January 8, 2017  
Pastor Jim West  
Acts: Set Apart  
Acts 12:25-13:3

This morning we will resume our journey through the book of Acts. Before we do, I want to remind you of where we left off. If you recall, back in chapter 11 we read about how the Holy Spirit began to move powerfully in the city of Antioch (see map from previous sermon). Remember that it was in Antioch where the believers were first called Christians, and remember also that when the Apostles in Jerusalem heard about the movement of God in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to check things out. Barnabas, realizing early on that something very special was happening in that city, decided to track down Saul in Tarsus and bring him back to assist in teaching and leading the church in Antioch. Finally, at the end of chapter 11, we learned that Saul and Barnabas had been sent by the church in Antioch down to Jerusalem with some financial assistance for believers affected by the immanent famine in that region.

Our text today picks up the story of Saul and Barnabas after they had completed their mission trip to Jerusalem. Please stand and let’s read Acts 12:25-13:3.

You know how in great stories there are always multiple plot lines going on at the same time? Well, we just experienced that reality if you have been tracking with us through the book of Acts. The two primary plot lines in chapters 9-12 are the stories revealing how the Holy Spirit was working through Peter and Saul. Peter represents the church in Jerusalem, and now Saul, along with Barnabas, represents the church in Antioch. In chapter 11 we read stories from both plot lines, then in chapter 12 most of the focus was devoted to what was happening with Peter in Jerusalem. But now here at the end of chapter 12 the focus returns to Saul and Barnabas.

We learn in vs. 25, “Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.”

Do you remember anything about John Mark? If you recall, we first heard of John Mark in chapter 12. Remember that when Peter was miraculously delivered from prison, he sought refuge at the house of John Mark’s mother, whose name was Mary, because the Christians in Jerusalem used her house as a place to gather and pray. The fact that Saul and Barnabas now bring John Mark back to Antioch with them helps us to understand that at some point, the stories of Saul and Peter overlapped when Saul was recently in Jerusalem. It may be that Saul and Barnabas were at Mary’s house that evening when Peter miraculously showed up at the gate…we really don’t know, but what we do know is that young John Mark has elected to leave his mother’s house in order to make the long trip back to Antioch with Saul and Barnabas. I think it would be appropriate to think of John Mark as a young apprentice…an “eager beaver” who is taken by the
power and mystery of the Christian movement. People like Saul and Barnabas are his role models and mentors, so it would customary in the ancient world for a young man to become a “disciple” of these teachers.

As we begin the 13th chapter, Luke describes in greater detail some of the leading men within the church in Antioch: Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon (who was called Niger), Lucius of Cyrene, Manean (a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch), and Saul.

Let’s pause here for a moment. First, notice that Luke differentiates between “prophets” and “teachers.” Both prophets and teachers were considered leaders within the early church, but, of course, they had different giftings. Teachers were and continue to be those who orderly transfer knowledge from the learned to those who are learning. The Greek term used here is the word “didaskalos,” which is where we get the word “didactic,” which is the word we use to indicate that a lesson is being taught. Jesus was regularly called “teacher,” and to this day we esteem the role of “teacher,” because teachers help us to learn and accumulate knowledge.

A prophet is different than a teacher. A prophet is one who speaks on behalf of God, and the words that come from the mouth of a prophet are often words of great meaning that the prophet did not know prior to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was also called a “prophet” by the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 because Jesus knew and communicated information that He could have only known through divine revelation. We learned earlier in chapter 11 that there was a prophet serving the church in Antioch named Agabus, who discerned from the Lord that there would be a horrific famine in the region. It was his prophecy that led the church to take up an offering and send it down to Jerusalem. Like Jesus in John 4, Agabus was not teaching what he knew, he was communicating what had been revealed to him through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

These distinctions are important to understand when we read about teachers and prophets in the Bible. However, we should not always think that any particular believer is limited to one particular gifting. It is possible for believers to have multiple giftings, and I think those who are called to preach are often those with the giftings commonly associated with teachers and prophets. Take this sermon for example, and pretty much every sermon I’ve preached since coming to Colonial. In almost every sermon I present, I begin with teaching, which is where I feel most comfortable. I transfer knowledge that I have gathered from my teachers, from reading and study, and I pass that knowledge onto you. On most Sunday mornings, I serve as the teacher. When you leave this place and go home, or enter into the rest of your week, you may share what you have learned from this sermon, and now you serve as the teacher for those who are learning from you. However, at some point in this sermon, and most sermons I have preached throughout the past 8 years, I will begin to communicate to you that which I have received from the Holy
Spirit. The difference is that those things that come from the Holy Spirit are those things I did
not know when I sat down to write this message, and that happens frequently to me…sometimes
right in front of you. Those are the moments that you hear from God, not from me. I wish there
were more of those moments, and I suspect you do as well! But we cannot conjure up a word
from the Lord. The prophetic word of the Lord comes only as God wills and chooses, and the
responsibility of the prophet is to communicate what the Lord has revealed to him or
her…nothing more, nothing less. Now, I’m not a “prophet.” I’m a pastor. But my calling requires
certain gifts of the Holy Spirit in order for me to serve faithfully and effectively, and two of
those gifts include teaching and prophecy: the transfer of knowledge, and the faithful
pronouncement of that which God has said in His Word and made clear to me through the
indwelling of His Holy Spirit. Every good sermon you hear from any particular pastor should
reveal a combination of those two realities: the transfer of knowledge; and the Word of the Lord!

Notice how Luke says there were teachers and prophets, but then he doesn’t say which man
served which office. We’re left to assume that some men served as teachers, and some served as
prophets, though I suspect that people like Barnabas and Saul could serve in either office
depending on the context and the way God chose to use them at any given moment. If you’re
reading ahead for next Sunday, you’ll see a perfect example of Saul “teaching,” and then quite
suddenly he takes on the role of a prophet when he rebukes Elymas the magician. We’ll look at
that story in greater detail next Sunday.

Returning to our text, let’s examine the names that Luke provides as those who served in
leadership in the Antioch church. We’ve already learned quite a bit about Barnabas from earlier
stories in Acts. He is originally from Cyprus; his name means “the son of encouragement;”
Barnabas sold his property in Cyprus and laid the proceeds at the feet of the Apostles shortly
after the day of Pentecost; Barnabas was the first person to welcome the converted Saul when he
showed up in Jerusalem; and Barnabas was the one entrusted by the Apostles to represent them
to the church in Antioch, even though Barnabas himself was not an apostle. We learned a few
weeks ago that Barnabas was a “good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.” At the end of
chapter 11 we learned that Barnabas served as a teacher for the Antioch church for a whole year.
I also want to point out the humility we see in Barnabas. When the job is more than he can
handle, Barnabas has no problem saying, “I need help!” When he brings Saul back from Tarsus,
we can easily assume that the powerful, charismatic personality of Saul quickly put Barnabas in
the position of the “Second” rather than the first in leadership. Barnabas was the kind of man
who did not need to be the center of attention…his ministry was one of faith, relationships,
friendship, encouragement, inclusion, and teaching. I would submit to you that Barnabas is one
of the most highly esteemed characters in all of the New Testament.

Now, we know less about Simeon, but we can make a few guesses. The fact that Simeon is also
called “Niger” should lead us to assume that Simeon is an African, and he is most likely black,
because that’s what “Niger” means. The fact that Simeon is listed next to Lucius from Cyrene may indicate that they are both Africans, because Cyrene was a region in North Africa. Again, we know little about Lucius other than his origin. Manaen is described as a man who was a member of Herod’s court, which means he likely grew up with Herod. That makes Manaen a highly esteemed civic leader who has risked his life and that of his family to follow Jesus. Now that’s not a ton of information, but I think it is quite significant that Luke notes these details…that Simeon was called “Niger…the Black”…and Lucius was from North Africa; that Manaen was more Roman than Jewish. Why? Well, when you add Saul, the converted terrorist/Pharisee into the mix, you have a very colorful, diverse, on-fire church staff! Anyone who would claim that Christianity is the “white man’s religion” reveals an ignorance regarding the origin and composition of the early church. Clearly the church in Antioch was multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and extremely diverse in its leadership.

If you’ve been around Colonial very long you’ll notice that I regularly invite international Christian leaders to share from this stage. In just a few weeks we’ll be honored to host Pastor Sam Yeghnazar who is Iranian by birth, and we’re hoping to see Pastor Sam Stephens from India and Brother Yun from China back on our stage in the next several months as well. We’ve enjoyed Pastor Pablo from Guatemala, Pastor Maseko from Malawi in Africa, and numerous other leaders from across the globe. Church, we are greatly enriched to understand the gospel from an international, multi-cultural perspective. Believe me when I say that biblical Christianity is anything BUT the “white man’s religion.”

Let’s return to our text and see what happens amidst this group of leaders and believers in the ancient church. Beginning with vs. 2 we read: While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

There is so much here in this one verse…I hope you can see it. First, notice the importance of fasting and worshiping together in Christian community. Fasting is a term that always means setting aside immediate gratification in order to give devotion and focus to God. One could argue that genuine worship always requires some degree of “fasting.” In other words, we won’t worship God if we are shoving our faces. We won’t worship God by lying around in bed for a few hours of extra sleep. We won’t worship God if we are busy shopping or working or playing. To worship God truly is to set other distractions and appetites aside and to give God all the attention, focus, adoration, and honor that He is WORTHY of. Remember, the word “worship” comes from the old English term “worthship.” We worship God because He is worthy of our singular attention, our praise, our love and adoration, our supplication, and our thanksgiving. That’s what’s happening in the ancient church. Sincere worship is taking place, and it’s taking place in community. I know many of us are passionate about the outdoors, and I can relate with feeling close to God when I’m on the water or climbing a mountain. But true worship that honors
God happens in community. Why? Because the outflow of our worship will inform and even transform our relationships with other people. Our story this morning is a perfect example.

Luke writes that while they were fasting and worshiping God, the Holy Spirit SAID, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul…” How do we discern what the Holy Spirit SAYS? Do you think the Holy Spirit spoke those words to Barnabas and Saul in that worship service, or the others who were worshiping with them? I guarantee the conviction of the Holy Spirit came over Lucius and Simeon and Manean in addition to Saul and Barnabas in this story. In fact, I am convinced that God’s will and call for our lives will usually be revealed THROUGH community, just as we see here in Acts 13. Now that’s not to say that Saul and Barnabas had not already been prompted to this calling in their private times of prayer…I’m sure they probably felt that prompting on multiple occasions…but who of us can regularly discern God’s voice from our own? We all need help in discerning God’s will for our lives, and that help usually comes through corporate worship and relationships formed in Christian community.

I will tell you that I heard the word of the Lord spoken over me by many believers from early on in my childhood well into my teenage years, predicting that I would be set apart to serve as a pastor, long before I was convinced that God had called me to the ministry. In fact, it was the deep, redundant conviction of many people in my life that led me to seriously consider the possibility that I was being called to vocational ministry. I’m quite sure I would have never discerned and submitted to that call if not for the community of believers who surrounded me.

Notice also that corporate worship leads to mission, and mission leads to worship! There is a symbiotic relationship between genuine worship and mission, and again, it’s because genuine worship of God leads us to see people the way God sees people. Look around this room. Look at the people beside you and those all around you. Do you see these people the way God sees them? Do you see the potential in these children? Do you see the hand of God calling people in this room to be set apart? To serve as missionaries, pastors, teachers, and evangelists? What do you see when you drive through your neighborhood and see women covered from head to toe in a Muslim abaya? Do you see a threat, or do you see those who Jesus died to save? Worship determines how we see people, and true worship leads us to love people and to desire for them all the best that God has intended for their lives. (There…that’s something given to me by the Holy Spirit…I didn’t know that before I wrote it.)

In our text this morning, the Holy Spirit makes clear that God has chosen and called Saul and Barnabas to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to all the cities of the ancient world. God directs the church in Antioch to set them apart and send them on their way. Now think about that. For one whole year, both Saul and Barnabas served as the teaching pastors of this young church. Can you imagine that? And now, God is calling the church to send them out, to support their calling to carry the gospel to foreign lands. Which means…Saul and Barnabas won’t be around to preach

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and teach and care for the congregation. Make no mistake...this was a huge sacrifice for the church in Antioch. But here we see what faithful, missional churches are always called to do: we send our brightest and best to pursue the high calling placed upon their lives by our Great God, regardless of the expense that is required of the sending church. Colonial has been through this process dozens of times over the last six decades, and the world has been blessed with God-honoring leaders, teachers, evangelists, missionaries, and pastors as a result. It’s always hard to send those we love and those who love us well, but it started in Antioch, and God continues to set apart His own and call them to both go, and to be sent! The “going” is their job; the “sending” is ours!

Our text concludes with the “sending” in vs. 3: Then after fasting and prayer, they laid hands on them and sent them off.

Once again, fasting and prayer set the context for obedience to God’s perfect will. Our hearts will not be prepared to send people until we are fully yielded to the Lordship of Christ, which happens only when we yield to Him in prayer. Notice also that the elders “lay hands” on Barnabas and Saul as they send them on their way. The laying on of hands is a means of identifying with those who are being called. When we lay hands on people, we are saying, “I am with you, I am for you, I affirm your call, and my blessing goes with you.” Next Sunday we will ordain and install a new class of officers in our church, and the Elders will lay hands on and pray over those who are coming into ordination for the first time. It is an ancient tradition, and I can tell you as one who has had the hands of elders laid upon me, it is a very powerful and affirming experience. We need those memories of being sent by the church when our calling gets tough, and we’ll see next week that it doesn’t take much time out on the mission field before the battle is on. Saul and Barnabas will need all the prayers and encouragement they can find to fulfill the calling God has laid upon their lives.

What about you? When God looks at you, what does He see? I can tell you right now what He sees: He sees His child, the one that He loves, the one He delights in. He sees the plans He has for your life, the calling to which you have been set apart to fulfill in the time that remains, and He sees all that is to come for you.

Oh that we could see ourselves the way that God sees us. That we could see each other right now the way that God sees this congregation. That we could see our neighbors, our co-workers, our classmates, our family members, and the nations the way that God sees them.

It begins with worship and fasting. It begins with entering into authentic Christian community where God reveals His plans for our lives among those who know and love us. It begins with the power of the Holy Spirit moving powerfully among the community of believers who pray. And of course, all of that begins with the Gospel...when we see ourselves as those in need of
forgiveness, and we repent…calling upon the name of Jesus Christ in faith for the forgiveness of sins. That’s where the adventure begins.

Listen: If you are an unbeliever and far from God, your life awaits you on the other side. The joy and meaning you search for are on the other side of this river called faith. You must wade in to cross it, there is no other way. Call upon the name of Jesus…He is calling your name even now.

If you are a believer this morning, God has set you apart…there is a calling upon your life…that is why you have breath. If you have lost your joy…if you do not know the peace of God’s presence, seek Him and ask Him…ask Him to show you what you look like to Him. Ask God to reveal how you have been set apart.

Let’s pray.