

## Twin Healings

*Acts 14: 8-18 ~ June 11, 2017 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church*

Today we pick up the story of Paul and Barnabas as they continue their first missionary Journey. While they were Iconium they learned about a plot hatched by Jews and civic leaders to kill them. So, they fled to a village further east named Lystra. God's spirit led them to safety and prospered the Gospel as it spread across Asia Minor.

When they came to Lystra, Paul began to preach to any who would listen. One of those who listened was a man who had been crippled from birth. When we encounter this story, we experience a kind of Déjà vu. We have heard almost this same story before. Peter was party to a nearly identical miracle in Jerusalem way back at the beginning of Acts. Our natural inclination is to compare these two very similar stories. Such a comparison helps us to better understand how Paul's ministry to the gentiles was different from the spread of the gospel among Jews. It also opens our eyes to the nature of the way the Gospel works in the world today.

There are two places in acts where men who have never been able to walk are healed. The story in today's sermon text is the second time we hear about this kind of miracle. The first time is back in Acts chapter 3.

***At the Temple gate called Beautiful Gate, there was a man who had been crippled all his life. ... The man saw Peter and John going into the Temple and asked them for money. ... But Peter said, "I don't have any silver or gold, but I do have something else I can give you: By the power of Jesus Christ from Nazareth—stand up and walk!" ... He jumped up, stood on his feet, and began to walk. He went into the Temple with them, walking and jumping, and praising God.***

It was Peter who healed a man crippled from birth in Acts 3. It was a demonstration of God's power that gave Peter opportunity to preach about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This first healing took place in Jerusalem. So, the crowds who witnessed it were Jewish people. They knew that the miracle was from the one true God. No one was tempted to make Peter into a god. In fact, the worst thing that happened in the story was that Peter was dragged before the Jewish leaders who tried to frighten him into being silent about Jesus. The crowds in Jerusalem responded with joy and glorified God because of this work of power. And because of Peter and John's preaching many came to faith.

When we come to today's sermon text in Acts 14 we have an almost identical situation with a very different outcome.

***In Lystra there sat a man who had been born crippled; he had never walked. This man was listening to Paul speak. Paul looked straight at him and saw that the man believed God could heal him. So, he cried out, "Stand up on your feet!" The man jumped up and began walking around. When the crowds saw what Paul did, they shouted in their own Lycaonian language. They said, "The gods have become like men! They have come down to us!" And the people began to call Barnabas "Zeus." They called Paul "Hermes," because he was the main speaker. The temple of Zeus was near the city. The priest of this temple brought some bulls and flowers to the city gates.***

This miracle in Lystra was nearly identical to what God did through Peter over ten years earlier. A man who was never able to walk suddenly was walking perfectly well. It was amazing, powerful, and astounding. It demanded a religious response. A decade earlier in Jerusalem the Jews clearly understood Peter's miracle inside the tradition of Israel. But Paul was nowhere near Israel. He was in a region called Lycaonia. And because of that, the outcome of the miracle in today's sermon text is vastly different from its twin ten years before in Jerusalem.

The people of this region are described by historians as wild and warlike aboriginal people who pastured sheep on the bleak central highlands. They were only brought under civilizing influence, about 400 years before Paul's miracle, with the rising tide of Greek culture through the conquests of Alexander the Great. This meant that they were pagans when Paul walked into town at Lystra. We often misuse the word Pagan in common language today. We think of Pagans as being non-religious rowdies with little regard for civilized faith. This is not true. Paganism in the ancient world was a highly organized religion with their own priests, sacred writings, and religious practices. Paganism was primarily a religion of nature that worshiped a group of gods collectively called a pantheon. Greek and Roman mythology was the heart of this religion.

So, when Paul rolled into town and healed a man born lame, the witnesses and the surrounding community immediately turned to their own religion to find understanding for the miracle. Their mythology told them of times when their gods walked among human beings doing miracles. It was natural for them to assume that was what was happening in Lystra. So immediately the religious leadership identified Barnabas as Zeus, who is the ruler of the Greek gods. Paul was identified as Hermes, who was the

messenger god. When we understand the religious environment, we can see how natural and normal these interpretations were. But things started to get completely out of hand when the whole town started gathering the elements for a cultic worship of Zeus. A bull laden with flowers was prepared for sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas as gods.

Paul and Barnabas knew that the sacrifice must be stopped. It would undermine everything that they had come to do. The proclamation of the Gospel required shattering pagan belief so that its adherents could be freed from bondage to its superstition. Paul and Barnabas could not allow themselves to be co-opted into a pagan interpretation of the miracle, even though it gave them a magnificent reputation among these people. If they allowed the impression that they were gods to continue and went along with the pagan sacrifice, there would be no way they could proclaim the gospel with integrity. And so, they rushed in and disrupted the religious event putting a stop to the misinterpretation of the miracle.

Now we arrive at an important question. So what? What does all this stuff about Peter and Paul's miracles have to do with us right here at Heritage Lutheran Church? What does it have to do with the mission of the Gospel in 2017? The twin miracles from Acts reveal the truth about our mission in the world today. They give us insight into the cultural transformation that has occurred during many of our lifetimes. The comparison of these two miracles can guide us into focusing our proclamation of the Gospel in our own time.

To understand this, we need to very carefully ask ourselves about the culture in which we go, make, baptize, and teach. Is our culture like Jerusalem where Peter's miracle happened or is it like Lystra where Paul's happened? In other words, does our culture today understand the Biblical world view that enables us to properly interpret miracles? Or is it infused with a more Pagan world view that fails to understand God's demonstrations of power? Most of us over forty-five years old remember a time when the Biblical Worldview prevailed in our culture. But, we cannot sit around and long for the good old days when our whole culture was nominally Christian. We must realize, like Dorothy Gale when she opened her eyes in Munchkin land, "Toto, I don't think we are in Kansas anymore." Truly as Christians, we are no longer in Kansas. Spiritual mediums achieve high popularity through mass media. US senators berate government appointees for core Christian beliefs. The Bible itself is thought of as antiquated nonsense by the very churches to which it gave birth. And paganism itself is on the rise,

both in its ancient form and the new nature worship which boosts sporting goods sales everywhere.

Today, in our very community, the reaction to a miraculous healing would be more likely to follow the pattern in Lystra than in Jerusalem. It would be abused by the religion of our time. It might be studied or experimented upon. It could be written up in an obscure scientific journal or sensationalized in a supermarket tabloid. It could maybe hope for a few “likes” as a Facebook post. But probably it would be branded as “fake news,” and relegated to electronic recycle bins everywhere. Now we can sit around and wring our hands about that or we can follow the lead of Paul and Barnabas.

***But when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, understood what they were about to do, they tore their clothes in anger. Then they ran in among the people and shouted, “Men, why are you doing these things? We are only men, human beings like you! We are bringing you the Good News. We are telling you to turn away from these worthless things and turn to the true living God. He is the One who made the sky, the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them. In the past, God let all the nations do what they wanted. Yet he did things to prove he is real: He shows kindness to you. He gives you rain from heaven and crops at the right times. He gives you food and fills your hearts with joy.”***

Like Paul and Barnabas, we must learn to address the paganism of our day. We need to know how to proclaim the Gospel using the scientific and technological language of our culture. We cannot continue to imagine that we live in Peter’s Jerusalem where everyone knew their scriptures. A very small percentage of people in the world today even have a clue about what the Bible is about. Very few of those really care what it says. Instead of trying to find who to blame for this, we need to find a way to proclaim the gospel. We need to address our culture today in their own language. We need to be clear about the central message. We serve a God of Love who calls people to himself. Inherent in that call is forgiveness, mercy, and the invitation to follow the Holy Spirit’s guidance into a better life. The mission to speak the Gospel is central for every Christian. But quoting the Bible will probably not even get us to the outskirts of Jerusalem. To reach Lystra we will need to learn a new language. It is the language of our generation.

In any language, the Gospel remains the same. It is a truth about you. It is an eternal decision that God has made in his own heart. He has looked at you and knows you from

one end of your life to the other. You fear his judgement, because you are fixated on your own faults. God does not have that problem. He doesn't even see your faults because he has forgiven you. Jesus took all of that to his Cross where he destroyed it. So, your relationship to God depends completely on the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. The same Jesus Christ that God raised from the dead. He is now the King of the Universe ruling every lightyear in glory. But, because of his mighty power he seeks a personal relationship with you. He wants to be the Lord of your life. I know you did not ask for this. But God did it anyway. And it is the most amazing thing that has ever happened. By these very words Jesus chooses you to be his own. He chooses to dwell with you in your life. He chooses to send his Holy Spirit to guide you each step of the way in life, in death, and into eternity, alive again with Him forever.

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.