January 29, 2017
Lead Pastor Jim West
Acts 13:13-25

Let’s continue our journey through Acts this morning as we turn to Acts 13:13-25. Let’s read the text together.

Beginning with Acts 13:13-14 Luke writes, “Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem, but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia.”

If you recall, last week in Acts 13:4-12, Paul and Barnabas were on the island of Cyprus sharing the gospel. This morning we learn that after their time in Cyprus, “Paul and his companions” sailed north just over 100 miles to the port of Perga in the region of Pamphylia, which is along the southwestern coast of modern day Turkey. We don’t know who all was travelling with Paul other than Barnabas and John-Mark, though we might assume there were several others. Luke tells us that John “left them” and returned to Jerusalem. Now, before we press on, let me simply point out that John-Mark’s departure here has some significance because Paul will refuse to take John-Mark on the next journey, even though Barnabas insists that he should be included. The tension surrounding John-Mark is so significant that Paul and Barnabas will decide to part ways and do ministry in different regions. Lots of theories have been suggested by scholars as to why John-Mark returned to Jerusalem instead of joining the team on their trip north; but, in fact, we really have no idea. He may have been sick, he may have missed his momma…there is no way of knowing. I think we can assume, however, that whatever his reason, Paul didn’t find it very compelling. We’ll return to this plot line later in Acts 15.

I also want to address something that might be a bit confusing. Notice that the city they end up in is called Pisidian-Antioch. Now, if you recall, Paul and Barnabas were sent on this mission trip by the church in Antioch of Syria. So, why are there two different towns named Antioch? Actually, there were sixteen cities named Antioch in the ancient world! The cities were named and established by Seleucus Nikator in the third century BC to honor his father, Antiochus. Now, in order to avoid confusion, just remember that Antioch in Syria is the only “Antioch” that is not regularly preceded with another name in the Bible. The city Paul is now in is called Pisidian-Antioch, and that’s how the other cities were named…with two words…though you won’t find anymore of the 16 “Antiochs” in the New Testament. I’m not sure if that helped clear up confusion or simply made things more confusing. Let’s move on…

Picking up with vs. 14 we read, “And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them saying, ‘Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it.’”
Note that Paul always begins his ministry in each town by first going to the synagogue to share the gospel with the Jews. That’s because he will always work on the premise that he writes about in Romans 1:16 that salvation is first for the Jew, and then for the Gentile. We’ll hit that theme later on. Josephus records that there was a very large population of Jews in Pisidian-Antioch, so we might expect that the synagogue was quite large. I have actually stood in the ruins of an ancient synagogue there in Pisidian-Antioch, and if the synagogue referenced here was similar to the ruin I observed back in 2005, I would estimate that several hundred people could have been gathered in that space. Luke reveals how a typical synagogue service would flow, including the traditional readings of the law and the prophets, followed by an exposition provided by one of the men in attendance. If you remember, this scene is similar to the synagogue story found in Luke 4 when Jesus is handed the scroll of Isaiah and then speaks to the text after it was read aloud. In the same way, the rulers of the synagogue offer Paul and Barnabas the opportunity to bring a word of spiritual encouragement to the congregation gathered in the synagogue following the readings. Why did the rulers send a message inviting Paul and Barnabas to speak? It may have been the ancient code of hospitality to invite those who were visiting from other countries to share a word with the congregation, for that’s how you would get news of what was happening around the world. It’s possible that Paul was already a known commodity from his years in Tarsus which was just down the coast from Perga. Whatever the case, Paul will seize the opportunity to address the congregation, and we’ll spend the rest of our time examining the first part of his message. I want you to listen for how Paul frames the good news of the gospel within the context of Israel’s history, the sovereignty of God, and the fulfillment of God’s promises. Beginning with vs. 16 we read

So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said: “Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen. The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. And after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance. All this took about 450 years.”

Let’s stop and observe a few things. First, notice that Paul addresses “men of Israel” and another group of people—“you who fear God.” The difference is lineage. The “men of Israel” were those who were born Jewish from one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The other group, “you who fear God” were those who adhered to Judaism, or perhaps were exploring Judaism, but were not “ethnic” Jews per se. Remember, for example, that the Roman centurion Cornelius was described by Luke as “one who feared God.”

Notice Paul’s emphasis on the sovereign hand of God. Who chose the patriarchs…who made the Israelites great while they were in Egypt…and who led the Israelites out of Egypt? God did. Not only did God lead the Israelites out of Egypt and to the Promised Land, but He also demonstrated tremendous patience with a group of people who constantly moaned, complained, and failed to
remember all that God had done for them. And who conquered seven nations that allowed the Israelites to inherit the land? God did.

So Paul is setting the stage for the good news of Jesus Christ within the context of God’s mighty work and self-revelation as recorded in history, and specifically in the nation of Israel. He will build the case that God has moved His hand to form a nation, raise up leaders, appoint kings, and now…as the culmination of all that came before…he has raised up a Savior from the line of David, who is Jesus Christ our Lord, just as He promised.

Now I know I’ve made this point a thousand times, but it bears repeating: our faith is not a philosophy, and it’s not a list of moral laws, and it’s not “what works for me”. The Judeo-Christian faith is rooted in history because God has always been revealing Himself in history, and specifically within the history of His chosen people Israel. I know that seems incredibly obvious and redundant to many of you, but what you must come to appreciate is that the epistemology of our current culture…that is, the means by which can know things…often begins with ME…not what we can learn in history. In other words, many in our culture will say “I know what I know because of what I think and what I feel and what I’ve experienced. I am the authority for what is true, because knowing begins with what works for me…or my friends…or what I can touch and see and measure…or what I’m currently feeling…or what I saw on a YouTube video.” History is no longer a reliable source of knowing for many people in our culture because so much doubt has been cast upon the sources from which our history is found. That’s one of the reasons why everyone is so intrigued by a “personal testimony” or hearing people’s stories about their encounter with God or their spiritual experiences. I am sympathetic to the age of skepticism in which we now live, and I love a personal testimony just as much as you do, but make no mistake: the authority for what is true can never be rooted in me, or you, or in our experiences. I’m not saying that our personal experiences are invalid or unimportant. What I am saying is this: rooting our epistemology and our theology in our personal experience or feelings is the epitome of “shifting sand.”

Let me give you an example that hits very close to home. I had the opportunity to visit with a young lady from our church this past week who is going through a very difficult time. She comes from a very faithful Christian family, and this 20 year old college student is one of the most committed Christians I have ever known. My family got to know her well on our trip to Haiti in 2015, and among the 100 people on that trip, she shone brighter than the rest in my eyes. Her love for the Lord and for the orphans was evident, and based on her experience and her feelings in 2015, she would have surely told you, “God loves me, and I love God. I know He is with me.” However, after months of being struck down by a crippling disease, her current experience and feelings would be on the polar opposite end of the spectrum. If her epistemology and her theology was based upon her current circumstances, you can imagine how her concept of what is true about God might be completely altered. However, as I met with her this week, we rehearsed
the history…just like Paul is rehearsing the history with his audience. We remembered how God revealed Himself in Jesus Christ…how Jesus lived the perfect human life and endured great suffering…so we know that God loves those who suffer, and He allows those whom he loves to suffer, even when they are perfect and without sin. We remembered how Jesus called His disciples to endure suffering…and he predicted that was part of our journey as his followers…so we found comfort in knowing that a loving God never promised us a pain-free existence, but He did promise to be with us no matter how difficult our situation. We rehearsed the 23 Psalm, where God revealed to David that He is with us in the valley of the shadow of death, and so we can walk that difficult part of the road without fearing evil. We rehearsed the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, how God saved them not by blowing out the fires of Nebuchadnezzar but by getting into the fire with them!

As Christians, what we know to be true about God is what He has revealed to us in His Word, which records God’s self-revelation throughout thousands of years of history. That truth remains true, no matter what our current circumstances might be…and that’s why our faith can be rooted deeply and can remain unwavering, even in light of terrible circumstances. No matter how bad things get, I personally rehearse the history with this single statement, “Either Jesus rose from the dead or he didn’t. The history is compelling to me…Jesus rose from the dead. That means God loves us, death has been defeated, God sees my situation, and by grace I’ll get through it, and when I’m done, I get to go home and be with my Savior for all eternity.” Listen friends: if you are struggling today, don’t trust your feelings to determine what is true…trust God’s self-revelation in history. The tomb is empty, Christ is risen, which means there is hope and salvation for those who believe no matter how terrible things might be right now…and that is GOOD NEWS, amen?

In vss. 7-25, Paul actually covers 2500 years of history by touching on key chapters of God’s self-revelation including God’s action in appointing the patriarchs, delivering Israel out of Egypt, leading them through the wilderness, defeating seven nations and delivering the land into the hands of the Israelites, raising up judges, raising up Samuel the prophet, raising up the first king of Israel, Saul; then raising up King David, a man after God’s own heart. Assuming that his Jewish audience remembers the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7, that a son of David would rule over Israel whose kingdom would never end, Paul proclaims in vs. 23, “Of this man’s (David’s) offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised.”

How do we know Jesus is the Savior? Because the same God who was responsible for all of Israel’s history is the same God who made promises. He is a God who keeps His promises, and Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise…Jesus is the savior, the Messiah, the King who comes from the line of David.

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Paul then hits on the very recent history of John the Baptist, who clearly was well known throughout the Jewish world by his powerful message of repentance that was proclaimed in the spirit of Elijah, which is also a fulfillment of prophecy. Paul points out that John the Baptist was preparing the way for the one whose sandals he was not worthy to untie. Jesus is the one that John was anticipating, and we know this is true from John’s gospel which records John the Baptist’s first encounter with Jesus when he exclaims, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” John 1:29.

We’re going to stop here today and pick up more of Paul’s sermon next Sunday. I want to spend our last few minutes showing you how I think this text intersects with our lives and our current circumstances.

As I talk with people who are going through all kinds of different circumstances, and even as I reflect upon my own life, I think one of the greatest challenges people face in our culture is a profound sense of isolation. I’m not just talking about other people…I wrestle with a sense of being isolated as well on occasion…I think we all do to some degree. There are a lot of contributing factors to Western isolationism. One factor is our preoccupation with the individual’s rights, freedoms, and entitlements. Our culture celebrates rugged individualism and disdains anything that looks like conformity. We’ve also turned our homes into entertainment centers, so we spend much more time indoors watching our screens than any other generation before us. Texting and social media have replaced face to face interactions, and our manic pace of life makes developing and sustaining relationships next to impossible.

However, I suspect that the greatest contributing factor to our isolation is the unrelenting pressure we feel to “write our own narrative.” Here’s what I mean by that. Throughout history, people have known themselves as part of a larger story that began with the word “we” instead of the word “me.” The “we” included our family, our tribe, our nation, and our religion. Historically our identity was given to us, we were not responsible for creating it on our own.

Now there are some terrible downsides to “receiving” our identity, particularly if you live in India and fall into the Hindu caste system; or you are born into a world that thinks you are less than human because of the color of your skin. Our fallen human nature has abused “group identity” by twisting a generally good thing into a very evil way of labeling, dismissing and even eliminating groups of people. So I get why we as Americans gravitate toward rugged individualism. We don’t want to be labeled and dismissed, and we hate how so many people have been hurt by those kinds of groupings.

Unfortunately, our intense effort to differentiate from the “groupings” has led us to carry the burden of writing our own narrative, and the result is exhaustion and isolation. We can expend tremendous energy and time trying to prove who we are not, and yet never come to a place of
knowing who we are, and how our story fits into the larger story of life on this planet, or if we even fit at all. When tragedy or illness comes along, we have no way to interpret those circumstances within a larger, meaningful narrative if we are the ones responsible for writing the narrative…you see what I mean?

Now if you are older, you probably don’t wrestle with isolationism like your children or your grandchildren, but I’m telling you right now: this is a huge problem. People feel alone…they feel misunderstood…they feel like they don’t fit in. They don’t know who their “people” are. But here’s what we know is absolutely true: we are built with a deep, profound need to belong. All of us have that need, more than we could possibly know on a conscience level.

Our text today helps us to understand that within a biblical worldview, we are never responsible for writing our own narrative. Within a biblical worldview, we are part of God’s story…our identity has been given to us, and at the moment we step onto the stage to play our part, there is already a powerful story that has been taking place, and what we do with our time contributes to the powerful conclusion of this Big Story that will happen sometime in the future. In other words, we have an ancient/future identity…and that identity includes being those created in the image of God, formed into a people by that God, loved by that God, liberated by that God, saved by that God, and sent by that God. Our lives are not accidental, and we are never alone. In fact, according to a biblical worldview, we are grouped with those who are broken, yet those who are being redeemed through the free gift of God’s grace made known through the death of Jesus on a cross and an empty tomb. We are those to whom God has made promises and kept promises. We are those highly esteemed by our Creator, we are those born with a purpose that is both eternal and specific to the space and circumstances in which we find ourselves at this very moment, and we are those who will one day enjoy living together in the City of God where there will be no more tears, no more pain, and no more death. In short, you are God’s people, you are my people, and I am yours. I belong to you, and you belong to me, and we belong to all who are sealed in the blood of Christ. That’s true of every believer everywhere around the world regardless of skin color, intelligence, net worth, facial features, age, gender, or favorite sports team!

Whenever I feel isolated, I have to remember what we’ve learned here today in Acts 13: I’m not the writer of my own narrative…I’m a character in God’s story, and it turns out that the story isn’t about me…it’s about Jesus…and I’m good with that.

Let’s pray