

January 25, 2009
The National Presbyterian Church

To Know Who We Really Are

Acts 14:8-23

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Lord, be our teacher today. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

One of the joys that my wife and I have had being here in this wonderful church with you has been the chance to get to know personally Condoleezza Rice. We knew about Condoleezza Rice; believe me, before we came. Two of our children, were students at Stanford University when Condoleezza was the provost of Stanford University so we knew a lot about her and all good, too. Then she became the Secretary of State of our country, and it has been just a great privilege to know you, Condoleezza, and to know the role you play in this fellowship.

And this city, what a great city, Washington is. I believe it's been a model of hope to the whole world. When I think of the inauguration this week,

two words came to my mind in this amazing set of days that we've just been through. And one is the word excitement and the other word, peaceful. It was peaceful excitement. And I think that's a great tribute to this city and I believe that it modeled hope for the whole world.

Now, another city. We're looking at cities in this series of sermons, Saint Paul and his friends, the early Christians and the cities they loved. One way to study the Book of Acts and certainly the ministry of Saint Paul is to watch Saint Paul and his friends as they travel from city to city in the Mediterranean world of the first century and see what happens to Paul in these cities, what he says to these cities, what we learn about the Christian Gospel in these cities. And we have one today that's very interesting. You've heard the text read about his visit to Lystra.

First, Paul, in the beginning of his Christian journey, has an amazing personal healing and assuring experience in an ancient city Damascus. Then he goes to Antioch. And Antioch on the Mediterranean Sea, third largest city of the Roman Empire, the city where the believers are first called Christians and there Paul and Barnabas following their teaching time in Antioch were sent out by that church, first to the island of Cyprus. They had success in Cyprus sharing the gospel. Then they come back and they journey into the heart of what is today modern-day Turkey. They probably took a ship to what is now Anatolia, and then they went over the 9,000-foot mountain range--it's right near the coast of southern Turkey--into the heart of Turkey, what the Romans called the Roman province of Asia. And it's also called the Galatia area, to several cities, one of which is Lystra. And that was the text you heard, and they went up there and went to several cities.

And when they went to Lystra, a man who'd been crippled for a long time was healed by Paul, and a crowd then became excited, and they began to run out of the city speaking in the Lycaonian language which Paul and Barnabas evidently at first did not understand. That's why Luke mentions that they were speaking in the Lycaonian language which was their own

dialect instead of Greek which Paul and Barnabas would know. The priest in the temple of Zeus joins them and they say, "Oh, this is so exciting. Here we have Zeus and Hermes in our midst." It is interesting they called Barnabas, Zeus, because Barnabas is probably much taller than Paul. And Zeus, of course, in the pantheon of the Greek gods, would be number one.

So here's Zeus, by the way, the Romans didn't invent gods. They borrowed all their gods from the Greeks but then renamed them. So if you want to know the Roman equivalent, the Romans called Zeus, Jupiter, and therefore in the Roman empire there are a number of Jupiter temples in the ancient world that the Romans built. The Romans called Hermes, Mercury. Hermes is the Greek god who speaks. That's why in modern scientific language we talk about hermeneutics. It's the art of interpreting or explaining what something means, and that's the Greek god Hermes. And since Paul did most of the speaking, he's called Hermes who's a shorter god, runs around a lot, called Mercury by the Romans, the one who teaches.

So they come out of the city and at first, Paul and Barnabas probably don't know what's going on, then when they realized it, they said, "Oh, my goodness." And they run into the crowd. First, they tear their clothes, a Jewish tradition that says, "I'm not happy with what's happening." They run into the crowd and say, "Men, we're just men like you are. We're just humans like you are. We're not gods." And that finally sinks in, notice Luke says it was very hard to make that sink in because the Zeus priest was planning to give sacrifices in honor of Barnabas and Paul. When it finally sank in, then the mood of the crowd shifts and they start throwing rocks at Paul. Now, what's that tell you? Don't disappoint a crowd or the adoration may turn to rage. And so they start to stone Paul, and they were dragging him around when the Christians surrounded him. I love that line. The Christians surrounded Paul, protected him like the Secret Service surrounds the President. They surrounded him, took the rocks with their backs, and got Paul out. And then, don't you love this, Paul and Barnabas soon after come back into the city. And then they go out to Derbe and then they come back and teach in

that city perhaps for a long period time and continue their mission.

Well, that is quite an adventure. Following the sudden adoration of the people, this great teaching moment occurs. And in that teaching moment, Saint Paul clears the air. And that clearing of the air that, "We're not gods. We're just ordinary men. We're servants like you are." That clearing of the air becomes very important for the whole future of the Christian gospel in the world, and its centered-ness, it becomes crucial for us today. This is a text for us just like it is a text for them.

But I want you to think for a minute. Has it occurred to you that this moment in the life of these men, Paul and Barnabas, is a fork-in-the-road moment? If Paul and Barnabas had not been so definite, they could have made use of this mistake that the people are making to their advantage. If you're a public relations person you would realize an incredible moment that is now on your lap, the people are ready to worship you, why not take advantage of it at least for a while and you'll be able to advance your mission. With all of their support because they're not only supporting, they are adoring you. And so, they're at a definite crossroads here. Had they had not been so completely clear and definite with what they said and did, they could have used this mistake to their advantage, at least for a while. Later on, it would come back to haunt them with unhealthy, even toxic results.

It's a little bit like when you're writing your resume, there appears a small mistake in the resume and a line notes that you were a Vietnam War Veteran who fought in the Tet Offensive, but you did not actually go to Vietnam. Just one sudden mistake on a resume, caught by the alert news media, ended the career of a college football coach. The resume's false line came to haunt him. Some will check out the details in your resume so be careful. You may win a short term gain but it could be a long term disadvantage.

Can I tell you a true story? I have been a pastor for quite a while and I've had two honors given to me and they're wonderful for which I'm truly grateful. A few years ago, Whitworth University gave me an honorary doctorate so I have an honorary Whitworth D.D. And then two years ago,

Seattle Pacific University in Seattle also gave me an honorary doctorate for which I'm also very grateful, Doctor of Humane Letters. And you know that's a very touching honor except that I had a bad dream afterward. I had this bad dream that I was in a hospital and everybody thought that I was a surgeon because I had these two honorary doctorates. I had this terrible dream in which they thought I was an orthopedic surgeon and they told me that I had to go in and do surgery. In my dream I went into the library at the hospital and was going through the books as fast as I could to try to read up on surgery. It's true. And the only thing I could think of that I knew anything about surgery was I'd seen movies of the doctors washing their hands. I knew I could do that. I could do that, put gloves on my hands. I knew I could do that, but everything else after that and I was in sheer terror. This is one of those terrible dreams. I think it's a penalty dream for not having prepared for some schoolwork exam when I was in college. I have a lot of those dreams about not being prepared for exams. But here, I'm not prepared for surgery. And then I woke up before any harm had actually happened to me or to any patient.

But you know it's a great lesson to learn. And you know after the first service today a man told me that he had that happen. He had a Ph.D. which is certainly an honorable degree, and his secretary made a mistake of putting doctor before his name on his air ticket. On the airplane during the flight a flight attendant came up to him and said, "We have a medical emergency, doctor, at the back of the plane. And would you come?" He said, "No, no. I'm not that kind of doctor." So he said, believe me, he doesn't put Dr. in the front of his name on air tickets anymore.

Well, Paul and Barnabas have a moment on a far larger crossroads moment with a lot more things at stake. They could be called gods if they wanted to, at least for a while. And it would help them at Lystra and they would win a tremendous following. Everybody would have followed them there but they make a moment of truth decision. Instead, they tell the truth. They tell the truth in their resume. They tell the truth. The result? They get stoned. You know Paul has a lot of close calls, doesn't he? They got stoned but something

beautiful happens. The Christian believers surround them. They surround Paul just like he'd been surrounded at Damascus. They surround him. They watch out for him. And here's something else. After he gets restored and gets his health back, then he and Barnabas come back to that city of Lystra, that very city, and they do what they do best, they teach the people the truth.

And by the way, those people of Lystra become strong believers. You know that just two chapters later when Paul comes to Lystra, he meets a young man in Lystra who will be with him for the rest of his life. You know who that young man is? Timothy. Young Timothy is from Lystra. And you know what else? Later, Paul will write one of the greatest books he ever wrote to any church, to that church. You know what it is? The Galatian letter. It's written to the people at and around Lystra. So good things happen. He told the truth. He paid a price for it at the beginning there but it had a good effect.

Folks, why are we studying this great text? We're grateful for it. We're grateful for the clearing of the air so that we know that from the early Christians and from Saint Paul and from Barnabas on, the good news is about the Lord Jesus Christ, not about us. We're not lords. We're not gods. We're servants. This is a great text on humility because that's really what Paul shows. What is the definition of humility? Have you ever thought of what the definition is? The definition of humility is knowing who you are and knowing what you're not and then telling the truth especially to yourself. The definition of humility is that it is not being incompetent.

And some of you will think, "Oh, a humble person is incompetent." Oh, no, a humble person is very competent because they know what they can do and what they can't do. A humble person is not a weak person. It's not being weak. It's being very strong. Look at the boldness of Paul. They tore their clothes, ran into the crowd, and with great effort, they made it really clear who they were and what they weren't. Their humility was not weak. It was not indecisive. It was not afraid. So, humility must never be made an equivalent of fear. It was wise. It was wise. And also there's something

marvelous in this great text. Paul discovered the beloved-ness of the Lord who protected him and also he discovered how beloved he was by that little band of Christians who at great personal risk--notice the text, it said --the Christians in Lystra surrounded him. They surrounded him. And he never forgot that. They empowered him. And then he came back to that city and did what he did best, he taught them the truth.

I was touched by what we experienced this week, in our nation, the peaceful transfer of power in our democracy. And afterwards, I tried to read all the pundits and people who made comments on what happened at the inauguration. One that was most impressive to me was in *The Washington Post* by George Will.¹ George Will made an interesting comment. He said he was struck by the fact that President Obama's first words when he stood for his inauguration address was, "I stand here today humbled by the task before us." He was struck by the use of the word humble. And he said what President Obama did in that speech was to repeat the very first inauguration speech of the president of the United States and that was the speech of George Washington. George Washington's opening words in his inauguration were, "The magnitude and the difficulty that we have here this day which the voice of my country has called upon me since I am not sufficient in the wisest and most experienced of her citizens and I am inferior with endowments of civil administration," he said, "They ought to be particularly conscious of this, of my own deficiencies." And so, he started by that stance of who he was, the humility he felt, "I stand here humbled," it's what George Washington said and our present president had said it. And George Will said he thought that was good.

The Apostle Paul and Barnabas were humble. They were realistic about who they are, and that wonderful gift of realism, that gift of truth is planted firmly into the heart of gospel. Not only truth, but also grace because those Christians that surrounded Paul and shared their love with him, and the love that Paul had for Lystra even after that rocking incident that he comes back to that city, teaches them, writes one of his most beautiful letters to that church.

Heavenly Father, thank you for that. Thank you for this legacy. Today, as we install elders and deacons in this church, they also are not gods. They are servants. We are servants together and they will be installed to be under-shepherds in this fellowship. Lord, we thank you that we can be who we are and discover your grace and your truth that changes the world. Lord, may we have that genuine humility but also the grace that gives us power and courage and strength. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

¹Will, George. "Speech Therapy." *The Washington Post*, home edition, January 21, 2009, page A11.

Earl Frank Palmer Copyright © 2009 All Rights Reserved

Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202/537-0800