

A Light for the Nations

Acts 13:13–52

November 11, 2001

What a sermon! After the scripture had been read, and after the elders properly invited him, as a guest, to speak, Paul stood—not like the rabbis who sat down to teach—Paul stood like a Greek or Roman orator, motioned to the congregation that something important was about to happen, and did a new and marvelous thing in that church—he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. They had never heard that before.

The gospel was electrifying! The congregation begged him to come back and preach the same sermon again the next week! Can you imagine that? Devout people sought him out for conversation. The next week, the whole city came out, not so much to hear Paul, as to hear him preach the word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ. The old guard got jealous, which is always a sign that something is being done right. That was fine by Paul. He turned to the people who wanted to hear the gospel, knowing that God was sending out the church as a light to the nations, to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. Those who heard rejoiced. Those whom God chose, even from among the nations, believed. And the word of the Lord spread like wildfire. The disciples were full of joy and the Holy Spirit. And that is the way it is supposed to be.

The good news here, today, is that God has provided for salvation. Everything good in this reading occurs at the initiative of God. “The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great. . . . He gave them their land as an inheritance. . . . He gave them judges. . . . God gave them Saul. . . . He raised up David to be their king. . . . God has brought . . . a Savior, Jesus, as he promised.” It is all at God’s initiative, and it is all by God’s grace and action. By way of contrast, everything bad in this reading happens by human initiative and action. “For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets . . . fulfilled these by condemning him. Though they could charge him with nothing deserving death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed. And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a tomb.”

Whatever good that happens here happens by the initiative and action of God. Whatever bad that happens here cannot undo or overcome the initiative and action of God. And this good that God has done is to bring to us a savior, the one who can save us from ourselves and restore us to God. That is what we need, more than food and drink, more than money or fame, more than breath or air. We need to be saved from ourselves and we need to be restored to God. This is what Jesus Christ has come to do for us. He was sent from God to do precisely this.

Of course, things did not go smoothly. The very people to whom God sent Jesus as savior rejected and killed him for claiming to be the savior, thus unwittingly fulfilling the ancient prophecies that the savior would be rejected and killed, proving by their own actions that he was who he said he was. The evil of their deed demonstrated their need for salvation. The killing of the savior was part of the way of salvation. And to show that Jesus was right in accepting their rejection, to show that Jesus is the savior and not just one more criminal executed outside Jerusalem, to show that God keeps his promises about saving his people, and to show that the power of God is greater than the power of sin, death, and evil, God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. God recreated life out of death. God broke and defeated, once and for all, the power of death. They killed Jesus, God raised him. They buried him, God brought him back to life. They

rejected him, God accepted him, loved him, vindicated him, and resurrected him, for their sake. And they still did not get it.

“Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.” What a sermon! What good news! Through the risen Jesus Christ comes forgiveness of sins. Through faith in the risen Jesus Christ comes freedom from sin, freedom from guilt, and freedom from evil. The law cannot do that, but Jesus Christ can. Self-achievement cannot do that, but Jesus Christ can. The nation cannot do that, but Jesus Christ can. The pious soul cannot do that, but Jesus Christ can. And still, the danger is that some people will not be interested, that some people will not care, that some people will not believe the resurrection when it happens right in front of them, that some people will not believe the gospel when it is preached to them. “Beware, therefore, lest there come upon you what is said in the prophets: ‘Behold, you scoffers, and wonder, and perish; for I do a deed in your days, a deed you will never believe, if one declares it to you.’” Here is the horror of it all, that God would bring the gospel to us, and we might reject it. Conversely, here is the beauty and the joy of it all, that God brings the gospel to us and works within our hearts and souls that we might hear, believe, and obey.

How is it with us today? Are we too proud to accept God’s gift? Are we too self-sufficient to realize our own need? Are we so comfortable that we have no motivation to know God? I cannot understand this. Our nation is at war. We are under attack from an alien religious perspective. And yet, for many, life goes on as usual. How can that be? Perhaps the gospel of Jesus Christ does not interest people when times are perceived to be good. But how in the world do people stay away from church during war? At the very least, should we not be praying for God’s mercy? I do not understand our nation’s aloofness.

The point of today’s reading is not a history lesson, at least not a history lesson about the people of Antioch. To some extent, it is a divine history lesson, but only for the sake of telling us about a present and living reality. For the point of today’s reading is not what a good preacher Paul was but what a wonderful God God is, not what a remarkable sermon Paul preached then but how remarkable the gospel is now, not only that Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried, but that God has raised him from the dead, not that the people of Antioch believed but that we might believe, and not that the devout women and leading men of the city rejected the gospel, but that we might not reject the gospel. Their rejection of Jesus Christ was enough. We need not add another soul to that.

God has done it all: chosen us, brought Jesus Christ to us, raised him from the dead, and proclaimed his gospel. Hear, believe, and rejoice. And as we believe, so do we share the gospel with others. It is not only the ancient apostles, and not only the preachers of the gospel, who are called to be a light to the nations. It is the entire Christian church which is called to be a light to the nations, living and sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with all the world. Each of us has a part to play in this. Some of our members have been missionaries. Perhaps others will be called to follow in their footsteps. At this very moment, two young American women are in prison in Afghanistan accused of the “crime” of sharing the gospel. That is illegal in Islamic nations around the world. So we have a lot to learn about how to spread the gospel. We face great difficulties.

At the same time, people of all nations and religions come to this country and to this city. We can be missionaries right here. We can invite and bring people to church right here to

worship God and to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. What a joy, a privilege, and a solemn responsibility this is for us. We could become increasingly multi-racial, international, and ethnically diverse, not by trying to do so, but simply as we are drawn together by our one Lord, Jesus Christ. We could draw from the city and from the universities. Perhaps our early worship service should be in another language. Perhaps one of our Sunday School classes should be in another language. And the more we reach out to other people, the more we preach Jesus Christ, the more we glorify God, the more we become, here and now, a light to the nations.

“Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. . . . For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth.’”

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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