

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, oh God our strength and Redeemer....

I usually stand at this podium as the Eucharistic Minister, assisting in the liturgy of the word by leading the psalm and the Prayers of the people. This week, though, I am the preacher. As some of you may know, the Diocese is offering a Lay Preaching Certificate through the Iona Collaborative and the Seminary of the Southwest and I was lucky enough to be accepted into the program, on Caro's recommendation.

Before I got into the "numbers" game as a career, I dreamt of being a history teacher. My area of special interest was "social history".... Understanding the world in which people lived; what music they were listening to, what books they were reading, what influenced their politics and spending habits and generally how they lived their day-to-day lives. As a result, I've always been fascinated about the world of the Bible – Life in the Middle East from Abraham up through the first and second centuries of the common era. So I'd like to share some thoughts about the reading from Acts of the Apostles we read this morning, and how it may apply to our own world today.

As you may have noticed, the first reading each Sunday since Easter has been from the Acts of the Apostles, rather than the Hebrew Bible. Rather than learning of God's work of salvation before the birth of Jesus, which we recalled at the Easter Vigil, we are experiencing the joy, excitement, and yes, fears of the followers of Jesus immediately after the resurrection. We're there when thousands of people are baptized after hearing Peter's powerful sermon declaring that Jesus was both Lord and Messiah and of God's love for his people. And we're there for the Ascension of Jesus into heaven, to be at the right hand of his father. He's home with his Abba. We're there with the disciples as the fiery tongues of the Holy Spirit anoint them at the first Pentecost.

We're also introduced to new and old players in this epic story: Peter is back but is no longer the cowering man who denied knowing Jesus while waiting in the courtyard at Pontius Pilate's palace. Instead he has stepped out and become a bold leader of this new "church"; Stephen the first deacon and martyr whom we heard about in last week's reading; the roadside teaching of Phillip to the faithful Ethiopian Eunuch, baptizing him and then "flying away", and the new community forming around the disciples where people sold everything and shared it with others, devoting themselves to the apostle's teachings and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

There is also another new player in this story – Paul of Tarsus.

Paul is not from Palestine...he is from Tarsus, a major Roman city, in southern Asia Minor. He is a Roman citizen. His first language is Greek and he is very familiar with the Hellenistic world – its political and religious institutions, its cosmology and "its ecumenical tendencies" according to New Testament scholars.¹ He is a Jew and a Pharisee, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. He lives in the Jewish Diaspora, outside of the Holy Land, and knows his Jewish Scriptures from the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. Paul is a pillar of both the Jewish and Hellenistic communities, a supporter of the status quo. While many years of Paul's life are unaccounted for, we do know of two events, both related in Acts

¹ Roetzel, Calvin J. The Letters of Paul, 4th edition. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 1998 p. 7

- Paul was in Jerusalem, in the crowd that stoned and martyred Stephen, and was very passionate in his denunciation of the followers of Jesus
- Paul was called by Jesus while on the road to Damascus, where he was going to continue his persecution of the followers of Jesus – to be his apostle

You are familiar with the results of these events – Paul became the energizer bunny of the first century church, traveling throughout the Roman World, spreading the good news of Jesus and his resurrection to the Gentiles, finally ending up in Rome where he was martyred, probably around 64 or 65 CE. You're also familiar with his epistles, or letters, which were written to the new Jesus communities springing up around the Roman Empire between 50 CE and his death.

But I'd like to focus on Paul's visit to Athens, around the year 50 as related in the Book of Acts. So what was first century Athens like? The Athenian society was experiencing a "malaise" after a 300-year period of severe hardship in Greece, including economic

depression, civil war, the near collapse of the judicial system and the decline of the city-state, worsened by the suffering brought on initially by famine and hunger....The decline of social institutions and the rise of a spirit of skepticism virtually destroy[ing] old religions²

Do the challenges facing this Athenian society sound familiar to you? Many in our society have suffered greatly during the pandemic years, the economic downturn, inflation and balkanized politics. Paul was invited to speak to philosophers at the Areopagus, a large rock, northwest of the Acropolis which served as the site of a judicial court. And there, Paul offered these skeptical, inquiring minds a new option.

Paul acknowledges that the Athenians are a religious people, even having a shrine for "the unknown god". "I have the answer" says Paul, "you are seeking the Lord of Heaven and earth who made the world and everything in it." This god isn't found in man-made shrines of gold, silver or stone, created by mortals. He's found in Jesus and the promise of the resurrection and the hope for eternal life.

"We are God's offspring" he declares. By repenting now, God's people will be judged in righteousness by the man he has appointed, his son Jesus, and to prove that he will be there at the final day, he raised Jesus from the dead. Repent, and this new life is available to you. In the verse after today's reading, we learn that Paul's audience was divided between those who were cynical or 'scoffers' and those who wanted to learn more. "We will hear you again about this" and they became believers.

Paul has become a challenger of the status quo; he is preaching a counter-cultural life, and these new believers are willing to step up and follow him without fear or question. Are you willing to do the same?

Are you willing to live counter to the culture in which you live: one that "allows" hunger and homelessness to exist, one that denies people to live out their true being, regardless of what others might consider their gender to be, to love and marry those of their own choice, to experience climate change without trying to do something about it?

Paul is asking his listeners to challenge the status quo and be true apostles of Jesus the Christ. Apostle means "herald" of good news. Walter Brueggemann in "The Prophetic Imagination", asks us to use doxology or the "Praise of God" as the way to challenge the status quo with compassion, cutting through

² Roetzel, p. 20

the ideology that pretends to be a given – the status quo. “Only when there is doxology – Praise of God - can there be justice, for such songs transfigure fear into energy”³

So again, I ask you to consider how you are an apostle of Jesus; how you spread the good news that God loves you and that we are all God’s children. Do you have the energy to step out of the culture of fear, such as gun-toting angry white guys or suppression of women and people of color and speak for those who have been forgotten or left behind, knowing that God will not forsake you even though those around you might? If you are, how are you going to do this today when you step out of your “safe” pew following the service? And tomorrow? And next week.....?

John reminds us in the gospel reading we are not orphaned just because Jesus is no longer physically present, he will always be present in the Holy Spirit. We are loved and cared for by God, just as Paul proclaimed to the Athenians. And God will not forsake us. “Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” That is the “Good News” for today!

Praise God!

Amen

³ Brueggeman, Walter. The Prophetic Imagination, 40th Anniversary Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2018. p 18.