time, told by Ovid in his book *Metamorphoses*. Zeus and Hermes had, in the distant past, visited this area disguised as humans, testing the locals. The people failed and the town was destroyed. The residents of Lystra didn't want to experience that again. So the people of Lystra were not going to miss out on this opportunity. They were convinced that Zeus and Hermes had once again returned to earth in the form of humans, and this time the townspeople were going to welcome and entertain them.

For us, Paul is the central figure in Acts, so we might consider it odd that

the people of Lystra identified Barnabas as the great Zeus, the most important of all the gods. Luke, himself, can't explain why this misidentification was made. However, historical evidence reveals that it was a common belief in the ancient world that when two gods came to earth, the lesser one did the talking. Since Paul did the preaching, the people probably concluded that Barnabas must be the greater god. This is a small historical point, but it underscores the authenticity of the narrative.

Apparently, it took some time before Paul and Barnabas caught on to what the crowd was saying and thinking. As far as Paul and Barnabas were concerned, they had just witnessed a man being healed through the power of Jesus Christ. The crowd is stunned and in their jubilation assume that Paul and Barnabas are living embodiments of the gods Zeus and Hermes.

Still not getting what is actually going on, Paul and Barnabas join the townspeople in their jubilation. So convinced of their divine status are the Lystronians, that the local priest of Zeus shows up at the gates to the city with oxen and garlands to offer sacrifice to Barnabas, assuming he was Zeus himself! Of course, Paul and Barnabas are unaware of this since the hubbub is being conducted in a language they do not understand, a reminder that Pentecost does not resolve all linguistic confusions!

The appropriate response to seeing a miracle (in the New Testament at

least) is to praise God and have faith in God's active presence. And this is exactly what happened – sort of. The people who witnessed this miracle did start praising and believing in the active presence of the divine. The problem was that their understanding of the divine was limited to the gods and goddesses of the Eastern Mediterranean, in this case, the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes.

The problem wasn't really that the people reacted incorrectly to this miracle. The problem was that they didn't yet have the correct direction; they were just using the wrong map. The reality is that the Lystronians read the situation very, very wrong. And these monotheistic Jewish apostles were absolutely horrified that the people were trying to make them the objects of their idolatrous worship! Paul and Barnabas tried to correct the people and teach them about the true God. It worked - a little.

In response, Paul and Barnabas lament symbolically by tearing their clothes in grief and testify their common mortality with their audience. Hey, we are just human beings like you! We are not gods whatsoever, they say, but the God who created everything you see is the one who empowered this miracle. Worship that God, for that God is the same God who has showered your crops, fed you, and caused your heart to abound with joy. Nevertheless, the Book of Acts says, "they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them".

It's a great story. Paul and Barnabas perform a Christian miracle that gets misinterpreted totally out of their context and into the context of the Greek legend of the time. We have an instance of a people who had never seen a lizard, but they knew what an alligator was. They had to interpret the new experience according to their previous mind-set, according to what they already knew about theology, according to what they already knew about miracles and God.

It is the same with us today. Whenever anything new comes into our lives, whether welcome or unwelcome, it is inevitable that we will interpret it according to our past. This leads to confusion which is sometimes funny, but also sometimes painful. It is the reason for many of the arguments in the Christian church. Many of us cannot fathom the possibility that God would ever do anything new or different in our churches. We claim that these new things are not, or cannot possibly be the work of God.

Given the inevitability of misinterpretation, it is a miracle that we ever accept or learn anything new. And yet, we do. One of the great miracles in our lives is the ability of God to present new things to us and, at the same time, to give us the ability to understand and interpret them. This, is the real power of the Holy Spirit.

Consider the world of science. Scientists spend years in the laboratory discovering new facts which do not fit the old theories. Only after some

time has passed are there finally enough new facts to argue convincingly for changing the old theories. Then, a new construct is developed, a new theory enables the new facts to be interpreted.

It is the same with our experience of God. If our ears and eyes are open, God does new things in our lives all the time. God teaches new things about herself, about what it means to follow God, about new places where we might find Jesus Christ. Often, that means we must change our previous image of who God is.

Those transformations are never easy. It is not easy to come to grips with a new thing in our spiritual lives, in our emotional lives, or in our theological lives. The greatest obstacle to our experience of God is our last experience of God. The greatest obstacle to our experience of church is our last experience of church. That is: what prohibits us from experiencing God today is yesterday's experience of God. What prohibits us from experiencing church today is yesterday's experience of church. We were so moved by that previous, wondrous experience, that we cannot possibly imagine any other way that God might come to us. The greatest stumbling block to seeing God anew is thinking that God is always going to show up in the way we saw God before. The people of Lystra could not immediately see the power of Paul's message because ~ they interpreted the miracle according to the legends of their own time.

Too often, we have applied the Bible's narratives of healing miracles to

our lives without careful consideration. We see only what was lacking in those Jesus healed, and we assume too quickly to know the meaning of wholeness. There are individuals worshipping in our communities with disabilities of various kinds, some are evident while others are largely invisible. In either case, their wholeness is not for us, for me, to determine. For instance, we cannot simply assume that those who are visually impaired or those who are hearing impaired would find wholeness in the restoration of sight or hearing. It may be for some ~ perhaps even many ~ of our sisters and brothers that a significant component of their identity emerges from these so-called disabilities. They are not children of God *despite* their disabilities. They are children of God because God only sees their wholeness.

And yet Paul does heal this man. Why? Notice that he does so because the man has “faith to be healed”, meaning that he has a hope for this healing and a trust that God and God alone could provide it. This is the nature of faith in Acts: trust in a God who will keep God’s promises and will meet us and heal us.

What do we make of these narratives of mission? First, we might be reminded that Paul’s journeys were cross-cultural efforts, that his attempts to proclaim the gospel in new places meant crossing cultural boundaries that sometimes resulted in massive misunderstandings.

Second, we might be reminded that God and God alone is the source of

healing and life and salvation in Acts. We, God's servants, carry God's power to heal and to renew life in our hands and in our mouths when we are called by God to love our neighbours and proclaim the good news in word and deed.

Third, we are reminded anew that the stories in Acts delight us with vibrant scenes. There is a comedic element to this scene of religious fervour and misunderstanding. In the delight this scene causes, we catch a memorable glimpse into God's character. Last, we are reminded once again that Paul's missionary journeys in Acts are not meant only to lead us to imitation. We can certainly retrace Paul's steps by visiting key sites in Turkey today.

But that is not the primary aim of this text! Instead, these encounters ought to inspire us to see the unexpected ways God will call us to serve God and neighbour in our everyday lives. These encounters should inspire us to see the unexpected and exciting new ways God will call the church to serve God and neighbour ~ ways that we have never experienced or even imagined. We just have to be ready to see and listen with open hearts and minds and be ready to hear and see something new.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE FOR APRIL 30/ 23 - EASTER 4

O God, your Son remained with his disciples after his resurrection, teaching them to love all people as neighbours. As his disciples in this age, we offer our prayers on behalf of the world in which we are privileged to live and our neighbours with whom we share it, saying: God of life and freedom..... **Receive our prayers.**

Your voice sings in creation. Preserve pastures and city parks, oceans and local water sources, so that nature provides life and protection for all creatures; may our leaders have dedication and love like Alessandra Korap Munduruku of Brazil's indigenous Munduruku community, who was successful in a grassroots win against mining in the Amazon rainforest.
God of life and freedom..... **Receive our prayers.**

Your voice sings among the nations. Curb the desire for vengeance: turn us from dishonest speech and deceitful living; lead us in your truth.
God of life and freedom..... **Receive our prayers.**

Your voice sings in our homes. Open the hearts of those who provide mothering and nurturing care, that Christ's love would be revealed in the generosity shown to all our children.
God of life and freedom..... **Receive our prayers.**

Your voice sings in the pains and challenges facing the world. In Sudan — may the cease fire hold for people to flee and needed care be brought to all desperate for aid. May deeper peace be sown and its roots strengthened in places living in daily conflict – Ukraine and Russia, Israel and Palestine, Haiti and Honduras amid “war-zone-like” gang violence; for the earthquake survivors in Syria and Turkey, recovering physically and emotionally as they piece together lives with so much rubble, trauma and loss.
God of life and freedom..... **Receive our prayers.**

Your voice sings among the children of the world. We hear many children crying for food and drink and for someone to enfold them in loving arms. We pray for those in Kenya uncovering the story and lives-lost due to the starvation cult. For 13-year-old Marcelo Jesus Gouriyu who makes a dangerous border crossing between Venezuela and Colombia daily to get to school. For children across the world whose access to education is impacted by violence, poverty and limited availability.

God of life and freedom..... **Receive our prayers.**

Your voice sings among migrants marching in Mexico demanding systems to change on the border between Mexico and the United States; among the LGBTQSIA+ community in Iran who rose up in protest this week asking for rights, to be seen and accepted as they are, and for who they love.

God of life and freedom..... **Receive our prayers.**

Your voice sings among those in need: the poor, the homeless, the suffering, the afflicted, those living with depression, chronic illness, anxiety and terminal disease, the ill and hospitalized; those who will die this day.

God of life and freedom..... **Receive our prayers.**

Your voice sings among those who are celebrating another birthday, an anniversary; those who are travelling to experience your wonderous world elsewhere; and for any other special occasion in our lives. We give thanks for your ongoing blessings in our daily lives, for providing us with all we need.

God of life and freedom..... **Receive our prayers.**

Open our hearts to your power moving around us and between us and within us, until your glory is revealed in our love of both friend and enemy, in communities transformed by justice and compassion, and in the healing of all that is broken.

Amen.

God in community, Holy One, make us one Body from many individuals as we pray as Jesus teaches us, saying:

Our Father, Who art in heaven ...