

Texts: Acts 13:1-3, 14:8-18; Matt. 10:40-42

Subject: Paul's Mission

Theme: Where We Live

4th Sunday of Easter; May 12, 2019, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Risen Lord,
Jesus Christ! Amen.

One of my favorite films of all time is the 1998 Cohen Brothers classic, "The Big Lebowski." The action of the movie revolves around a case of mistaken identity, where some bad guys break into the home and soil the rug of a local unemployed ex-hippie who goes by the name "The Dude," after mistaking him for a millionaire with the same name. The plot unravels when multiple groups are after some stolen money, Bunny, the young bride of the millionaire Lebowski goes missing, and The Dude's friend Walter complicates the issue. There are lot of ins, outs, and what-have-yous. NO one listens to the Dude, who just wants his rug back. ("It really tied the room together.") The events which could have been easily avoided, had there not been a mix-up in the beginning, end up working out. Bunny is located, the would-be kidnappers get what's coming to them, the Dude gets a new rug, loses it again, and meets a special lady-friend.

The characters in the film drive the story. There's Donnie, a kind friend who loved the ocean; Walter, the Vietnam veteran is Dude bowling partner and loyal to a fault; Maude, stepdaughter of the Big Lebowski and possible mother to the Dude's child. Then there's Sam Elliot, as the narrator and a cowboy/all-knowing divine figure. And of course there's Jesus, Jackie Treehorn, some Nihilists, Knox Harrington - the video artist, and Arthur Digby Sellers, who write 156 episodes of *Branded*, the bulk of the series.

The early church was full of characters too, and we get to hear about a few of them in today's reading from Acts. They are in Antioch, to the north of Jerusalem, along

the coast, the congregation was fasting and in deep prayer. There was Simeon, called Niger - probably of African descent. Manaen - a member of the court of Herod - one with connections to the upper class. And Saul, who was formerly persecuting followers of Jesus. They listened to the Holy Spirit, which called out Paul and Barnabas as ones to go out and preach to the nations. These two would set out to share the gospel of Jesus with people where they lived - into modern day Turkey, and would later write them letters - these cities were in a region known as Galatia. They were full of people just trying to survive, they were Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Phrygians.

In Lystra, after being mistaken for Zeus and Hermes, Paul and Barnabas object. ("This aggression will not stand, man.") Perhaps they were confused by the Lycaonian language, and excited, thinking they were making good progress, and the people were ready to convert. Maybe they were tempted to just keep quiet, and see what would happen next. When the priests of Zeus show up are are about to sacrifice their cattle to these so called 'gods' the apostles have to speak up.

They protest, and teach the people that they are but mere mortals proclaiming the gospel - telling the story of Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, who made the Universe. To appeal to their context, they teach that this hidden God is the one who made all they can see - the one who has given them rain, food, and joy.

There was a reason the people might have mistaken these two missionaries for gods. The history of the place included a legend of when these two gods came to the earth in disguise. No one would welcome them - they received no hospitality, until two old peasants, Philemon and Baucis finally took them in. As a result, everyone was wiped out, except these two, who were rewarded by being turned into trees when they

died - to stand watch at a great temple. When Paul and Barnabas arrived, *out of their element*, maybe the people thought they had a chance to make things right - and in a case of mistaken identity, they offered sacrifice to Barnabas and Paul, hoping to earn their favor.

The gospel was new information.

They could only hear it in the context of their own story, if at all. The fervor came after Paul and Barnabas healed a man born with a disability. They had heard Paul speak, but all the people know was that these men had performed a miracle.

How can we hear the gospel in our own context?

We still mess it up and mix it up with the things of our own culture and put obstacles in place that make it hard for anyone to hear Jesus over the myths and legends we tell ourselves. Manifest Destiny, the doctrine of discovery, colonization, and Christendom are the result of Christian witness being wrapped up in our selfish, short-sighted, and sinful narratives of power. These are not Jesus stories, but stories of our own wills.

What can we really know except our stories? We can read books, study philosophy, history, the classics, literature, and have an awareness of things larger than us, but what can we really know and embody except our own various and particular experiences? If we have felt alone, that is the reality we know. If we have been hurt, we can find it difficult to believe in healing. If we only know our failures, how can we know new life and new reality?

“Certain things have come to light.” Jesus is risen! He has ascended into heaven and kept the promise to not leave us abandoned. The Spirit moves us to act up, act out, tell our stories, and share our lives with one another - this is where we live.

You don't have to be God.

Your story can proclaim the good news of Jesus.

Among us there are stories of consistent service, forgiveness and reconciliation, folks tirelessly working to support a family, serving in the community, helping neighbors, taking care of students and new mothers, feeding seniors, being a good citizen, teaching children about Jesus, caring for our church building - keeping it clean and standing upright. We've had far too many funerals in the last few years - but when we think of those saints sat in the pews with us and recall the ways they quietly lived their faith, boldly stood their ground, firmly trusted in the promise of Jesus, and gave of themselves to make a difference where they lived and for the people of Reformation we get a glimpse into how our stories are all intertwined, and connected to the source of all life - the one who made heaven and earth.

Our stories are Jesus stories.

We live and tell how he made us. How he healed us. How he guided us. How he brought us together, to celebrate, to grieve, to worship and pray and sing. How he came down from heaven to where we live. How he died and rose again for us. How he sent the Spirit, to lead us and guide us and save us.

We *are* the church, the body of Christ. Nothing we do can separate us from what Jesus has done for us.

Jesus reassures his friends, after sending them out from where they lived - about to enter a world of pain - to go and cast out demons, to heal the sick and bring new life.

When we leave this place you hear the words: Go in peace: Christ is with you - that is the truth. Christ is with you, at home, at work, in your worries, celebrations, hidden thoughts and in every footstep. God is working in you - believe it - even when you don't perceive it.

Not because of how special you are. Not because of how knowledgeable you are, how spiritual, pious or perfect. The promise remains just as He told those disciples at the end of the Matthew's Gospel - "I am with YOU." We are sent out from here, carrying the story of Jesus with us, in us - this incarnation continuing for the sake of the world we live in. We are formed in relationship to one another.

The "mission" of the twenty-first century church, for the church of every age - is to listen for opportunities given in the Spirit of God - to see what God is up to, to listen to the needs of neighbors, to keep the faith, in prayer & worship, acts of service, humility, generosity, and to care for the least of those in our communities. Baptized into Christ, we don't have to "be" anything other than who we are. The Spirit transforms us. Iron sharpens iron.

The good news shows up right where we live. Then it stands us up straight and moves us from where we were to where God has called us to go.