

We Have a Mission

Acts 16:6-15

If you look in the back of your Bible (but, not the pew Bible) you may very well find several maps – often one map will be titled “Paul’s Missionary Journeys”. Most Bibles frequently have four basic maps. 1) The route taken by the Jewish people fleeing slavery in Egypt - called the Exodus; 2) the division of the land to the twelve tribes after the conquest of Canaan; 3) a map of Palestine in the time of Jesus; and 4) the Apostle Paul’s missionary journeys (you may find them around Acts 16 as well).

Of course, these maps were added in by biblical scholars who prepared the particular edition and translation of the Bible. Obviously, these maps were not originally drawn by Moses or Joshua or Jesus or Paul. However, their presence in the Bible would imply either that they are important...or possibly that this is one of the few geographically interesting things to show. Some Bibles may have a map showing Jesus’ travels during his ministry, but those travels were not nearly as interesting, not nearly as epic as, for example, the Exodus which was the flight through the wilderness guided by fire, chased by an army, and fed by bread from heaven.

So, it would appear that Paul’s missionary journeys brought epic journeys, legendary journeys back into style...Since Paul follows Jesus – but Jesus never really had epic journeys - so how you think, Paul got it into his mind to wander the world preaching? And why did this become such a central piece, a defining moment of the New Testament?...

Paul may have, in fact, gotten this idea from Jesus. What was Jesus’ very last command to the disciples? It was “go” (Matt 28:19). Though Paul was not with the disciples for this command, he inherited it when he, so dramatically, joined the community. Jesus said, get up out of here...go. Here is how Matthew 28:16-20 reads:

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus

came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

In what is called the "Great Commission", Jesus says, "go!" Jesus spent his rather limited time in ministry - 3 years - in a relatively limited area, with a relatively limited range of people, doing a relatively limited (yet notable) number of things. Of course, Jesus was "going from town to town" as he went up and down the countryside, but this was still rather limited in range. This makes it even more interesting that his final teaching includes the imperative to "go." While his ministry was this rather limited range, he gives the command to "go".

So, it would appear then that the missionary journeys of Paul (which included companions most of the time) are the immediate response to this command to "go". With the coming of the Holy Spirit and the departure of Jesus, the Spirit - like some sort of wildfire - started jumping the boundaries.

In our Scripture this morning, we drop-in part way through trip #2. In the last verses of the chapter before ours Paul and Barnabas have a difference of opinion and part ways. In chapter 16:1 we read, *"He [Paul] came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived,..."*

Timothy's mother was a Jewish Christian but his father was a Greek. What is interesting about this is that even though it was just decided at the Council at Jerusalem (chapter 15) that the Jewish requirement of circumcision was not a requirement for being a Christian. However, Paul has Timothy circumcised so as to create fewer obstacles for Jews to follow Jesus.

Paul, then, with Timothy went throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia. The reason stated was that they “had been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia”.

Then, when “they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia”. But again, were prevented to go. It says, “but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to”.

Note that they passed through a particular region because the Holy Spirit forbade them to speak the word. And then in the next verse the “Spirit of Jesus” didn’t allow them to enter another place. I find this baffling/perplexing – that they were told not to speak the word in one place or enter another territory...I’m pretty sure it is not that Asia or Bithynia were not worthy of Paul’s preaching. Was this some kind of strategic move?... What is the purpose of this text? Why even include that Paul was forbidden to preach in one territory or enter another? Is it just an historical account or is it for guidance for mission or church growth? If I had to answer, I would suggest it is to tell us the story of the early church theologically...to demonstrate the moving of God in the community, of how God was moving in the early church. The Gospel of Luke (which is part 1 of this two-part work, Luke and Acts) opens with the explanation that the writer (Luke), after careful investigation, wrote this account “so that you [Theophilus] may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4).

So, in our text this morning, we continue along with Paul and his companions on this trip. Acts 16:8-15 reads:

So, they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay at my house.' And she persuaded us.

So, after being stopped and silenced and redirected Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia calling them to come. They immediately change their course and go there. They stay a few days seeming to just hang around waiting for the Sabbath...and a church is started. This church is initiated by a businesswoman - Lydia - who is baptized and has her household baptized. And while they received direct communication (from God) about the region... it is left to them to go to the place where they "expected to find a place of prayer."

So where does all this get us? Earlier I suggested that the purpose of Acts is to tell us the story of the early church theologically, to demonstrate, the moving of God in the community, how God was moving in the early church following the departure of Jesus. Therefore, it is in part, an account of what happened - a historical account - and in part a resource to guide us as a church. Since we have already covered what happened – the historical account, how does this passage guide us as a church?

1. *Outward mission defines the church*

Think back to the four maps. In part, the inclusion of these is, of course, the decision of scholars - but it also indicates core events, defining moments that are seen as central to a reading of the Bible. The Exodus was a central act of God's provision and liberation for the people of Israel – a defining moment for the Israelites. Similarly, Paul's missionary journeys are a central narrative, a defining moment, of the early rapid expansion of the church outside of Jesus' home territory. Remember, this was, at least in part, fueled or spurred on by Jesus last command to "Go and make disciples". At the coming of the Spirit and then external threats led the disciples to scatter, preaching wherever they went.

The recognition of this outwardness has become a central characteristic of the church. This outwardness has been developed as the paradigm of church, the model of the church as missional...Outward mission defines the church.

2. *If outward mission defines the church, then we need to go.*

Outward mission defines the church, not because this is some faddish American(?) church strategy that has recognized this, but because this outward-ness can be seen as the pattern in the New Testament. Mission defined the early church...Why? In order to engage others with the gospel message. This does not, of course, mean we need to go everywhere or do everything. Remember the limitation on Paul and Timothy? – They, like us, could not do everything. At several points they were restrained, pulled back, then redirected by God. Since outward mission defines the church - then we need to go.

3. *When we go, we will need to invite, talk, serve, make peace, seek justice -*

The Church – and this particular body - is not a social club, not simply a nice place to be, not a historic building...We have a mission, a people on the move – on the go. And that

pushes us out into our community - outside of ourselves - inviting, serving, making peace,
seeking justice...Amen.

Clay Z. Moyer

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