

Who Will Answer the Spirit's Call?

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Over the last several weeks we have been studying the work of the Holy Spirit as seen in the book of Acts. The very beginning of the book starts with Jesus' ascension to Heaven. And just before he leaves them, Jesus tells the disciples in Chapter 1 verse 8, “⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”ⁱ

We have seen how the Holy Spirit started with a small group of disciples and followers of Jesus in Jerusalem and how the circle, the reach of the “church” has expanded incrementally to Judea and Samaria and today we see the beginnings of the reach of the Good News of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth.

The first thing I want you to notice today is the description of the people in the church at Antioch. Verse 1 tells us, “Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul.” We have Simeon, presumably from Africa in what is

possibly now Nigeria. Lucius of Cyrene, also in North Africa. Manaen, a member of the then current Herod, the ruler's court and Barnabas, who was a Levite, and Saul, who had been a Pharisee.

This is an impressive list of people. It is a diverse group, accepting people from all different types of backgrounds and skill sets. We have prophets and teachers as well as people who were historically very religious.

Antioch was a city in Syria about 16 miles from the Mediterranean, and approximately 300 miles north of Jerusalem. "It ranked third, after Rome and Alexandria, in point of importance, of the cities of the Roman empire."ⁱⁱ At Antioch, we are already well outside of Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and are into the "ends of the earth." It is at Antioch where the followers of Jesus are first called Christians. This was not meant to be a complimentary title when it was given as a label to the believers. It was more of a mocking term.

We find ourselves at a gathering for worship and fasting. It is while they were gathered that the group understood the Holy Spirit directing them to set Saul and Barnabas aside for a particular ministry of outreach. The verse says, "for the work to which I have called them." And then after praying and laying

on of hands, they sent them out. We are told in verse four “that they went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus.”ⁱ

This is a very short four verses. There are so many questions that we do not find answered here. Who else was gathered beyond those mentioned? How did the church know it was the Spirit speaking to them? How did the Spirit speak to them? How did Saul and Barnabas feel about the Spirit singling them out and the church commissioning them to an undescribed ministry? How did Saul and Barnabas know where to go after they had been set apart? You might even have more questions than these.

As is often the case in Scripture, not all of our questions come with easy answers. But what this text makes clear is that the church, the believers in Antioch, were gathered for worship and a time of focusing on their faith (as evidenced by the fasting) and they knew the Spirit of God was directing them in a particular way. Here, to send out Saul and Barnabas to further spread the Gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

Oh to be that certain of God’s will. To be that certain that the inklings of direction felt in their hearts was from God and that they acted on it – seemingly without hesitation.

There have been times in my life that I have felt more like the Prophet Jonah of the Old Testament, who when he heard God call him to go preach to the city of Nineveh, he ran to a boat to go the opposite direction to Tarsish. Of course, God wasn't finished with him, and Jonah ended up in the belly of a great fish and finally did what God had called him to do.

You see God has always been in the business of calling people to carry his message.

In the first Scripture reading today we see the Call Vision of the Prophet Isaiah. We assume that Isaiah was already a priest serving in the temple when he experienced his Vision. The imagery that is described in Isaiah 6 is beautiful.

Close your eyes for a moment and picture what it is that Isaiah sees.

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ² Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." ⁴ The pivots on the

thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.⁵ And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.⁷ The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”ⁱ

You can open your eyes.

Isaiah sees an image of God on the Throne with the attendant heavenly beings. And his immediate response to the majesty and glory of God is a recognition of his own un-holiness. At this very moment for Isaiah, God provides a manner for cleansing of his sins. Where the seraphs flew to Isaiah, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.⁷ The seraph touched his mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”

It is in the midst of this moment of Worship, for I cannot think of a better description of this Vision, in

this moment of Worship that Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”ⁱ

God extended the Call to Isaiah and he immediately responded with Here am I – send me.

Saul and Barnabas, it would seem, heard God’s call and also responded with Here am I – send me.

I do not know to whom in this gathering of people today that God may be issuing a call. But I have no doubts that the Spirit of God is at work here, putting needs of various people in various locations in our minds and on our hearts, compelling us to not be comfortable with our sometimes (or often) sedentary version of Christianity.

What is God’s Spirit speaking to you about today? Is the Holy Spirit pushing you towards a new ministry here at this church or in the greater community? Is the Holy Spirit pushing **us** towards larger involvement here in the Big Flats area or maybe around the world?

Maybe today you need to hear once again Jesus’ invitation to join him at the Lord’s Table for Communion. In coming together for a celebration of the Lord’s Supper, maybe we need to remember that it is in fact a Celebration. We celebrate that Jesus

Christ came to the earth to live and to die – and to be resurrected for the Salvation of All people. We all too often make the Supper a very solemn ceremony, rather than a moment for rejoicing.

Just as God has always done, from the time of the Patriarch Abraham, through the prophets, to the early church down to us – God calls us to answer the Spirit. God calls us to follow in the paths the Spirit directs us. And this morning God invites you to feel the Spirit leading you. We come this morning to answer the Spirit and to join in Joyful Communion with the God in whom we believe, serve and love and with one another. And just perhaps to hear God’s Spirit ask, whom shall I send and who shall go for us – will you listen and respond?

ⁱ [New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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ⁱⁱ “Olive Tree Bible Software Bible+ for Windows Desktop.” 1998. Easton Bible Dictionary - Article on Antioch.