February 5, 2017
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Acts: “The Kerygma”
Acts 13:26-43

One of my goals as the Lead Pastor at Colonial is to teach you to know and understand the Bible. That is why I am currently preaching through the entire book of Acts…so that you will know and understand the history of this movement called Christianity, and so that in knowing and understanding, we might be filled with the Holy Spirit and serve to transform our culture just as God used the early church to transform the ancient world.

As we return to our journey through the book of Acts, we pick up in chapter 13 in the middle of Paul’s sermon in the city of Pisidian-Antioch. In this sermon we find the basic apostolic message of the gospel, which historically has been called, “the Kerygma.” Now…if you are new to the faith, there will be a lot of teaching going on in this sermon, and you may feel like it’s a little over your head. That’s OK, and here’s why: Christianity must be learned because Christianity is rooted in history. Nobody automatically knows history…we must be taught history and what that history means in light of our lives today. So this morning we will examine the teaching…this message of salvation through Jesus…that changed the world and continues to change lives today. If you leave here a little overwhelmed or confused by all the history, I encourage you to go to our website and listen to the sermon again with your Bible open, and perhaps go back and watch the other sermons from this series on the book of Acts. And don’t worry…a lot of us who have been Christians for a long time are still learning…we actually like it that way! So please stand and let’s read the Kerygma found in Acts 13:26-43.

If you recall, Paul and Barnabas have made their way up to Pisidian-Antioch in Asia Minor, or what is today called the country of Turkey. They are on a mission trip to share the good news of Jesus Christ, first with the Jews and then with the non-Jews known as the Gentiles. As we zoom back in, Paul is in the synagogue, where he has been invited to address the congregation comprised of Jews and converts to Judaism. He has just rehearsed the history of God’s self revelation through the nation Israel in vss. 13-25. In vs. 23 he proclaims that God has now fulfilled His promise to Israel…the promise made directly to King David, by sending a savior, who is Jesus, the son of David and the long awaited Messiah. This morning we will pick up with vs. 26 as Paul continues to address his listeners in the synagogue.

Beginning with vs. 26 Paul states: “Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation.”

Remember that Paul is addressing two groups of listeners: those who are Jewish by birth, and those who are converts to Judaism or at least those who fear the one God worshipped by the
Jews. Note that Paul counts himself among their number...he calls them “brothers” and he is appealing to their shared history; their shared conviction regarding who God is; their shared understanding of God’s promises; and their shared hope in the one who has been promised...the Savior...the Messiah.

Paul states with emphasis, “TO US has been sent the message of this salvation.” In other words, the message of salvation is for all who fear God and who await a Savior. The group that Paul now associates himself with in the synagogue service stands in contrast with those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers...and that’s what Paul points out now beginning in vs. 27 where he states, “For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him. And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. And we bring you good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus...”

The Kerygma always includes the history regarding Jesus Christ that we find here in Acts 13. Jesus was the fulfillment of God’s promise, but those who should have received Him with gladness did not recognize Him. In fact, they falsely accused Jesus even though He was innocent of any sin, and he was unjustly murdered by those He came to save. Why? Because the Jews in Jerusalem did not understand the utterances of the prophets...even though they were read each and every Sabbath for years and years and even generation after generation. Their ignorance regarding the Word of God led them to crucify the Messiah of God.

Notice how Paul is setting up his audience...who are also those who have been listening to the reading of the prophets for many years. He’s already suggesting to them, “Don’t be like those people in Jerusalem who think they are authorities and yet they don’t understand the prophets at all. Let’s all be smarter than that...let’s be those who hear the Word of God and believe. Let’s be those who understand what the prophets foretold so that we can rightly understand what God has accomplished through Jesus Christ, the Messiah.”

Notice that even though Paul is critical of those rulers and the Jews in Jerusalem who did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah, he is also acknowledging that their ignorance and their violence towards Jesus simply fulfilled everything the prophets predicted would take place. In other words, the abuse and death of Jesus did not surprise God...and it should not surprise any of us. The prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 53) clearly predicted that the Messiah would be “despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; as one who from whom men hide their faces...despised, and we esteemed him not.”
Paul says very directly that in condemning and killing Jesus, then laying him in the tomb of a rich man, the Jews in Jerusalem unknowingly fulfilled the prophecies concerning the Messiah. Again, we look to Isaiah 53 to understand some of the prophecies that Paul is appealing to, prophecies that were regularly read in synagogue services for hundreds of years before Christ: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted...like a lamb that is led to the slaughter...by oppression and judgment he was taken away; he was cut off from the land of the living...and they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.” Who else but Jesus meets this description? And who would have believed that any group of Jews...having heard these scriptures read in synagogue services throughout their lives, could have then missed the coming of the Messiah? Yet not only did those in Jerusalem despise and reject God’s Messiah, they had him executed and placed in a rich man’s tomb...just as the prophet Isaiah had foretold hundreds of years earlier.

“But wait” you say...”just because the Jews in Jerusalem condemned an innocent man and had him killed, and just because this poor guy was laid in a rich man’s tomb, does not mean that Jesus was the Son of God, right? Maybe the Jews killed other innocent men and they were laid in tombs as well. Or maybe this Jesus was a schizophrenic (as one skeptic suggested recently), and the rulers in Jerusalem knew they had to silence this crazy fool before he caused a riot. Being falsely accused and executed does not make a man the Messiah.” You’re right...it doesn’t. But here’s what does, and this is the most important moment in Paul’s sermon...vs. 30, “But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people.”

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead on the third day is God’s validation that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the One predicted by the prophets, the fulfillment of God’s promises, and the Savior of Israel and all who believe. As Paul will write later to the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 15:17), “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is in vain and you remain in your sins.” All of Christianity hinges on the resurrection.

“But how do we know that God raised Jesus from the dead? That is a fantastic claim that defies logic and observation...all people who die stay dead, their bodies decompose, and that’s it, right? So how are we to believe this incredible story of resurrection?” Paul states clearly that his listeners should believe based upon the testimony of eyewitnesses who traveled with Jesus throughout his life and ministry and then beheld the resurrected Jesus for many days after his public execution. These men have now become the witnesses...these apostles are those who now bear witness that Christ is not dead...He has risen. In the world of theology we say it this way, “The Kerygma is based upon the Apostolic witness.”
“But how do we know that the apostles…the witnesses…are not lying? How do we know that they didn’t make up this myth of resurrection in order to keep their program alive? Perhaps they meant that the spirit of Christ lives on in their hearts, but should we believe that this man Jesus of Nazareth literally, bodily rose from the dead?”

This question has been asked and poured over thousands upon thousands of times by skeptics of every generation for 2000 years. So here’s what most scholars generally agree upon: Jesus of Nazareth clearly died on a Roman cross and was buried in the private tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Three days later, the followers of Jesus claimed that the tomb was empty and that they had seen Jesus alive…fully restored, with the nail holes still visible, and they claimed to have seen Him not once, but on multiple occasions over the span of 40 days following his public execution. In fact, hundreds of people are said to have seen Jesus alive. And here’s another thing we know: the empty tomb was never disputed by the Jewish authorities who had him executed. Those who had the most to lose by the rumor of the resurrection could not produce the crucified body of Jesus of Nazareth, for that would have been the simplest way to squash the rumor of his resurrection. We have four accounts of the resurrection in the four gospels found in the New Testament. The four accounts clearly come from varied perspectives because the details do not all align neatly. We know that the four written accounts of the resurrection of Christ were written and in distribution within the lifetime of those who were able to confirm or deny the claims made in the Gospels. As far as ancient history goes, that is the earliest, most accurate, most redundant, and most convincing evidence that we have of any event that ever took place in antiquity, bar none. Furthermore, there is no evidence from that time period…not a shred of written evidence…suggesting that the resurrection did NOT happen. In other words, no one in the first or early second century wrote a rebuttal to the claims of the gospel accounts stating that the body of Jesus had been located, or that it was common knowledge that the rumor of Jesus’ resurrection had been disproven.

Consider also that those “witnesses” who claimed Jesus had risen from the dead did so at their own peril. They did not receive esteem, women, money, power, office or reward for their message. Instead, they were thrust out of their own religion, ostracized by their communities and often their own families, and almost to the number they were executed as a result of their testimony. What’s even more amazing is that after Jesus of Nazareth was publicly executed, his movement did not die, it suddenly exploded. And the explosion of Christianity continued to grow and spread long after the original witnesses were killed as well. Unlike many other growing religions in the world, Christianity did not expand at the tip of the sword or by the power of kings and politics. In fact, whenever those calling themselves Christians attempted to expand Christianity by such means, the movement experienced decline and corruption until which time it would self-correct, almost always by those who would call the church to realign themselves with the teachings of Jesus, which in most cases led the Christians to take on the role of those being persecuted instead of those responsible for persecuting others. In fact, Christianity has always
spread with greater speed and virtue when the church was being persecuted than in any other context, which is completely counter-intuitive to say the least.

How can we account for any of these historical realities if, in fact, Christ did not raise from the dead? What reasonable, alternative narrative is available for us? Trust me when I say…there is none. Many have tried, all have failed. There is no reasonable alternative narrative that accounts for the early writing of the four gospels, the willingness of the early witnesses to suffer and die terrible deaths for something they “knew” was a lie, and the explosion of Christianity that followed the death of its leader, Jesus of Nazareth.

As we return to Acts 13, remember that Paul did not have the benefit of 2000 years of church history…he didn’t even have access to the four gospels. However, Paul, the former terrorist known as Saul, had personally met the risen Lord outside the city of Damascus. That made him an apostle of Jesus Christ, and it’s also the only way we can account for his transformation from one who hated and persecuted Christians to one who became the greatest evangelist the world has ever known. And now Paul, the former Pharisee, will help his listeners to understand why all of this makes sense in light of the Hebrew Scriptures that his audience knew very well.

Let’s return to Acts 13:32 and following: And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus as also it is written in the second Psalm, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.” And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, “I will give you the holy and sure blessing of David.” Therefore he says also in another psalm, “You will not let your Holy One see corruption.” For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption.”

Paul’s point is this: God made promises of blessings to David for Israel in Isaiah 55 in the form of a covenant…that the Lord would “abundantly pardon” sinful Israel. Those promises were to be fulfilled in the future, through an heir of David’s. The fulfillment of the promised blessings would be associated with the Son of David…who would also be the begotten Son of God referenced in Psalm 2…the Holy One who did not see corruption as described in Psalm 16. “For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.”

Question: Who dies and does not “see corruption?” Both Peter and now Paul point out that David died, and was buried and even now his corrupted body remains buried. So, Psalm 16 is speaking of someone else…a Son of David. Such is why the Son of David, who will be called the Son of God, will be the who dies but does not see corruption…resurrection will serve as the sign and validation of the Holy One of God, the Messiah, as clearly stated in the prophecies of Isaiah and King David. Clearly Jesus meets that criteria.
And what do the promised blessings mean for those listeners in the synagogue as a result of Jesus and His resurrection? Look at vs. 38, “Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”

Listen, if you missed everything else that I’ve said, focus on what I’m about to say now, because here’s the punch line: through Jesus Christ, forgiveness of sins is now offered to all who believe, and by virtue of your forgiveness in Christ, you can be set free.

The language here is legal in nature, so let’s think of the court room for a minute. The law of Moses, also known as the Ten Commandments, serves as the absolute, timeless standard by which all human beings are judged. We all know this is true in our hearts. We know when we have broken God’s law, even if we have never read about God’s law. We know it’s wrong to lie without anyone telling us it’s wrong. We know it’s wrong to sleep with another man’s wife…it’s wrong in every culture everywhere in the world. We know it’s wrong to steal what doesn’t belong to us; we know it’s wrong to murder; we know it’s wrong to secretly obsess over something that belongs to our neighbor. So the Law of Moses states explicitly what all human civilizations have known intuitively.

It is, then, the law of God which convicts us…we are law breakers. Within the courtroom, the Judge bangs the gavel and says, “Guilty!” And then there is a sentence…jail time…a huge fine…whatever the sentence might be. In God’s eternal court, the penalty of sin is death, according to Romans 3.

So here’s what Paul just said. He said that the Law of Moses…which is God’s law…cannot free a person from the death-sentence of their sin. No matter how good of a person we try to be, our sin will condemn us, and our sentence is eternal death. We need a Savior! We need one who can save us from our sins since we cannot save ourselves. Paul goes on to say that in order for us to be set free…in order for us to be acquitted of our crime…our debt must be forgiven. And now, in Jesus, because of his atoning death and resurrection, forgiveness of our crimes against God is now made possible. If we repent and believe in Jesus and what He did for us, our sins are forgiven…we are acquitted, and we are set free from the condemnation we so rightfully deserve. That is the central, most important message of the Gospel…this is the good news! But this message of the Gospel, this Kerygma, demands a response. The listeners are left with a choice: believe and respond with repentance and faith, or be as those who refuse to listen, even when someone tells it to you plainly.

Paul concludes his sermon with a warning beginning in vs. 40, “Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about: Look you scoffers, be astounded and perish; for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.” This
quote comes from the prophet Habakkuk, and it serves as a reminder that there will ultimately be two groups of people in the end: those who believe in Jesus and are saved through the forgiveness of sins; and those who will reject the gospel and remain unforgiven.

A biblical worldview does not provide a third option. We are either those who are saved by the sacrificial death of Christ upon whom God laid the iniquity of us all; or we are those who remain condemned in our sins and our sentence will be ours to bear for all eternity. Remember, good people don’t go to heaven; forgiven people go to heaven. We must be forgiven and set free, and there is only One through whom forgiveness is offered…there is only one name that saves…it is the name of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, the Son of David, the fulfillment of God’s promise and the Savior of the world.

Now you have heard the Kerygma…the simple and clear proclamation of the Gospel…the good news of salvation in Christ. How will you respond? Will you respond in faith, or will you remain a scoffer?

The tension we feel right now is the tension of the Gospel that has been felt all around the world for 2000 years. It is the tension between holding on to our sinful, selfish pride…or laying down our pride to confess our need for a Savior and calling upon the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. So let me ask you this question: do you need forgiveness in your life? Do you feel the weight of condemnation weighing heavily upon your soul? Do you know that if you died tonight, you deserve hell because of your sins against God and others? Do you need to be acquitted and set free? If you answered yes to any of these questions, hear the good news of the Gospel: in Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins is being offered to you right now. Freedom awaits you…but you must respond.

Call upon the name of Jesus in faith, repent and believe, and friends: you will be set free. Let’s pray together.