Acts: “He Who Is in You is Greater”
Acts 19:8-20

Here at Colonial we are slowly making our way through the book of Acts, verse by verse. We took a few weeks off to celebrate Advent and Christmas, so this morning we will return to Acts 19, and our text will include vss. 8-20. Please stand and let us read the Word of God together.

OK, let’s quickly review where we are. If you recall, Paul has made it to the famous city of Ephesus, and that’s where he is in our text for this morning. Here is how the NT scholar R. Kent Hughes describes the ancient city of Ephesus:

Ephesus’s strategic position made her the “Treasure House of Asia” and the mother of materialism and ambition. She was the site of the Temple of Artemis (or Diana), one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. One hundred and twenty-seven marbled pillars rose sixty feet to support the gorgeous ceiling, many of them inlaid with gold and rare gems. The temple’s huge canopy, covering an area of 425 ft. in length and 200 ft. in width, housed the multi-breasted image of Artemis, supposed to have fallen from the stars. This temple was the center for a thriving cult of fertility worship. Ephesus was the waterhole for every kind of magician, witch, clairvoyant, and criminal. Con artists, murders, and perverts all found the climate of Ephesus unusually agreeable.

With that colorful description of Ephesus in mind, let’s turn to our text, beginning with vs. 8, “[Paul] entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.”

Of all the places Paul has traveled in the book of Acts, he is able to speak in the synagogue in Ephesus for a longer stretch of time than any other city. However, after three months…and after developing a group of disciples as a result of his teaching…the door begins to close at the synagogue. Look at vs. 9-10, “But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”

As long as there was openness to the Gospel, Paul kept his focus on those Jews and God-fearing Greeks who occasioned the synagogue. However, when the spiritual climate changed, and those in the synagogue became hardened in their hearts, Paul decides to move out of the synagogue and into a public hall known as “the hall of Tyrannus.” We know very little about Tyrannus, except that his name literally means, “Tyrant.” Given that very few parents would knowingly name their child “tyrant,” it is likely that” Tyrannus” was the name given to this Greek
philosopher by his disgruntled students….which may also account for why the hall was vacant and available for use!

Now, one of the later Greek manuscripts of the book of Acts, known as “the Western Text,” inserts that Paul rented the hall of Tyrannus from “the fifth hour to the tenth hour.” Although we do not think that Luke included that detail in his original gospel, the “western text” is early enough to suggest that a scribe inserted this detail because it was a well known fact in that region. Why is that significant? Well, it’s impressive in regards to Paul’ work ethic.

You see, in ancient Ephesus, the work day began around 7 a.m. and broke off at 11 a.m. The town would then eat lunch and take a siesta until 4 p.m. and then work well into the evening before quitting time, which was usually around 9:30 p.m. So, if Paul rented the hall of Tyrannus from “the fifth hour to the tenth hour” of daylight, that means he rented the hall from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m…the time that everyone else was eating lunch and taking a nap. Keep in mind that Paul had a day job as a tent maker, and he was very committed to NOT charge the Ephesians for his teaching ministry. Which means…Paul would get up early every day, go to work from 7 - 11 a.m., rush over to the hall of Tyrannus and proclaim the gospel until 4 p.m., and then go back to work until 9:30 p.m. And he kept this schedule six days a week for two years! Was Paul “all in?” You bet he was…the day he worked himself to the bone. In Ephesians 20:34 he writes, “You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities.” Paul was a working man, filled with the Holy Spirit, committed to his calling, and as a result, Luke writes, “…all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”

How did all of Asia hear the word of the Lord? Paul made disciples who were committed to making disciples. You have heard of the seven churches referred to in Revelation 1 and 2? It was during this time when Paul was stationed in Ephesus that all of those churches were planted by the disciples of Paul. This was one of those seasons when the Gospel spread like wildfire throughout the ancient world…it was a God movement of epic proportions.

Evidence of this God movement is what we learn about next, beginning with vs. 11, “And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.”

First, notice how Luke describes what was happening. Luke says that God was doing “extraordinary miracles.” Now, have you ever seen a miracle that was not extraordinary? Miracles, for us, are always extraordinary, right? But Luke is making a point here: the miracles that God was accomplishing through Paul and his ministry were extraordinary…to the extent that the only available parallel was when Jesus walked the earth Himself. For example, even the sweat rags and aprons that Paul used while working on his tents were being used to bring about
healing and freedom for those who were sick and harassed by demons in the region. This reminds us of the woman who was healed by simply touching the robe of Jesus, right?

Now I know you Presbyterians get a little freaked out by this story because we’ve all heard of TV evangelists who were selling their handkerchiefs for $15 apiece, claiming that their snot-rags would bring healing for their listeners who were willing to pony up for the ministry.

Listen to me: that is not at all what is taking place here in Acts 19. First, notice that God is doing the extraordinary miracles, not Paul. Note also that Paul is not selling his hankies and aprons. In fact, we’re left with the possibility that Paul didn’t even know that his discarded rags and aprons were being smuggled out to sick people in the first place. Think about it: in all of his writings, Paul brags about his weaknesses, not the healing power of his sweat. In fact, not once in his letter to the Ephesians does Paul refer to these miracles that took place in Acts 19.

The more significant question is this: what kind of people would even think to smuggle the dirty rags and aprons of the Apostle Paul to sick people in the hopes of their healing powers? The answer to that question may very well reveal what is taking place here in Acts 19. You see, the people of Ephesus were very spiritual, albeit very misinformed. They believed in the power of magic and witchcraft, and so they were accustomed to spells and potions and all kinds of craziness when it came to dealing with sickness and demonic behavior. It makes sense, then, that as Paul is contending for the power of the Gospel in the name of Jesus, God reveals the supremacy of His power in ways that these very religious, superstitious people can see and understand.

You know, in many ways we see the same kind of phenomenon in places like India. India is a deeply spiritual environment where people fear the millions of “gods” that make up the broad religion known as “Hinduism” which essentially means, “the religion of the land.” In a highly spiritual environment where people worship idols and believe in magic per se, we often see “power encounters” when the Gospel is presented because that is the way those cultures come to believe in the power and the authority of God and the name of his Son, Jesus Christ. Such is why, when you are in India, it is not uncommon at all to hear Christian church planters tell of divine healings, exorcisms, supernatural provision, and other stories that sound similar to what we read about here in the book of Acts. In a predominantly secular culture, such stories would likely backfire, since the average secular person has no frame of reference to understand or see God through miracles.

This culture will only understand the power of God as it is revealed through the spiritual. Such is why Paul writes to the Ephesians: “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities,
cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Can you see how that language speaks directly into the cultural assumptions of the Ephesians?

Now…do you want to know why Christianity is once again spreading like wildfire in places like Africa and certain parts of Asia? It’s exactly because of what we just read. In countries where people are spiritual, where they are convinced that there is a spiritual realm that is often malevolent, the Christian/biblical worldview does not insult them by telling them they are accidental machines in a non-spiritual, secular world; rather, the Christian/biblical worldview honors their culture by acknowledging that there is a spiritual realm that is often malevolent, but that victory can be achieved over the spiritual enemies that are there through the power and the blood of Jesus Christ, who has been given all authority on earth and in heaven by God as a result of his atoning death and resurrection. And when the claim of Christ’s superior power is put to the test, great signs and wonders continue to take place in the name of Jesus Christ…thanks be to God!

Speaking of signs and wonders, let’s see what happens next, beginning with vs. 13, “Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, ‘I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.’ Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this.”

Remember that Ephesus is a city of magic, idol worship, temple prostitution, human trafficking, and all sorts of darkness. As a result, exorcism was a commonly sought service. The Jews were thought to know the “secret name of God,” thus giving them an advantage in the exorcism business. However, when the Christians began to do spiritual battle in the authoritative name of Jesus of Nazareth, the results were profound…so much so that even the unbelieving sons of Sceva tried “adding” the name of Jesus in their ritual of exorcism. That didn’t work too well.

Beginning with vs. 15 we read, “But the evil spirit answered them, ‘Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?’ And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.”

This is such a bizarre story, it has to be true! But what actually happened here? To some degree, the seven sons of Sceva did what many of us do: they attempted to “add” Jesus without ever surrendering to Jesus. They knew of Jesus, but they did not know Jesus. They may have even admired the power of Jesus, but the power of Jesus did not reside in them. Consequently, when they attempted to do battle with an evil spirit, they lost. Listen to what the evil spirit says, “Jesus I know; Paul I recognize; but who are you?” Remember, all throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus never had to be introduced to the demons…they all knew and recognized who He was. Paul has been effective in casting out demons because the Spirit of Christ dwells within him, so
when the demons are confronted by Paul, they are at the same moment confronted by the Holy Spirit of Christ Himself.

However, when the seven sons of Sceva attempt to cast out the evil spirit, even though they appeal to the name of Christ, they are, in fact, taking on an evil entity on their own power, for the Spirit of Christ is not in them. The demon sees that these mere mortal men are without the power and protection of Christ, so he attacks them. Notice the supernatural strength of an evil spirit that dwells within a human body. The demon possessed man overpowers seven men. We saw that same kind of demonic power in Luke 8 in the man from Garasene who was possessed by a demon known as Legion…a demon that empowered the man to break through chains. Demons, or evil spirits, are powerful spiritual entities that are not to be trifled with. However, they are no match for those who are filled with the Holy Spirit of Christ. As John writes to the Christians in 1 John 4:4, “The One is in you is greater than the one in the world.”

Pastor Bob has a great story about a spiritual confrontation he had many years ago. It began with a random phone call from our local airport, asking Bob (who, at the time, was the well known chaplain of the Kansas City Chiefs), to come as quickly as he could. As it turns out, a young woman was on her way to give herself to the High Priest of the Satanic Church, but while she was in the airport, she somehow hurt her ankle. Having given herself over to evil spirits, she began to curse and carry on in a way that unnerved the security officers at the airport…they all recognized that this woman was possessed by an evil spirit of some kind. So they called Bob. When Bob went out to see her, the lady became particularly visceral, and she growled at Bob, “I’m going to kill you!” To which Bob simply replied, “No, you’re not…because the One in me is greater than the one who is in you.” The woman immediately turned away and growled, “I know.”

Christians, never doubt the spiritual authority that has been given to you when you surrendered your life to Jesus Christ. You may not feel spiritually powerful…and, in fact, YOU are actually NOT spiritually powerful…but the ONE who now lives in you is more powerful than all the hordes of hell put together. If Christ is in us, we need not fear the evil spirits or Satan himself, for as John writes in 1 John 3:8, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.” Take heart church: He who is in you is greater than the he who is in the world.

Now notice, this story of the seven sons of Sceva spread like wildfire throughout the city. Beginning with vs. 17 we read, “And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled.” The fear described here in vs. 17 is a healthy fear of the Lord…it is a proper respect for the Name that is above all Names. But always remember, the One who has all authority on heaven and earth is the same one who took on flesh, took on our darkness, and exchanged his perfect life.
for our broken life. He deserves reverence, awe, and a healthy fear of the Lord…but He loves us like no other…He is our Savior and our Friend, our Brother and our King.

So what happens when the fear of the Lord settles on new believers? What happens when people actually extol the name of Jesus? Look at vss. 18-20, “Also many of those who were now believing came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.”

What we just read encapsulates the description of every great revival in church history. First is passionate preaching of the Gospel and prayer over an extended period of time; then, the fear of the Lord sets in upon a group of people through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit; followed by the name of Christ being extolled above all names; a large number of new believers begin to confess their sins and divulge their past practices; and finally, there is visible, actual repentance that marks the end of the old and the beginning of the new…that which was once hidden in darkness has been brought out into the light. And that keeps happening, from town to town, church to church, person to person…it is a movement of God that changes a culture.

Church, do you know that God still moves to this day in many parts of the world in exactly the same way that we see here in Acts 19? He most certainly does. And it wasn’t that long ago that God moved in our country in a very similar way. I don’t know about you, but I’m still praying for a mighty movement of God right here in our city in my lifetime. I know that’s something that many of us are praying for.

Now, you can’t manufacture a movement of God…it doesn’t work that way. We can, however, follow Paul’s example and commit ourselves to the work that Christ has set before us. And it is work…it is hard work. But listen: People won’t know the truth of the Gospel if we don’t tell them. People will not know the love of Christ if we don’t show them. People will not know the hope of Christ if we don’t help them. People will not know the power of Christ if we don’t pray over them. People will not know the resources of Christ if we don’t share with them. People will not meet their heavenly Father if we don’t introduce them. People will not know the healing of Christ if we don’t care for them.

There is work to be done if this hurting culture is to see and be transformed by the light of Christ. But make no mistake: that work begins in us. We will not prevail against the darkness out there until the Light of Christ exposes and removes the darkness in here. As I read the scripture, I don’t think that happens until we confess our sin, divulge our secrets, and repent with faith, believing that Jesus, the Lamb of God, can and will forgive us and make us into something new through the power of His Holy Spirit living in us. I know that’s scary for a lot of us, but listen:
how much more horrifying to face the darkness alone; to battle the enemy of our souls without the power of Christ in us. We’ve seen what comes of that in Acts 19, and many of us have seen what comes of a “Christ-less” existence in our own personal history. We can’t win that battle…but He can.

I invite you this morning to yield your life to Jesus Christ, the only One who died for you and yet rose victorious over death and darkness. He is greater than the one who is in the world; and He loves you. Confess your sin to God, divulge your secrets so that you might walk in the light, and experience the healing transformation of a new life in Christ, a life of light, power, and purpose. Christ in us changes everything.

I will close with Paul’s words to the believers in the ancient church of Ephesus: “May He grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Will you pray with me?