

Apollos

Acts 18: 24-28 ~ July 16, 2017 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus.

There are twelve words in this sentence from verse 24, chapter 18 of Acts. A twelve-word sentence doesn't seem like much. But this sentence tells a tale that should be a marvel to every Christian. We are going to break it down phrase by phrase today to come to a fuller understanding of why this sentence should send shivers running down our backs about the power of God's Holy Spirit at work in the world.

Let's start with the phrase, ***a Jew named Apollos***. We are twenty first century Americans, so we should be excused for not immediately recognizing the significance of this phrase. What is so meaningful about the phrase, "***a Jew named Apollos?***" Well, Apollos is not a Jewish name. It is a Greek name. It is derived from the name of a Greek god. In Greek mythology, Apollo is the god of music and healing. Now the question arises, why would any Jewish parents name their little boy after a Greek god? It seems ludicrous, doesn't it? We think this because we are not familiar with how Greek culture completely took over the ancient world. Apollos' name leads us to the conclusion that he was a Hellenistic Jew. This means a Jew who had completely adapted to the Greek culture. Some of his family were probably Greeks who became Jews by choice, or what we call proselytes. But we know that Apollos himself was fully Jewish since he spoke in the Synagogue. His name shows that his family was progressive and unconcerned about the superstitious overtones of a Greek god's name. He fit well into the culture of his day.

Now we come to the phrase, "***a native of Alexandria.***" Many will have heard of ancient Alexandria. Some will know that it was a city in Egypt. However, there are three important bits of information about ancient Alexandria that impact our understanding of Apollos. First, even though it became a Roman provincial capital less than a hundred years before Apollos was born, Alexandria was still the most Greek city in the world. By this time, it was the Hellenistic cultural center for the entire region. Second, Alexandria was the most prominent place of learning for science, mathematics, rhetoric, the arts, philosophy, and theology in the world. Some argue that no center for learning has ever surpassed the relative scale of research and educational resources present in ancient Alexandria and its amazing library. Third and finally, Alexandria also had one of the

largest Jewish quarters anywhere in the world outside of Palestine. Apollos may have grown up among a Jewish population that even surpassed Jerusalem itself.

So, what does being “*a native of Alexandria*” mean for our understanding of Apollos in the book of Acts. First, we can deduce that he was progressive and completely Hellenistic in his outlook. That meant that he could move comfortably between the Jewish and gentile cultures of his day. Second, he was a very educated individual. The text of Acts, emphasizes this when it describes him as, “*an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures.*” Eloquence in the ancient world referred to careful rhetorical training which was the focus of university education in that day. Competency in the Scriptures also came from the broad theological instruction that was characteristic of an Alexandrian education. In fact, Alexandria was the place where the Hebrew scriptures had been translated into Greek. When we think of Apollos we should imagine that his background and education gave him the kind of cache that we associate with an advanced degree from Harvard.

This brings us at last to the phrase, “*came to Ephesus.*” We know why Luke is writing about Ephesus. It is the next place Paul plans to establish a Christian congregation. He had left Aquila and Priscilla there to prepare the way. But why did Apollos come to Ephesus? Obviously, the answer is that he came to Ephesus by the will of the Holy Spirit.

Let’s try to image what Apollos’ coming to the Ephesian Synagogue was like for Aquila and Priscilla. Remember that Aquila and Priscilla were made refugees by the expulsion of the Jews from Rome mandated by Emperor Claudius. They became friends and fellow missionaries with Paul in Corinth. The focus for their mission work in Ephesus, where they awaited Paul’s return, was centered in the Jewish Synagogue. They faithfully attended that Synagogue Sabbath after Sabbath. But remember the focus in the synagogue was about being Jewish, not Christian. Then one Sabbath a young, erudite graduate from the great university in Alexandria shows up at the Synagogue. True to custom, the leaders of the Synagogue called upon this visiting scholar to preach and expound upon the sacred Scriptures.

Aquila and Priscilla would have settled in for another progressive and liberal interpretation that they had come to expect from Alexandrian Jews. But to what must have been their complete amazement, Apollos stood up and expounded upon the coming of the Jewish messiah in the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. It would have been the last thing that Priscilla and Aquila would have expected to come from a visiting

Alexandrian scholar. Can you imagine the joy and wonder they felt as Apollos' words rang out with conviction and truth about proofs from Scripture that Jesus was the Christ?

And that joy and wonder grew as Apollos continued week after week to teach and debate Christian truths with the members of the synagogue in Ephesus. But as they listened, Aquila and Priscilla began to detect some deficiencies in Apollos' exposition of the gospel. Our sermon text for today refers to these deficiencies by saying that "**he only knew the Baptism of John.**" This is a very important clue about what is going on with Apollos. It seems likely that Apollos' Christian training had not come from Jesus' Apostles. Instead, he had been trained in Christian faith by disciples of John the Baptist.

From our modern perspective, we tend to forget that in the early days of the church the followers of John the Baptist were crucial in the process of formulating Christian faith. It is likely that four of Jesus' own disciples were also followers of John the Baptist. The first chapter of the Book of John makes this connection for Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathaniel. Also in Luke Chapter 7, after John the Baptist has been imprisoned by Herod, he sends this question to Jesus, "**Are you the One who is coming, or should we wait for another?**" Jesus sends back a quotation from the prophet Isaiah about the signs he is performing throughout Judea. Many of the followers of John came to believe in Jesus. But they may not have had the benefit of Jesus' teachings about the nature of the Kingdom of God; the coming of the Holy Spirit; and likely they did not have the last instructions about baptism that Jesus gave to his disciples after his resurrection.

Apollos' deficiency would not have been a serious matter. But it might have been an impediment for Paul and Apollos to work together. However, our Scriptures tell us that Aquila and Priscilla took Apollos to their home **and helped him better understand the way of God.** This is one of the most amazing miracles in Scripture. Not that Aquila and Priscilla knew what to teach, they were after all well trained by Paul. But the miracle was that Apollos was willing to learn. Apollos did not let pride in his vaunted education stand in the way of his learning the truth from humble working-class believers. He accepted teaching from both husband and wife in what some scholars point to as the first Christian seminary.

The results must have been very satisfactory, because members of the Ephesian synagogue agreed to help send Apollos on to Corinth in southern Greece. He was highly effective in that ministry. As the Scriptures tell us:

Apollos argued very strongly with the Jews before all the people. He clearly proved that the Jews were wrong. Using the Scriptures, he proved that Jesus is the Christ.

Paul himself testifies to the effectiveness of Apollos' ministry in his first letter to the Corinthians when he writes:

I planted the seed of the teaching in you, and Apollos watered it. But God is the One who made the seed grow.

What is so wonderful about Apollos' story is that it gives us a whole new vision about how God shaped his church in the world by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the story of how a college boy from liberal, cosmopolitan Alexandria was brought into Paul's ministry of the Gospel. It shows how God used common folk to correct and sharpen the theology of a university graduate for the clarity the Christian message. It is a story about how God's Holy Spirit provides the preachers and teachers that the church needs to exist and prosper in the world.

This is good news for us. God will continue to provide what the Church needs to exist and prosper its mission in the world. Preachers and teachers will come, perhaps in ways we do not expect, like Apollos. It is so easy for us to think that our church belongs to us, but it doesn't. The church belongs to Jesus Christ and he will provide for it as he thinks right. And like we see in the work of Apollos, the church will continue to confound the challenges that this world makes to Christian Faith. And more important it will continue to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This Gospel is the truth. You have been saved from despair and destruction by Jesus Christ. Jesus interposed his own body between the forces of damnation and your eternity. As he died on the cross he purchased your salvation and secured your place as a child of God. Since God had raised Jesus from the dead, you now have a living lord who is master of life and death itself. He has promised to take you by means of your faith to himself in heaven. And he promises that on the day of Judgement he will cover you with his righteousness so that your eternity with God is secure. This is the same Gospel proclaimed by Paul, by Apollos, and by Christian preachers down through the ages. Today, I have the privilege of announcing it to you in this place and at this time. Repent and believe the gospel, for the kingdom of God is at hand!

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.