

From Jerusalem to Samaria

Acts 8:1b-8 ~ May 7, 2017 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem ... Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Can you imagine the kind of terror that spread through the ancient Christian church in Jerusalem when Saul began his persecution? What would it have been like if you were suddenly subject to arrest and incarceration for no more reason than you were a member of a Christian church. What if your only option was to head for Canada in hopes of finding the freedom to believe as you do.

Can you imagine the panic of having to quickly pack a few things and then take to the road in hope of refuge? While each moment you worried about the police knocking on the door and dragging everyone off to jail. And realizing that the danger was real because Christian friends were already in jail with their very lives in danger. What would that feel like? It's hard to imagine, isn't it? But it does have a way of putting things in perspective. It helps us to see how blessed we are to live in a country where that sort of persecution is against the law. We live in a country where we enjoy incredible freedom to think and worship as we believe. It is a country where we can seek the truth without fear of those who disagree. When we read about the persecution against the Jerusalem Christians we are suddenly embarrassed about our own petty concerns. And perhaps we can become even more thankful for what God has given us in this community we call Heritage Lutheran Church.

But the question arises, "Why does God let bad things happen to his Church?" Isn't that something we all want to know. I'm sure that question was on the minds of many of those who fled Jerusalem at the time Saul went on his rampage against the first Christian congregation. Up to that point, things had gone very well for the earliest Christians. Peter and John had preached powerfully. The Apostles had taught a whole new understanding of Scripture that put Jesus at the center of God's plan of redemption. All of Jerusalem had been pleased and excited about the healings and wonders that had manifested themselves through the local Christian mission. Even the grumpy Jewish leadership had backed off. The congregation was growing by leaps and bounds. Then, in one catastrophic moment, a mob had dragged Stephen the Deacon

out of town and stoned him to death. Suddenly a new enemy with seemingly endless malice had appeared. Saul of Tarsus, was ravaging the church. He was going from house to house, dragging any Christians he could find off to prison. What had happened. How could the nature of Christian fellowship in that earliest congregation have changed so quickly? Why would God allow that to happen?

The problem with this very natural question is that we get confused between our selfish desires and God's purpose. We think God's love for us means that he is going to want the same things for us that we want for ourselves. It is like toddler that wants to be comforted numerous times during the night in order to return to sleep. Certainly, a loving parent wants to comfort their child, but developmentally, everyone reaches a stage when they need to learn to return to sleep on their own. At this point the parents' love needs to be expressed in ways that move the child toward developing the ability to go back to sleep without comforting. This usually results in a sharp disagreement between the child and the parents. Any of us that have been through this with children distinctly remember the discomfort in helping them move toward a new developmental stage. Children enduring this seem to scream out with every fiber of their bodies, "Mommy, Daddy, why are you doing this to me?" It is a lot like the question, "Why does God let bad things happen?"

Saul's attack on the earliest Christian congregation in Jerusalem is a perfect example of this problem. Christians in Jerusalem were happy with their lives. They loved their congregation. They basked in the warmth of their popularity. All was well until Saul came along. But was all well? Did the first Christian congregation have it all together? Clearly, they didn't. Jesus' command was to start spreading the Gospel from Jerusalem. But it wasn't supposed to stop there. It was supposed to go outward into Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Ever since that time Christian congregations' health has been marked by a balance between inward and outward focus. When there is imbalance then God acts and the results are often not pleasant.

We would expect this experience to have been devastating for the Gospel. The virtual annihilation of the Jerusalem congregation should have stopped Christianity in its tracks. But it didn't. Instead we read in Acts 8:4 ... ***Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.*** This is one of those short verses in the Bible that goes by really quick. It is easy for us to miss its true significance. ***Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.*** Think about this carefully. Put yourself in these

people's place. What would you do if you had left home in the middle of the night with little more than the clothes on your back? How would you respond to the people you met along the way if you had Saul out to get you? I have to be honest, I would keep my head down. I'd try to hide my shame. I'm not sure that I would want to say anything to anyone. But that is not what happened among the refugees from Jerusalem. As they scattered they talked about what had happened. They held their heads up. They told others about Jesus. They allowed God to work the miracle of the spreading Gospel through them. The disaster that was brought on by Saul's ravaging turned into the birth of many new churches. Congregations that sprang up all across the known world.

We have to ask; how could such a thing happen? It is completely outside our common frame of experience. These people who fled Jerusalem, where could they find the joy and the peace to engage in the preaching of the word? We already know the answer, but we persist in thinking that the answer is for someone else. Certainly, the power to preach the word emerging out of tragedy must be there for more than those first exiles from Jerusalem. Could it be there for us as well. We have the same Lord Jesus. He is the same, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We have the teaching of the Apostles in our hands and our hearts. What more do we need to turn adversity into a powerful opportunity for the gospel?

As the Scripture recounts for us...

Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city.

Phillip was one of those that escaped from the chaos in Jerusalem. He had been appointed a deacon, a leader in the growing new Christian congregation there. He was respected. He had an important role to play. But overnight the congregation was destroyed. His freedom and his life were in jeopardy. He ran to Samaria. A place that was hated by the Jews because it was the capital city for the despised Samaritans. Jews shunned that place, avoiding it totally when possible. This made it an ideal sanctuary for those running from the jack-booted authority of Saul and his cronies. Philip ran to Samaria. But the Gospel of Jesus was a part of him. It went with him. He could not help but to speak it, even though it seemed an unlike venue for Christian revival. But the

proclamation of the Christ was accompanied by works of power. New life came to Samaria. Sensibility and health came to those who had been possessed. Healing happened. And the love of Jesus gave light to one of the dark places in the world. So out of the misery, fear and sadness of the disaster in Jerusalem, God wrought a miracle in Samaria by Philip's walk in the Spirit. And to that place came healing, light, and joy. This was God's purpose. His church stepped beyond the self-styled restriction of Jerusalem's city limits. From Jerusalem to Samaria, Philip came bearing the Gospel. And we can easily see how that was very, very good.

Down through the ages, God has moved his church from its self-imposed limitation to new horizons of the Gospel. Disaster is often God's first step in moving the mission of the Gospel ahead. It is not our success that matters. It is God's will and his kingdom that must prevail. Today's sermon text addresses that dynamic very clearly. The call of Jesus to pick up our cross is not a fashion statement. It is the acknowledgement that life in the church cannot be measured by the world's standards. Faith is not a number. It can't be counted. Two or three is all the further we need to go... Faith is a quality of life. It is trust that God knows what he is doing, no matter what we see around us. We must be ready to move at his command. If we are called to flee Jerusalem, it will be because God needs the Gospel preached in Samaria.

It is very clear in God's word, that he has a purpose in mind for each of you. There are no spectators in Christianity. You are called to be full members of Jesus' team. God has equipped you with spiritual gifts that he needs in his Kingdom. It is his will that you put them to work. Remember that when we pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done..." These words are not empty, they are full of great meaning and purpose. You are God's very children. You have been purchased for eternity by the Blood of the Lamb. But you are not on lay away. You are in the world, even though you are not of it. You are called. You are in the Spirit. Look for great things to happen and soon you will see that it is your hands, your voice, and your heart doing them. And then exalt in the Joy of the Lord which begins this very second and extends beyond all time.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.