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The United Methodist Church
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By Belton Joyner, Jr.

November 1, 2015

Text: Acts 12:1-11

“God Rescues Peter”

There are a lot of different handles that might be used to pick up the baggage of this text: persecution of the faithful (Acts 12:1); relationship between government and religion (Acts 12:3); religious holidays (Acts 12:3); prayer (Acts 12:5); angel or messenger from God (Acts 12:7); mystery (Acts 12:9); miracles (Acts 12:10); confident faith (Acts 12:11). But let’s zero in on what is reported in the closing part of Acts 12:10: “...when abruptly the angel was gone.”

Don’t you love it while the angel is waking up the snoozing saint (v. 7)? Don’t you love it when the angel is giving Peter step-by-step directions on what to do next (v. 8)? Don’t you love it when Peter escapes right in front of the men who were supposed to guard him (v. 10)? Don’t you love it when the front gate of the prison unexpectedly opens up (v. 10)? Don’t you love the way the angel walks down the street with Peter (v. 10)?

bible+study

Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury’s Adult Bible Study Series

Then, boom! The angel is gone! Say it ain’t so! When I have a mountain-top experience, I want to stay on top of the mountain! When the Lord seems so “up close and personal,” I want it to stay that way! When everything is “coming up roses,” I want to keep smelling the flowers! But that is not what happens here. The angel left.

On the southeast side of Raleigh, there used to be a church that posted a report on its outdoor bulletin board every Monday: “Eight saved yesterday”...“Six saved yesterday”...“Ten saved yesterday.” I rejoice that persons accepted the claim of Christ upon their lives, but I always wonder: “What happened when they went to work on Monday? What happened on Tuesday when a co-worker tried to belittle them? In other words, what happened when the high moment of divine encounter was over? In other words, what happened when the angel left?

In this account in Acts, Peter celebrates how God has rescued him (v. 11), but now he continues the journey without such a visible presence of God. That is a sign of a remarkable faith: walking on in trust even when God’s angel

cannot be seen. For Peter, it was enough to know that God had rescued him. And, for me, for you, is it enough to know that God has rescued us from our sin? The angel may have left but we keep walking.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In a collection of writings by Pope Francis (*The Joy of the Gospel*, Image), the pontiff has said, “...I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Let me risk, O Lord, keeping the faith even when You are not as visible as I might want...”

November 8, 2015

Text: Acts 15:1-12

“God Makes No Distinction”

In about six months, the United Methodist General Conference will gather in Portland, Oregon. Delegates from annual conferences all over the world will debate multiple issues about

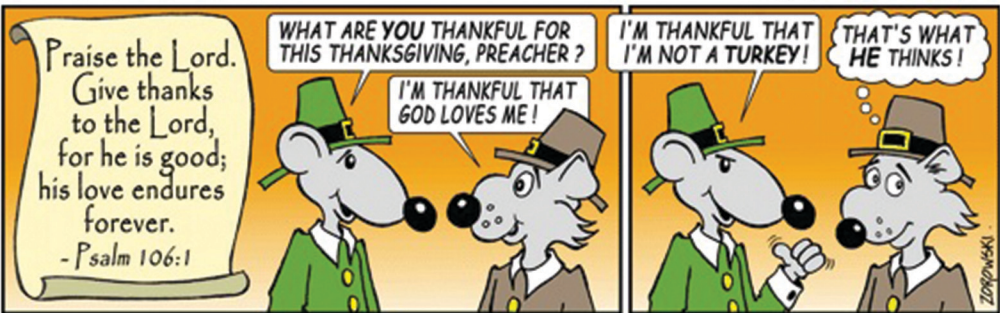
how to be the Church God is calling for in the twenty-first century.

Many of the matters to be deliberated will have to do with the identity of the Church. When folks in different parts of the world disagree, how do we distinguish between cultural proclivities and the essence of the Christian faith? When believers hear different voices in the same Bible, how do we sort through language to hear what God is saying? What human characteristic (gender, sexuality, ethnicity, for example) can be used to define one’s role in the Church’s life?

It’s not going to be an easy two weeks in Portland, but let this week’s Bible study give a word of encouragement: this is not the first time the Church has had to struggle with the basics. At issue in Acts 15:1-12 is the question of “who’s in” and “who’s out.” Understandably, those Christians who were faithful Jews who had then recognized Jesus as the long-promised messiah might believe that being Jewish first was the way you got to be Christian. After all, that was the only way they had experienced Christian faith

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An Alternative Way To Travel With Someone You Can Trust

(Acts 15:1).

Isn’t it interesting how something could be so clear and straightforward for some people while others had experiences that said quite the opposite? Paul and Barnabas countered those who said that being Jewish was the only way to be Christian; they had reports of non-Jews who came to faith, not through heritage, but through the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:8). Finally, thy said, it was not circumcision or non-circumcision that saved a person; it was “the grace of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:11). That is how both Jew and non-Jew came to salvation, with no distinction (Acts 15:9). It was the Holy Spirit, not circumcision, that gave the gift of faith.

These verses describe what we have come to call the Council at Jerusalem, when those early believers felt they had to come together to talk about things that might divide them. They determined that Gentile Christians were not second-class citizens in the kingdom of God.

What Someone Else Has Said: Bishop William R. Cannon (*The Book of Acts*, Upper Room Books) wrote, “Next to the description of Pentecost in the second chapter of Acts, this passage—Acts 15:1-35--is the most important in the entire book, for what takes places here opens up for the church its largest field for expansion...the transformation of Christianity from a small Jewish sect into an independent and autonomous church.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin, “Hold us together, Lord...”

November 15, 2015
Text: Acts 16:1-5, 8-15
“From Derbe to Philippi”
There are four interesting personalities in this week’s study text:

Paul, Timothy, a man from Macedonia, and Lydia. Let’s ponder a bit about each of these.

Paul: Here is a man who was an itinerant preacher. In these verses alone, there is mention of Derbe (v. 1), Lystra (v. 1), Phrygia (v. 6), Galatia (v. 6), Mysia (v. 7), Bithynia (v. 7), Troas (v. 8), Macedonia (v. 9), Samothrace (v. 11), Neapolis (v. 11), Philippi (Acts v. 12), and Thyatira (v. 14). The apostle did not travel to all these places, but in this account they are clearly within his frame of reference. And all of this without a GPS! I might keep this outreach in mind the next time we talk about apportionments as outreach to the world. In a sense, this mission to all the world, and not just home, is biblically illustrated in the ministry of Paul.

Timothy: Although Timothy’s mother and grandmother had both been believers (2 Timothy 2:5), his father was not a Christian (Acts 16:1). Timothy had a good reputation (Acts 16:2) and Paul took him on as a traveling companion and protégé. (Remember the letters of advice Paul wrote to Timothy—1 Timothy and 2 Timothy—as a way of encouraging, supporting, and equipping the younger man.) Although Paul did not think circumcision was necessary for the Christian journey, he saw that Timothy was circumcised (Acts 16:3) in order to acknowledge the power of that identity for those with Jewish heritage. Today’s church can be cautious about throwing the spiritual baby out with the cultural bath water; the heritage of the journey of those before us is to be valued.

A man from Macedonia: This character (Acts 16:9) actually shows up in a vision, a dream, that Paul had. Naysayers might

mumble that this was no more than some bad hummus as Paul grabbed a quick bite on his journey, but Paul sees it as a word from God: change your plans and go help out in Macedonia. The call of God can show up in some unusual places: a homeless man, a teen who wonders whom she can trust, a believer who appears to be strong in the faith but who in truth wants to know where there is a safe place to take her doubts, or a news reporter telling of some profound social injustice. We best listen. It might be God.

Lydia: Good-bye stereotypes! Here is a woman who had position (Acts 16:14), wealth (Acts 16:14), influence (Acts 16:15), and persuasive power (Acts 16:15). I am left to wonder: Who is left out today because I have depended on stereotype rather than getting to know him or her?

What Someone Else Has Said: In *Leaders Eat Last* (Portfolio/Penguin), Simon Sinek has said, “Leaders are the ones who run headfirst into the unknown.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Call me to Your tomorrow...”

November 22, 2015
Text: Acts 17:1-4, 10-12, 22-25, 28
“Thessalonica, Beroea, and Athens”
Do relatively obscure verses ever jump out at you? I was happily reading through the text for this week and happened to notice that Acts 17:11 (a description of the Jews in Beroea) is translated differently in the New Revised Standard Version and in the Common English Bible. the NRSV says these folks were “more receptive” than the ones in Thessalonica. The CEB says the Beroean Jews were “more

“honorable” than those in Thessalonica. Curiosity got to me, so I checked the King James Version (“more noble”), the New International Version (“more noble character”), Goodspeed (“more high minded”), New English Bible (“more liberal minded”), Rieu (“finer spirits”), Knox (“better breed”), Good News Bible (“more open minded”)---well, you get the picture. About all we can tell is that the Jews in Beroea get higher marks than those in Thessalonica.

What was Luke (author of Acts) trying to say about the Beroean Jews? The word is *ēugēnēs*. It is made up of two words: *ēu* and *ginōmai*. (No, I didn’t know that; I had to look it up.) If those words are put together in their literal meanings, we end up with “well generated.” No wonder translators have tried to find a way to communicate that in other terms!

Whatever the difference was, the key point seems to be that there were indeed differences. There were places where Paul and the Gospel message was better received than in other places. That should be of some encouragement to us who sometimes wonder if the shallow response we get to our proclamation is because we are weak in proclaiming. It is not likely that we would accuse Paul of being weak in his proclaiming; yet he ran into the same variety of responses that we get today.

Paul does not make the same approach in each place. Sometimes it was speaking in the synagogues (Acts 17:1, 10-11). Sometimes it was chatting with folks at the marketplace (Acts 17:23). Sometimes it was to those with Jewish roots (Acts 17:2). Sometimes he found ways to give the message to Gentiles (Acts 17:12). Paul did not have a “one size fits all” ministry. Yes, these three cities differ from one another. There were Jews (v. 2). There were Gentiles

(v. 12). There were vaguely religious (v. 22). There were intellectuals (v. 11). There were searchers (v. 11). There were agnostics (v. 23). And there was a gospel to be told in a multitude of ways.

What Someone Else Has Said: Frank Newport (*God Is Alive and Well*, Gallup) has written: “I like to say that Americans have potential religious energy locked up, ready to be converted to activated energy if and when the time is right.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Open my eyes to those around me...”

November 29, 2015
Text: Acts 18:1-11, 18-21, “Teaching God’s Word”
Corinth was quite a city. It was a bustling seaport, often with the streets crowded with people who had come from far places. It was the host of the every-other-year Games that brought participants and spectators from all over. Corinth had a reputation (not deserved, say some archaeologists) as a place of easy sexual favors. There was a lot of wealth in Corinth, much of it in the hands of the ex-slaves who had colonized the city. In fact, it was seen as sort of a boom town.

Paul spent some time (eighteen months—Acts 18:11) in this one place. Many students of the Bible think the apostle wrote the Letter to the Romans while he was in Corinth (Romans 16:1, for example, refers to Cenchreae, which is the seaport at Corinth). He wrote at least two letters to the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians); in fact, some conclude that he wrote even other letters to the church in Corinth, letters that we no longer have (1 Corinthians 5:9, 2 Corinthians 2:4). Even after his first visit to Corinth, he went back twice. (See 2 Corinthians 12:14, 13:1.) Paul evidently

resonated with the aggressive,-full-speed-ahead milieu of Corinth.

Acts 18:18 gives a passing reference to how important this Corinthian ministry was to Paul. When he left, he had his head shaved. Based on Number 6:5 (the nazirite vow), Paul had not cut his hair as long as he was on this special mission to Corinth. When it was over, he had his hair cut, thus signaling that he had completed the task given to him by God.

And notice Paul’s journeys after he leaves Corinth: Syria (v. 18), Ephesus (v. 19), Caesarea (v. 22), Jerusalem (v. 22), Antioch (v. 22), Galatia (v. 23), and Phrygia (v. 23). This is not the pattern of a man who longs so much for the good old days back in Corinth that he cannot set out on new work. No! Even though his ties with Corinth are, so to speak, made of a strong cord, Paul is still able to reach to new places, new experiences, new possibilities.

May it be so for us.

What Someone Else Has Said: Kenneth Carder and Lacey Warner (*Grace to Lead*, GBHEM) have stated: “The church is the penultimate goal of the Christian leader. The church exists as sign, herald, foretaste, and instrument of the Ultimate—the reign of God over all creation. Therefore, the criterion by which the church leader is evaluated is how closely the institution resembles and practices God’s reign and how faithfully it shares in God’s mission of creating, healing, forgiving, redeeming, reconciling, and transforming persons, communities, and creation.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “On earth as it is in heaven...”



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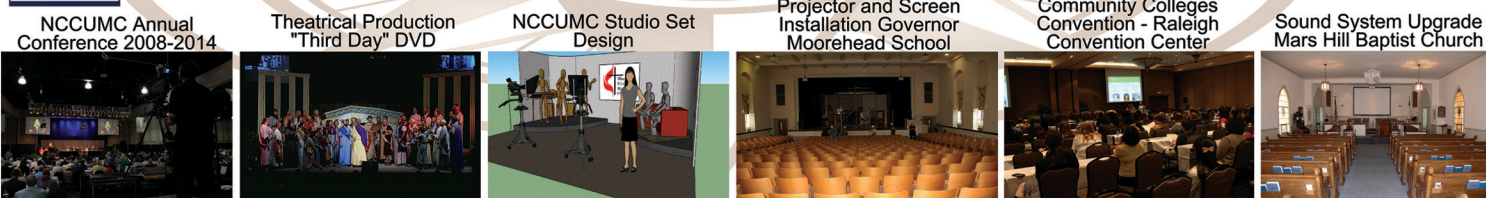
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