

“ENCOURAGEMENT IN CORINTH.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for the Sermon: Acts 18:1-17

Introduction:

On the hot Sunday morning you will be pleased to know that I have resisted the temptation this morning to change my sermon and preach on the reality of hell.

Let's turn our attention to our text where we see a remarkable display of God's faith building grace and kindness in His surprising encouragement from some unlikely sources this morning.

Encouragement from an unlikely city.

Encouragement from an unlikely series of circumstances.

Encouragement from an unlikely outcome from conflict.

Encouragement from an uncommon vision from God.

Encouragement from an unlikely city.

Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaëa with a huge population of over a quarter of a million people. Athens was the intellectual center, Corinth was the political and commercial center on a peninsula between the Aegean and Adriatic seas about 50 miles west of Athens.

And it was a sports center. Every two years they hosted a huge athletic competition, the Isthmian Games, second in fame and reputation to the Olympic games.

It was a fabulously wealthy city, think Manhattan. It was an extravagant city, think Paris. And what happens in any city or any culture where there is great affluence and ease? The pride of life and the pursuit of pleasure, the lust of the flesh. It was a wicked city filled with sexual immorality and debauchery, think Las Vegas. It was the NYC, LA and Las Vegas of the ancient world.

Why would Paul go there and end up having one of his more successful missionary efforts? The power of the Spirit of God on him and his Gospel message. This is a glimpse of the glory of God shining through such an ordinary man and in such a pagan, city filled with abominations and rebellion against God. This is the fruit of a man who trusted in God alone. Confident in the power of God he proved to be courageous, steadfast, unmovable, unafraid. This is why we need never be ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus anytime, anywhere.

Encouragement from an unlikely series of circumstances.

The first unlikely circumstance starts with Aquila and Priscilla. Aquila was a native of Pontus which is on the Black Sea in central Turkey. Somehow he ended up in Rome. Then he and his wife Priscilla were forced into exile by Emperor Claudius who evicted all the Jews in Rome. So now they find themselves in Corinth.

God is up to His old ways, moving people, directing events. Notice how God providentially moves people around and puts them in places for His glory and His service. Never doubt God's ways and purposes and plans, especially in unpleasant or hard or difficult circumstances.

Most people get frustrated, angry, annoyed, irritated, upset by their misfortunes. How do we react to the inconveniences of life? Sometimes God lets us see why He is doing what He is doing, but more often it is well after the fact, if at all.

When God wanted His Son to be born in Bethlehem He moved the heart of Caesar Augustus to issue a decree for a census of the entire Roman world. When God wanted Aquila and Priscilla to move to Corinth He moved in the heart of Emperor Claudius to command all Jews to leave Rome.

Proverbs 21:1 The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

What is one thing going on in your life right now that has you completely flummoxed, befuddled, baffled, confounded, questioning God, wondering what in the world is He up to?

Take that before the Lord and inquire of the Lord about it. But be prepared for God to not give you an explanation, but rather to ask you a question back. "Do you trust me, do you believe I love you and have your best interests foremost in mind? Do you know that I can and actually do cause all things to work for the good of those who love me and are called by me?"

God's ways are always redemptive, and so they proved to be for Aquila and Priscilla, and Paul. They were a great comfort and help to Paul. Do you see in all your friendships that kindness and love of God? Do you see God's grace in the gift of friendship to others as cause to give thanks?

The second encouraging circumstance was the arrival of Silas and Timothy.

God encouraged Paul by sending his close and dear companions in the ministry, Silas and Timothy, fellow laborers in the Gospel and fellow sufferers for Jesus. They arrived with a good report from the church in Thessalonica and with financial support from the church in Philippi.

We all know the blessing of friends who come along side and help us and hold up our arms and support us in challenging circumstances. And we know how God provides at just the right time for our needs. The money from the church in Philippi enabled Paul to focus more on preaching and teaching and church building than on tent making. Are you encouraged when you see God's financial provision in your life and in the life of others?

This brought to my mind yesterday how blessed I am by your faithful support of our church year in and year out, and most especially during Covid. Personally I want to thank you for supporting me so I don't have to make tents. Thank you that I can be free from worldly cares. Thank you that I can be occupied with the Word of God.

Speaking of being occupied with the Word of God, do you come to the word expectant each week, prepared in heart and mind to hear a good word from our great God? Are you convinced that what you need to hear from the pulpit is of far greater importance than what you need to see on your favorite television show, or read from your favorite website, or hear from your favorite podcast? Are you letting the world shape you more than the Word?

May we be occupied with the Word and may the Word be occupied with us. May we be under the Word and filled with the Word. May you love the Word and know the Word. Be occupied in reading and memorizing God's Word.

Encouragement from unlikely outcomes from conflict.

There are three unlikely, providentially ordained surprises God gives to Paul to encourage him in ministry.

First there is the strategically placed Gentile convert right next door to the synagogue. Not everyone was scandalize by the Gospel, some heard the truth and believed it. This is the amazing power of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit, to transform so many lives in a very pagan, godless, rebellious city.

Second, from the conflict with the Jews in the synagogue comes the conversion of Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue.

Third, from the conflict with the Jews before Gallio the Roman proconsul Paul receives no persecution and Sosthenes is converted, the ruler of the synagogue who followed Crispus.

How did they come to believe? By what means of grace? From Paul's faithful occupation with the Word, reasoning and persuading and testifying to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah.

Jews would put up with listening to Paul until he said Jesus was the Christ, and that He was raised from the dead. As soon as Paul said Jesus is the Christ, the Jews were adamantly opposed, this was blasphemy.

So what does Paul do. He shook out his garments. What does that mean? What is the significance of that? Paul is actually doing what Jesus told His apostles to do.

Matthew 10:14 If anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town.

What sort of action would elicit this sort of response? What crime would receive so serious a sentence?

Contempt for God's Word, deliberate rejection of the truth. Rebellion against God's Word is intolerable to God. They rejected God's invitation, they tried to extinguish the light of the world. It is the height of folly to throw away and trample underfoot the only remedy to our greatest needs. Who will dare come before God on the day of judgment without being clothed in the righteousness of Christ?

Paul's symbolic gesture was a warning of the dangerous spiritual consequences of rejecting the Word.

And as this is a great offense to God, so it should grieve our spirits. It is a great crime when the ungodly scoff and mock God, and it is just as disgraceful if God's children do and say nothing. If God gives us the opportunity, may no one we know perish out of ignorance of the truth.

Before I move I was struck by how we tend to think we are not like the Jews, but are we? Are we any different than these Jews who went along only so far, but then stopped short of full faith in Jesus?

Do we only go so far with our faith, but then find points of resistance where we don't submit to the Word of God? We all have our points of stubborn resistance.

How we spend the Lord's Day.

How we tithe our money to the Lord's church.

How we submit to those in authority.

How we think unbiblically about some of the social issues of the day.

How we think about or defend or view sexual immorality.

How we spend our time in prayer and Scripture reading.

How we talk about others, gossip, critical spirit.

We all resist some part of the truth revealed to us in God's Word. It should be cause for trembling before our holy God. May we never proudly resist to the point He shake out His garments and dismiss us and say, "Your blood be on your own head."

Are we men and women after God's own heart?

Are we men and women who truly desire and seek God's will and not our will?

Are we men and women who humbly pray as David did in our call to confession?

Psalm 139:23-24 Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!
24 And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

Encouragement from an uncommon vision from God.

This is extraordinary, this is not an everyday occurrence. Something special is going on here. Why did God do this? What conclusion might you draw from this vision?

Paul was a man like us, a man susceptible to discouragement, even anxiety and fear.

Paul is laboring, he is weighed down by huge burdens, growing weary in well doing, struggling with the demanding physical labor, and all the mental labor, with the constant conflict and contention and opposition. He is afraid. We get a glimpse of this in Paul's letters to the Corinthians.

I Corinthians 2:1-4 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

God gives Paul three commands and three promises.

Do not be afraid, meaning stop being afraid. This was a real temptation for Paul

Go on speaking, meaning don't stop speaking.

Don't be silent.

Then God promises His presence, His protection, and His provision.

I am with you. This is one of God's biggest and best and most consistent promises.

No one will attack you. Their efforts will come to nothing.

I have many in this city who are my people, my chosen ones.

This vision was a personal vision meant specifically for Paul. Paul was tempted to give in to fear, to be silent. But God by His Holy Spirit caused this vision to be remembered and recorded by Luke in the book of Acts for what purpose?

So we could see the hand of the living God on Paul's life, and so we could hear the same word being spoken to us. This is here for our spiritual benefit. Take it to heart as God's Word to you.

Are we strengthened and encouraged by the Word of God? Does the Holy Spirit lift our spirits with words of truth, life, power? Do we receive assurance from God's faithful promises? What are you afraid of? What does God's Word say to your fear?

Where do you turn when you are discouraged, defeated, anxious? What promises of God sustain you, keep you going, help you to get up and endeavor to persevere in faith?

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and he will direct your steps. (Proverbs 3:5-6)

Do not grow weary in well doing, for in due time you will reap a reward. (Galatians 6:9)

Who can separate us from the love of God? (Romans 8:35-39)

Set our hope on the grace to come (1 Peter 1:3)

He is our peace (Psalm 4:8)

He will never leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5-6)

He will forgive us (1 John 1:9)

He will never allow us to be tempted beyond what we can handle in Him (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Conclusion and Application.

Remember in every difficulty, man's extremity is God's opportunity.

From a pagan city, through remarkable and surprising providences, through the community of believers, the body of Christ, and like-minded fellow saints, through unexpected fruit from ministry, through the demonstration of God's power through His Word, God meets us again and again, encourages us, builds our faith and reminds us, His redemptive purposes are going forward, His kingdom is advancing, He has many people in this city, and we are instruments in His hands for bringing in the harvest.

Continue to be occupied with the Word of God and you will see and hear and experience surprising and encouraging things in your life and in the lives of those around you.