

"To the Ends of the Earth"
Sermon Series on *The Way of the Spirit*
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
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(Acts 13:1-12)

Introduction.

I've always been fascinated by tales of pioneers and their expeditions. So when our son moved to Lewiston, Idaho, I became all the more interested in the story of Lewis and Clark. You may know that Lewiston, Idaho, and Clarkston, Washington, which are just across the Snake River from each other, are named for the two famous explorers. There's a handsome statue in the town of the two men along with Sacagawea, the Native American woman who was so instrumental in helping them on their expedition.

In 1803, Napoleon was hard pressed for funds, so he sold France's American land-holdings to the United States for \$15 million. In one stroke, the U.S. doubled its size with the Louisiana Purchase. The government was curious to find out what it had bought, so in 1804 Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, along with a group of select U.S. Army volunteers, were dispatched by President Thomas Jefferson to explore and map the northern section of the territory. I saw a documentary on Lewis and Clark by Ken Burns on PBS last year, and I was amazed at all they accomplished in 18 months of their difficult expedition.

This morning we read of another story of an expedition by three remarkable pioneers. But it wasn't to explore and map a newly acquired territory, and the expedition wasn't initiated for economic or political reasons. Instead the purpose of the mission was to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with people who didn't know Him, and the expedition was initiated by the Holy Spirit. The story appears in Acts 13, and there we read of the very 1st missionary journey which involved the apostle Paul, his friend Barnabas, and a young man named John Mark.

I. The Church in Antioch.

Acts 11, which we studied a few weeks ago, told us how the church in Antioch began. You'll recall that believers were scattered by the persecution, which took place in Jerusalem in the aftermath of the martyrdom of Stephen. Some of them, people from the countries of Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak not only to Jews but also to Greeks about the good news of Jesus Christ. The Bible says the Lord was with them, and a large number of people gave their lives to Christ.

You'll remember that the leaders of the mother church in Jerusalem heard about this, and they sent Barnabas, whose nickname meant "the Son of Encouragement", to go and check things out. When he arrived he saw all the good God was doing there. So he went looking for Saul in Saul's hometown of Tarsus, and Barnabas persuaded him to return to Antioch to help establish this new worshipping community. The two of them stayed in Antioch for a whole year, and they taught a large number of disciples. You'll recall it was in Antioch that believers were first called Christians.

Chapter 13 picks up the story as Barnabas and Saul return from Jerusalem having delivered their financial gift to the mother church which was suffering from a famine. Accompanying them was a young man named John Mark, who was Barnabas' cousin. Barnabas and Saul were

two of the leaders of the church in Antioch, a congregation which was to play a crucial role in the next step in the history of salvation.

It's fascinating to study about the people the Lord raised up to lead this church in Antioch. In their names and in their descriptions, the five men who are listed in this passage reflect the diverse cosmopolitan character of the church in that city. *Barnabas* was a Jew from Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean. He came from the priestly tribe of Levi who were responsible for worship in the temple. *Simeon*, who was also called Niger (which means "black") was probably a black African. He may have been the same Simeon who was conscripted to help carry the cross of Jesus when our Lord was crucified (Mk. 15:21). *Lucius* was from Cyrene, a city in North Africa in what today is known as Libya, and his name was Latin which meant he didn't come from a Jewish background.

Manaen is the Greek form of a Hebrew name which means he was a Hellenistic Jew. He grew up with Herod Antipas, the same Herod who was responsible for the death of John the Baptist and before whom Jesus appeared during His night of trials before the crucifixion. This meant Manaen was a member of the Jewish aristocracy, and he was part of the inner-circle of Roman power in Judea before becoming a Christian. Then there was *Saul*, who later changed his name to Paul, the Greek version of his name, in order to make his outreach to Gentiles more effective. Paul rounded out the Fab Five of pastors and elders, or as we would call it today in Presbyterian terms, the Session of the church.

These people, representing the ethnic and cultural diversity of their day, were used by God to lead the church of Jesus Christ out of its geographical and ethnic ghetto into a much broader world. They were diverse in their backgrounds and the ways they were brought up, but they were unified in their passion for Jesus. God used this unity in their diversity to change the whole direction of the early church, and the congregation in Antioch continues to serve as a model for the kind of missional church I hope we strive to become in the years ahead.

II. The Sending of Barnabas and Paul.

One day while these church leaders were worshipping the Lord and fasting (perhaps in a Session meeting!), the Holy Spirit said to them, "*Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them*" (13:2). There are several things I want you to notice about the selecting and sending the first missionaries. The *first* thing I want you to notice is to whom the Holy Spirit revealed His will. Who is the "they" that is referred to here? It could be the five pastors and elders, or it could be the whole church in Antioch. Regardless, the point is that the Holy Spirit didn't reveal His will just to one person. Rather, He revealed it to the whole group.

This reminds us that the best decisions are usually made in community, and the best vision for the work of God is also developed with a team of people. Whenever I hear someone say, "God told me to do such-and-such," unless I also hear how the Holy Spirit has confirmed that through other believers in the context of community, I'm always a bit suspicious of the person's declaration. Normally, the Holy Spirit doesn't reveal His will just to individuals. He usually works in community, and we see an example of it here.

The *second* thing I want you to notice is what they were doing when the Holy Spirit spoke. They were *worshipping God and fasting*. If you want to hear the Lord speak to you, if you're asking Him to give you guidance and tell you what He wants you to do, you would do well to remember that God often speaks most clearly when we worship and fast. Historically, fasting has been a spiritual discipline many people use to deepen their walk with God and help them

sense His leading. It's a sacrificial action, going without food, for the sake of a positive result, that we might grow closer to God and hear Him more clearly.

Third, notice what the Holy Spirit said: "*Set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them*" (13:2). The nature of the work to which the Spirit called these two men isn't spelled out. It's rather vague. But there must have been enough clarity in the call to give them an awareness that Barnabas and Paul were to go, and they were to take the gospel somewhere else. Their time in Antioch had come to an end, and God wanted them to work in another part of His vineyard.

There's no evidence that Barnabas and Paul volunteered for this missionary service. Instead, they were selected and sent by the Holy Spirit through the church. It's the responsibility of every local congregation to be sensitive to the leading of God's Spirit to discern who the Lord is raising up and gifting and calling to be sent out from among us.

Finally, notice how they responded. "*So after they had fasted and prayed, they laid their hands on them and sent them off*" (13:3). The passage can also be translated "they let them go" or "they released them," which means the church freed Barnabas and Paul to follow the Lord's call in their lives. I think it was probably hard on the church in Antioch to lose two of their best leaders. Every church needs more encouragement, but there goes Barnabas. Every congregation needs great teachers, but there goes Paul. A healthy church gives away its best resources, and the congregation in Antioch released Barnabas and Paul for a bigger purpose. They laid their hands on them in solidarity and sent them off. What a powerful witness.

III. The Trip To Cyprus.

For their first missionary journey the trio of pioneers decided to return to Barnabas' home country of Cyprus, which is located in the Mediterranean Sea west of Antioch and south of modern day Turkey. They traveled first to Salamis, a commercial city on the east coast of the island, and they went to the synagogue and shared the gospel with Jews. Then they traveled through the whole island until they reach Paphos, the capital of Cyprus, on the western side of the island about 90 miles away from where they landed.

In Paphos there was a man who was the leading government official, the proconsul, whose name was Sergius Paulus, and he expressed interest in the gospel. But one of his advisors, Bar-Jesus, whose name means "son of salvation," served as a court wizard or sorts, and he opposed Barnabas and Paul and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith. Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, called Bar-Jesus "Elymas," a Semitic name for *sorcerer*, and Paul predicted he would be struck with blindness because of his deceit and the way he tried to blind people to the truth of God. Something like a mist or darkness came over Elymas, and he became blind. This dramatic power encounter between light and darkness caused the proconsul to turn to the Lord, and he believed.

However, other than this one convert, we don't read of anyone else coming to faith. Missing in this text are the usual words we've come to expect in the book of Acts: "*and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved!*" Was the whole trip to Cyprus only for this one person? Perhaps so.

This reminds us that success in ministry is difficult to measure. Numbers tells you something, but they don't tell you everything. Only heaven knows the true impact of our work. It also reminds us that in the middle of ministry we shouldn't be surprised whenever we encounter opposition and even failure. There are no guarantees that even when we send our best people and we're walking in concert with the Lord's leading that everything is going to work out well and there won't be any problems.

Sometimes opposition and resistance is the surest sign we're doing the right thing because light is encroaching on darkness in the world. And there are times when the best efforts we make result in only one person responding in faith. But that one person is the cause of great celebration, and God's math doesn't always add up in the world's eyes.

Dr. Christy Wilson was a professor of missions Lorie and I had in seminary. For many years he and his wife were Presbyterian missionaries in Afghanistan. For the first 25 years Dr. and Mrs. Wilson were in that country, they couldn't point to one Muslim who had come to faith in Christ. Many expressed interest, but no one actually became a follower of Jesus. Then in their 26th year, someone finally believed.

Some people suggested Dr. Wilson was in the wrong place, that Afghanistan was an unresponsive field, but he knew God that had called him there for a reason. And his experience in Afghanistan prepared him later on to teach all of us in seminary about missions. And many students from that school were then called by God to go to Muslim countries, and since then they have seen thousands of Muslims who have come to faith. And today there is a revival going on in the Muslim world that is absolutely breathtaking.

Dr. Wilson taught us by his own example back then that success isn't always measured by immediate results, and God only knows the full impact of what we do for Christ. Our calling isn't to be successful; our calling is to be faithful. And heaven rejoices whenever one person returns to the Lord. Barnabas and Paul learned something of these lessons during their first missionary journey.

IV. God's Call to Missions.

When I met Lorie in seminary, it became very clear early on that if I was ever going to win her heart I better get excited about two things – ministry to children and overseas missions! Her passion to reach children in poverty around the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ was contagious, and I caught the bug. Dr. Christy Wilson, who I just mentioned, was also a dynamic inspiration.

In addition these influences, my home church in Atlanta held an annual missions conference which nurtured my young faith and helped me develop a global perspective. It was fascinating to hear the stories of missionaries and meet people from around the world who were being used by God to take the gospel to foreign lands. All these influences have given me a passion for the work of Christ around the globe.

Our church has a solid history of sending missionaries overseas. Many of you remember Jule and Nancy Spach who were sent out from this church back in the 1950s as missionaries to Brazil, and in more recent years we sent Eric Stone to Guatemala. Others of you have gone to the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Kenya, and Nicaragua on short term mission trips. Later on today a team of over 40 high school students will be headed to the DR to work with Mission Emmanuel.

Our church has a passion for overseas missions. And I want to see that passion grow! There's a big world out there that desperately needs the Gospel, and God is looking for men and women and boys and girls who are willing to go and join Him on His mission of love for a lost and broken world.

The world of missions is changing in dramatic ways. It used to be that missionaries were people who gave their whole lives to work overseas in a foreign land for Christ. They would pack up all their worldly belongings and go to a foreign country for a lifetime. But nowadays with the ease of travel and modern developments in technology, more and more people are going

overseas for short-term commitments, and they're leveraging the internet to reach the world for Christ.

Some people no longer go as traditional missionaries. Instead they're doing Business as Mission overseas, or they're teaching English as a second language. They're going as structural engineers, doctors and nurses, and even attorneys who help free slaves in countries like India with International Justice Mission. The opportunities and options are expanding all around the world.

And in the midst of all this change, the world has now come to us! Did you know there are 723,000 international students who are studying in the U.S. right now? And many of them will be the leaders of their countries in the decades to come. We can extend a ministry of hospitality and friendship to these students and as we build relationships with them and share the gospel in a winsome way.

In addition, there has been a huge influx of immigrants to the U.S., and the need for planting ethnic churches like El Buen Pastor has never been greater. Lorie and I climbed Chimney Rock on Memorial Day, and we saw more Asians there than we did Anglos as we climbed to the top. A large group from the Chinese Baptist Church in Charlotte was there, and they had three bus-loads of people who came together for a church outing.

How will you respond to God's invitation to join Him on His mission of love? In what ways will you be His hands and feet in the world either here in Winston-Salem or overseas? Is God calling you to consider going to another country on a mission trip? Are you open to the Holy Spirit calling you and sending you out like He did Barnabas and Paul? Each of us has a role to play in the missional work of God in the world. What is your role, and what is God calling you to do?

Conclusion.

Last fall Lorie and I traveled to Athens, Georgia, to attend the Georgia/Georgia Tech football game. It was the first time since I graduated from the university that I've been back to see a game "between the hedges." It was an exciting game, and a very draining one, too! The game went back and forth, and Tech finally won in overtime, much to my sadness.

As I reflected on that game, I realized that we fans are in partnership with the football team. They are our representatives on the field. They're the ones who are slugging it out in the trenches. Those of us in the stands cheer, and we support them as they labor hard for us. At times we even pray for them! And when they succeed, we succeed with them. When they fail, we fail, too. That's why we feel so good after a win and so bad after a loss. It's a partnership.

The same is true in the enterprise of missions. The missionary is called to serve God, and we support them as they labor for the Lord and for us. We pray for Eric Stone and his family in Guatemala. We cheer for Javier and Rosario de la Cruz in the Dominican Republic, Leon and Jackie D'Orleans in Haiti, and the other missionary families we support as a church. We intercede on behalf of the high school kids who are going to the DR this week. That's our partnership with them -- to support those who are called to this special and holy task.

Will you join the Lord as a partner in mission? Will you pray about the part He wants you to play? Let's take the good news of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth, just like the pioneers of the early church did so long ago! Amen.