

“Called to Go”
Acts 12:25-13:12

Pastor Karl has provided us with a real challenge and a great learning opportunity during these summer months as he builds our weekly sermons around the chapters in the book, *The Call*, based on the life and message of the Apostle Paul as we find them laid out in the Book of the Acts. I’m not sure how many of you are using that book as your guide in following the weekly sermons. And if you’re not I’m afraid you may miss out on some of the important truths God’s Word has for us as we trace the journey of the Apostle’s life from his conversion on the Damascus Road to his final days in a prison cell in Rome. Today’s message is based on the second chapter of the book, which is entitled, “Called to Go.” The chapter covers the closing verse of Acts, chapter twelve, all the way to the end of chapter fourteen.

In this portion of the book Luke tells us of what has become known as Paul’s first missionary journey. And just to make sure we’re all aware of the essential events of that journey let me summarize them for you at the outset. The story begins in the city of Antioch in Syria. It is the third largest city in the Roman Empire, and a community of Christians has existed there for some time. Luke tells us that one of its leaders, Barnabas has gone to Tarsus where Paul has been living and has brought him to Antioch to share in the ministry there. Together they have taken an offering to the churches in Jerusalem who were suffering because of a severe famine. On their return they bring with them John Mark, Barnabas’ cousin, in whose mother’s home the early Church meets. Mark may have begun writing his Gospel about this time.

While the leaders of the Antiochian Church are worshiping and fasting the Holy Spirit directs them to set apart Barnabas and Saul for the task of taking the Good News of God’s saving loving in Jesus to those parts of the world waiting to hear it. Our Scripture Lesson for this morning records the beginning of the journey with a voyage to the island of Cyprus and Paul’s confrontation with a Jewish false prophet and would be wizard who tries to keep his boss, Sergius Paulus, the proconsul or governor of the island from responding to the message Paul has to share. In the power and authority of the Holy Spirit the Apostle tells Elymas that he is a child of the devil and an enemy of all that is right and tells him he will be blinded, which he is. The governor is so impressed by all this and by Paul’s teaching about the Lord that he becomes a believer.

From the island of Cyprus Paul and Barnabas and John Mark sail to the city of Perga in what is now southern Turkey. And at that point young John leaves the two Apostles and heads back to his home in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas travel up through the Taurus mountains to the town of Pysidian Antioch. (At that point in time there were about fifteen different towns called Antioch throughout the Roman Empire.) When they arrive there they go to the synagogue and Paul is invited to speak to the congregation. Almost all of Acts, chapter thirteen, is Luke's account of the Apostle's message to the Jewish members of the congregation and the devout Gentiles who attend worship with them. The people are so impressed by Paul's message they invited to come back next week. On his return the whole town gathers to hear him.

At this point we begin to see a recurring theme in all of the Apostle Paul's missionary journeys. Paul's strategy from the beginning is to proclaim the Good News to the people of Israel first before going anywhere else. And when his Jewish hearers reject the message of Jesus as their Messiah and Savior he turns to the non-Jewish population which often tends to be more open and receptive to the forgiveness and new life he brings in Jesus' name. The Jews in Pysidian Antioch are jealous of the welcome Paul has received and reject him. The Gentiles are overjoyed as they embrace God's Word and come to faith in the Lord. The Word of the Lord spreads. The Jews stir up the whole town and seek to persecute Paul and Barnabas. And the two Apostles shake the dust off their feet and moved on.

The fourteenth chapter of Acts, tells the story of how Paul and Barnabas are treated in the cities of Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. In Iconium they follow their usual pattern and go to the synagogue, where Paul's message is so persuasive that many Jewish and God-fearing Gentiles come to faith. The Apostles spend time encouraging the new believers and performing miracles of compassion and grace. They soon find themselves opposed by the unbelieving Jews who are able to divide the city and develop a plan to ill-treat and ultimately stone Paul and Barnabas. Once again the two move on. The next stop is the town of Lystra, where Paul sees a man crippled from birth and, aware that he has the faith to be healed, Paul speaks the healing word and the man jumps to his feet. A crowd gathers, decides that Paul and Barnabas are gods and sets about offering sacrifices to them. With great difficulty they persuade them not to.

However, some of the Jews from Antioch and Iconium make the trip to Lystra, convince the crowd to stone Paul, and dragging him outside the city, leaving him for dead. But when those who had become disciples gather around him he revives, gets up and returns to the city. The next day he and Barnabas leave for the city of Derbe, where they preach the good news and win a large number of disciples to the Lord. It has now been almost a year and the two missionaries begin to retrace their steps, returning to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening and encouraging the new believers and appointing leaders for these infant communities of faith. On their way they preach in Perga, and sail on home and report to the congregation all that God had done through them and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

Now, I doubt very much that any of us here this morning would every consider equating our experiences as those who have been called by the Lord to go, with those of the Apostles Paul and Barnabas. In so many ways their life as followers of the Son of God are different from our own. The work they were given to do, the challenges they faced, the very intensity of their lives as believers all seem far beyond anything we can begin to imagine coming to us today. Their lives were suffused with a sense of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Our lives seem so much more mundane and subdued. They were compelled and motivated by a love for the Lord and desire to please Him far more intense than most of us ever feel. But in spite of all that, there are some important things we share in our mutual call to go.

The first of those is the fact that our initial call is always a call to come to Jesus Christ. At some point in our lives the Holy Spirit makes us aware of the fact that we stand in need of a Savior who can rescue us from being the self-centered, guilt-ridden individuals we are, and of a Lord who can empower us and guide us to new life as the children of God. In that moment, or in the midst of that process, however it happens, we stop heading off in our own direction and respond to that gracious invitation, “Come to Me.” Sometimes that involves an about face, other times it’s more like a winding ark. But in the end it is simply a matter of coming to Jesus and opening our hearts and lives to Him, trusting in the forgiveness He has won for us and relying on His indwelling presence to make us ever more like Him.

But implicit in the call to come is the requirement that we must also go. For the invitation is always, “Come and follow Me.” Our Lord is always on the move. He is always at work in the world, and He calls us to come and join in Him in the establishment of His Kingdom here on earth. He calls us together to be His body, His hands and feet, His eyes and ears, His heart and voice. Together we have a mission to share in as He sends us out to accomplish His purposes. Every believer, everyone the Son of God calls to Himself, is in a very real sense a missionary. Every day we are being sent out as His representatives, as His witnesses. Every day we are being called to go. Probably not to Antioch or Lystra or Derbe, but possibly to Ohio, or the county jail or to a nearby nursing home, or to a needy friend or neighbor. There is mission work for us to do.

And when the call comes to go, here are some experiences we will probably share with Paul and Barnabas. Like theirs, our calls originate in the heart and mind of the Holy Spirit. It is He who guides and directs the people of God as they seek to do the work of the Kingdom. Just how He goes about making His will known isn't always clear in the Scriptures. But when believers are about the business of worship, when they are focused on discerning that will, He makes it known. And He does so through the voice of His people. We get a phone call asking us to serve as an Elder or Deacon or Sunday School teacher, as a Youth Advisor, or Vacation Bible School volunteer, or to go on a work camp, or to share in some form of outreach or ministry. That's how the Holy Spirit usually calls us to go.

Also, like Barnabas and Paul the call to go usually follows a time of preparation and equipping. As far as we can tell there were probably fourteen years between the time when Paul met the Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road and the time when he and Barnabas started out on that first missionary journey. We know that Paul was living in the city of Tarsus, and that he may well have been busy seeking to share the Good News with the Jewish congregations in that part of the world, sharpening his skills as a teacher and preacher. And then Barnabas sought him out and they worked together for some time in Antioch building up the Church there and developing a working relationship with one another. And then when the time was right, the Holy Spirit called them to go. This may be a time of preparation for you.

Something else we share with Paul and Barnabas is the fact that our calls to go are always undergirded and supported by the congregations which send us. The leaders of the Church in Antioch gather around the two Apostles and lay their hands on them, not only to set them apart for the special work they have been given to do, but also to encourage them that the work they are about to undertake is truly the Lord's work. And more than that, in the laying on of their hands, these Church leaders are identifying with themselves with in their efforts. They may not be traveling with them, but they are with them in spirit. The believers in Antioch are committed to praying for Paul and Barnabas, for their safety and the success of their endeavors. And that is how it is to be with us, as well.

Here are a couple of more ways in which we can expect our calls to be similar to the Apostles: first of all, don't be surprised if your job description changes once the work begins. At the start it certainly looks like Barnabas is to be the leader and spokesperson for the group. But very soon, on the island of Cyprus it becomes clear that Paul is going to be in charge and Banabas will be his 'wing man.' That kind of thing happens all the time on mission trips. And second, don't be surprised if some of the people working with you let you down. John Mark certainly disappointed Paul when he left the mission and headed for home. People don't always live up to our expectations, or we to theirs, and it can cause problems, as it did for Paul and Barnabas in their relationship later on. But life is like that, and the Lord is still in charge.

One thing more which ought to mark both that first call to go for Paul and Barnabas, and our calls to go, is that there always needs to be a sense of accountability and responsibility for the ways in which the Lord has been at work in and through us. At the conclusion of every missionary journey the Apostle Paul engages in, he returned to the sending Church in Antioch and reports on all that the Holy Spirit has been able to accomplish through him and his companions. We look forward to hearing from our work campers later this summer when they've returned and had a chance to reflect on how the Lord has used them. I personally wish that there were an opportunity every Sunday for all of us to report on how the Lord has used us in the week just past to accomplish His mission through you and me.

Just one final thing we should always expect when we answer the call to come and go: there are going to be people who will welcome us and the good news we have to bring and there will be people who will reject and oppose that good news in one way or another. The example that Paul and Barnabas have left us is one of patience and perseverance, of courage and confidence. No matter what the response they receive they simply remain faithful to the One who has sent them. What they were saying and doing, what they were experiencing and dealing with were all for His sake. And they simply trusted Him that He would honor their efforts and that His will would be done. That's what kept them going in good times and bad. That's the key for you and me when the Savior says to us, "Come and go for Me!" Amen.