Acts: “Be Encouraged”
Acts 18:8-17

As we make our way through the book of Acts, our text this morning is Acts 18:8-17. Please stand for the reading of God’s Word.

Before we jump into the text, let’s take a moment and remember the context that we are in. If you recall, at the beginning of chapter 18 we learned that Paul left Athens and journeyed 50 miles west to the city of Corinth (https://openoureyeslord.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/map.png). Corinth was a major port, located at the crossroads of east and west for the Mediterranean Sea. The mountain known as Acrocorinth loomed large over the city (https://www.bibleodyssey.org/-/media/Images/Passages/1-9/1-corinthians-ancient-corinth.ashx).

 Historians estimate that Corinth’s population was somewhere close to 200,000 people; though given Corinth’s booming trade economy, the city was always filled with foreign visitors on their way from one port to another. Corinth was definitely a city with a reputation. A temple to Aphrodite sat in the city which itself was perched at the top of a 1900 ft. hill. Each evening a thousand prostitutes would descend from the temple to ply their trade as an act of worship to their goddess. The prostitution was so famous that for 500 years the Greek verb korinthiozesthai “to Corinthianize” meant “to be sexually immoral.” Any sexual indulgence could be purchased in Corinth. Homosexuality was rampant. When Paul wrote Romans 1:26-28, he was no doubt describing what he saw in Corinth:

26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. 28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

Just as Paul was shocked and provoked in the spirit by the thousands of idols in Athens, no doubt Paul is once again provoked in his spirit by the blatant over-sexualization that he finds in Corinth. In fact, when we read 1 Corinthians, it’s pretty obvious that Paul spent a lot of time discipling people out of the sexual immorality that was so commonplace in Corinth.

Now, as Pastor Sam Stephens mentioned last week, Paul comes into Corinth pretty worn out and discouraged. Keep in mind that Paul was beaten in Philippi, run out of Berea, and mocked in Athens. Imagine how dispiriting it would be to walk 50 miles to Corinth, only to discover a city that “never sleeps”…the Las Vegas of the ancient Greek world.
Fortunately, God immediately provides some good friends for Paul shortly after he arrives when he meets up with Aquila and his wife Priscilla. Since they were all tent makers, Paul moves in with this wonderful couple and they form a very tight friendship that will last for many years to come. Paul then goes to work proclaiming the gospel in the local synagogue there in Corinth, but once again, he encounters significant resistance. Again, we saw last week that the Jews opposed and reviled Paul, so he literally shakes out his garments and says, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”

Paul then engages a man named Titius Justus who becomes a believer, as does the synagogue ruler who lives close by…a man named Crispus, along with his entire household. Now let’s pick up the story there in vs. 8, “Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.’”

Let’s pause for a minute. Did you notice something odd here? Let me show you.

In vs. 8, Luke records very positive success in regards to Paul’s ministry. Crispus, a ruler of the synagogue, becomes a believer…which is huge…and it’s not just Crispus who believes the Gospel, but also his entire household (sons, daughters, wife, servants, staff, etc)…they all become believers. And then Luke writes that MANY Corinthian citizens believed the Gospel proclaimed by Paul and they were baptized as well.

Now here’s what’s weird. If Paul is now having great success in ministry, why is it that God comes to Paul in a vision and says, “Do not be afraid?”

I’ll tell you why: because Paul was not afraid of failing…he was afraid of succeeding…and who can blame him? Think about it: every time Paul succeeds in bringing people to the Lord, he gets beaten, arrested, mocked, ridiculed, and run out of town. If you have been tracking with us through the book of Acts, you remember what happened in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and even recently in Athens. In every instance, success in the ministry leads to suffering, persecution, ridicule and an early exit.

Paul’s not an idiot. As people begin to believe the gospel and get baptized here in Corinth, his anxiety increases. As far as he’s concerned, it’s only a matter of time before the mob will come after him…the stones will fly…and once again he will be breathing the putrid air of an ancient prison cell. Paul has been traumatized; he’s weary; and he’s a bit paranoid at this point in his career. His wounds from previous persecutions have still not healed. The constant stress, the
toxic hatred of those who want him dead, and an increasing sense of isolation is wearing him out. So even as his ministry experiences success, Paul is battling depression; he cannot shake the fear that trouble is just around the corner.

I think anyone who has contended for the Gospel over a long period of time can completely relate with the Apostle Paul here in Acts 18. The ministry of the Gospel is difficult work, and it is costly. Not only do we meet resistance from those offended by the Gospel, not only do we fight against powers and principalities that we cannot see with our eyes, but we also battle our own sinful nature…our own limitations and weaknesses…and quite frankly there are many days when we think, “I can’t do this.”

I know that feeling all too well. I often feel that in ministry, when you lose you lose, and when you win you lose! For example: I received two notes after my last sermon. The first note said, “Oh Pastor Jim, thank you so much for the intellectually satisfying sermon you preached last week. I love digging deep into the field of philosophy and understanding how it intersects with a biblical worldview. Thank you for that sermon.” The next day I received a note that said, “Pastor Jim, your last three sermons went completely over my head. Please just preach the simple gospel and don’t intellectualize so much.”

Earlier this week I had a discussion with one of our elders who represents many of the older members of our church. He predictably expressed his disappointment with our plans to renovate the Wornall foyer as well as his generation’s disappointment with the music choices that do not include enough of the traditional hymns. Yet just a few hours earlier I spoke with a 24 year old new attendee who was lamenting that our facility was so dated and uninviting to her peers, and she literally said, “Just a fresh coat of paint here and there would make such a difference.” And of course, she and her peers would love for the music to include contemporary songs that linger on for several minutes in a spirit of worship. It’s hard to “win” in the ministry! No matter what you do, you’ll never be done, and you’ll always have those who are disappointed or even angry.

Such is why every night when I drive home from work I repent to the Lord for the people I did not call back, the sick that I did not visit, those who are grieving that I’ve yet had the opportunity to speak to, the thank you cards I have failed to write, the books I have neglected to read, the emails I have failed to return, the prayers I have said in haste, the people I have offended, the people I have neglected, and the list goes on and on and on. Even when things are going well, I battle anxiety about the “shoe” that is surely about to drop with the next phone call or email that pops up on my phone. No matter how strongly I am convicted that a decision made by Session is God’s will for our church, I have absolute certainty that a group of people will leave our church over that very decision.
So yes…I get why Paul is afraid of success. I suspect many of us can relate with Paul’s weary soul as he does his best to be faithful to his calling, knowing full well that trouble is likely just around the corner.

But look what happen next…look how God shows up at just the right moment. In vs. 9, God visits Paul in a vision and brings encouragement with these words, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.”

As I was preparing this message, I read those words over and over again…and I have to tell you: I was encouraged! Here is what God says to Paul, and I believe He is saying the same to all of us who are weary and burdened with anxiety:

1) Do not be afraid. God tells His people “Do not be afraid” 366 times in the Bible! Once a day, every day including leap year! Here in Acts 18 God is speaking directly into Paul’s weary heart, and He speaks words of power and courage. DO NOT BE AFRAID! God’s not making a suggestion…this is a direct order from the King! DO NOT BE AFRAID! Why not?

2) I am with you! Friends, can there be any more comforting words than to hear the God of the universe, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whisper through the presence of His Holy Spirit, “I AM WITH YOU!” Think about all the “I am” statements that we find in the Bible. God says to Moses, “I am that I am!” Jesus says, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” “I am the Good Shepherd.” “I am the Vine.” “I am the Resurrection and the Life” “I am the light of the world” “I am the bread of life.” And now consider what the Lord just said to Paul and to all who are followers of Jesus: “I am with YOU!” “I am with you” “I AM with you.” I am WITH you!”

Church, we would do well to meditate upon that one promise all week long! We are not alone in our suffering and anxiety. We are not alone as we seek to be faithful in our calling. Our LORD is WITH US…thus we need not fear whatever is to come.

3) The Lord says to Paul, “Go on speaking…do not be silent.” The temptation for every Christian is to clam up, to back down, to move out to the country far away from people…to follow Jonah on the ship to Tarshish and flee the ministry that God has called us to. Paul is no exception. Paul knows that he has every excuse and every justification to retire from the ministry and make tents for the rest of his life. After he makes some money, maybe he can settle down with a wife and have a few kids; maybe buy a house on the water and enjoy life for a change. Don’t think for a moment that Paul was not tempted. In fact, I suspect right here in Corinth Paul was tempted in more ways than we can possibly imagine. But the Lord speaks straight into Paul’s heart with this mandate: “Keep going…keep on speaking truth…do NOT be silent.” These were the words Paul needed to hear, and aren’t we blessed that Paul kept going? Had he not, we would be missing well over half of the New Testament, right?
4) The Lord also promises that here in Corinth, “no one will attack you to harm you…” The Lord has provided a season of respite for Paul…at least to the degree that he can stay in a city for more than a few days and continue his ministry without fear of violence or imprisonment. The Holy Spirit does not promise that Paul will never experience harm or attack…but for now, Paul can press on knowing that God has put a hedge of protection around him. The lesson for us here is this: God is, indeed, sovereign. God’s angels are all around us, and when God decides to protect His own, there is no scheme of man, no power of hell, that can break through that line. God is faithful to His promise to Paul, and even though a group of Jews attack Paul and bring him before the tribunal in vss. 12-15, Paul is unharmed and exonerated, and Luke reports in vs. 11 that Paul spends 18 months in Corinth, teaching the word of God among them.

5) The last note of encouragement given to Paul in his vision comes with these words from the Lord, “I have many in this city who are my people.”

As Pastor Sam touched on last Sunday, one of the ways that God brings encouragement to His weary servants is by connecting us with “His people” who He has placed around us. I cannot tell you how many times God’s ministry to me during my battle with weariness and depression is to introduce me to HIS PEOPLE who quite randomly end up in my office or sitting next to me at a local restaurant. PEOPLE are the means by which God sends reinforcements and encouragement, which is why withdrawing into ourselves and away from people is often the exact opposite of what we need to be doing when we are at the end of our rope.

So take heart and remember:

a) We are not alone in this fight. God is with us, and He is calling other people (like Priscilla and Acquila) to join us as friends and partners in ministry. Don’t believe the Liar…don’t believe his deceptive whispers that try to convince you that you are the only one who carries this burden…that you are all alone in your battle. That’s not true. God has many of His people in this city…look for them. They are all around you.

b) As believers, remember that we are exactly those people belonging to God who will serve as an encouragement to someone who is weary and ready to give up the fight. I am one of those people, you are as well. It has been said many times and in many ways, but let me say it one more time: YOU ARE THE ANSWER TO SOMEONE ELSE’S PRAYER! Your friendship, your encouragement, your help, your kindness and faithfulness will literally serve God’s purpose in a way that will appear nothing short of miraculous to those who have been crying out to God for help.
When I think of who is coming to join our team here at Colonial next Sunday, and when I think about the text that God arranged for me to preach today…it gives me goose bumps! God is sending one of HIS PEOPLE to us, and he will be a great encouragement to us all. He is coming as an answer to our prayers. He is coming as a testimony that God has many of HIS people in this city, and that we should be encouraged to continue our Gospel ministry with boldness and determination.

Church, don’t give up. Don’t give in, give up, let up or shut up! Do not be afraid, and do not remain silent. God is with us, God is for us, nobody can touch us aside from the sovereign will of God. And take heart: God has many of His people in this city…help is on the way.

Will you pray with me?