Turn Around

Acts 14:1-28
Key Verse: Acts 14:15
“We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.”

How many of you saw the video of the CTA Blue Line train that was headed to O’hare and when it reached the terminal it didn’t stop at the end of the line but ended up derailing and slamming into the escalator going up to the next level? That train was out of control. I bet the riders were wishing it would stop and turn around. In some ways, we find the topic of today’s passage like that runaway train. When someone is in idol worship, they have lost control, it needs to stop and they have to turn around.

Our passage today continues Paul and Barnabas’ first missionary journey, or as Dan put the unexpected journey after the Hobbit movie. So they leave Pisidian Antioch and press on to the next town, Iconium. “At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed. ” As usual, they started in a synagogue. After all, Paul and Barnabas were both Jews and they knew how to interact with other Jews because they had things in common with them so it was probably easier to start with them. Not only that, they were their people so they loved them. And historically, God gave his word to the Jews so they should be prepared to understand and accept the gospel. But the sad thing is that these people were the ones who put Jesus to death and opposed the gospel message. Paul and Barnabas knew they were inviting persecution. Still, they went into the synagogue and began to preach. This time however they spoke so effectively that a great number of people believed. Jews and Gentiles accepted Jesus as the Christ and acknowledged that he is the one who fulfills the promises of God and brings forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Paul and Barnabas must have rejoiced over the great harvest, however, not everyone believed. Take a look verse 2. “But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.” Why did they refuse to believe in the gospel? They were presented with the evidence. They had heard Paul and Barnabas’ testimony and yet they still would not believe. We have seen this before. Where people have seen the evidence, maybe even a miracle, and still don’t believe. This isn’t an intellectual problem that required more explanation or proof, but it’s a deliberate act of defiance. These people were so stiff-necked and stubborn that they probably didn’t want anything to disturb their nice quiet lives. It’s one thing not to believe, but they felt so threatened that they wanted to get rid of the gospel. I don’t believe in the Easter bunny, but I’m not on a campaign to destroy anyone who does. But these people stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the new believers. Suddenly, Gentiles were filled with hatred and malice toward them for no reason. It created a hostile environment for the new believers to live in.

What did Paul and Barnabas do? Take a look at verses 3-4. “So Paul and Barnabas spent

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considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders. **4** The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles." It says that they spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord. This means they must have had many group discussions and Bible studies. At first, verse 2 seems a little out of place between 1 & 3, but it's not. There is a spiritual battle going on and where we find the work of God, we also find the work of Satan. So we often see this back and forth, ebb and flow within peoples' hearts. Even though Paul and Barnabas were facing stiff opposition, these two apostles were not about to back down. They were able to maintain their witness and speak boldly for the Lord because they were powered by the Holy Spirit. Actually they were far from being intimidated, in fact, they were inspired to be EVEN bolder witnesses for Jesus.

Let's think about ourselves personally for a moment. How many of you are Christians? What happens when you face opposition when you talk about Jesus? Do you get discouraged and back down? Or do you get fired up and want to do more for the Lord? Paul and Barnabas were in a tough situation, there were only two of them and many more that opposed them. That is how it is for those who believe in God. I haven't seen the movie Noah yet, but from the previews I really like this one scene where Tubal-Cain approaches Noah and he wants to take the ark by force away from him. And Tubal-Cain says to Noah, "I have all these men at my back and you stand alone and you want to oppose me?" And I love Noah's reply, he says, "I'm not alone." That actually send shivers up my spine because we are not alone, God is with us. Remember that when you face someone who wants to oppose the gospel message, you are not alone, God is with you.

In the end, the city becomes even more polarized and divided. Doesn't this sound like society today? People are more divided than ever. Even over silly things. It is really difficult to practice loving our neighbor. Getting back to the passage, the opposition continued to grow until finally the opposition devised a plan to mistreat them and then stone them. The scene turns into chaotic lynch mob thirsty for blood. When Paul and Barnabas find the mobs plan, they take off out of town. This reminded me of Jesus who just like Paul and Barnabas was often confronted with threats from religious leaders. Sometimes, he withdrew in order to teach the word of God and raise his disciples. Likewise, Paul and Barnabas withdrew from Iconium to continue preaching the good news in Lystra and Derbe. We must know that gospel work is a spiritual battle that requires courage and commitment. At the same time, gospel work requires wisdom. We need to go to God in prayer and ask him to give us courage and wisdom so that we can be effective gospel workers.

Paul and Barnabas skedaddle out of Iconium and head to Lystra. Apparently there wasn't a Jewish synagogue in Lystra for Paul to teach at, but there was at least one Jewish residence, the home of Timothy's mother. Timothy was Paul's future right hand man. "In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked." (v8) No doubt, God had a plan when he sent Paul and Barnabas to Lystra. It was to help this man. He was a nameless cripple. Most People thought he was useless and never paid attention to him. It was as if he was invisible. As he listened to Paul's message, his heart wasn't hard due to his handicap. Quite the opposite, his heart was wide open and ready for Jesus to enter. He drank the words of life like they

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were a cold glass of water on a hot summer day. And as Paul looked at him, he could see visibly that he had faith to be healed. (v9) Paul wanted to give him what he really needed. So Paul challenged him, “Stand up on your feet!” It was sudden and unexpected, but the man had faith and knew it was God’s voice to him. He not only stood up, but jumped to his feet and began to walk. When he was willing and obedient, he was healed instantly. It always amazes me how lame people suddenly know how to walk? How do their weak muscles suddenly get strong? How do they suddenly know how to balance on two legs? I’ve seen people who know how to walk, but after an accident, have to go through rehab to learn how to walk again, but this guy doesn’t. He jumps and walks right away. This is a miracle on so many levels, healing, strengthening and knowledge.

The work of God through Paul was great but the response must have been a total surprise. When the crowd saw the man healed, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” They called Barnabas “Zeus,” and they called Paul “Hermes,” the chief speaker. Then they tried to offer sacrifices to them. It’s funny, over the years of teaching the Bible, I’ve found that sometimes, when the word of God begins to work in a person, instead of following what the Bible teaches they become more religious in their own way. That’s what happened here. The people claimed that the gods had come down, since there was a local Greek temple nearby, the gods must be from there. So they rationalized the talkative one (Paul) must be Hermes, who was the Greek god of oratory and the inventor of speech. And the other must be Zeus (Barnabas) the leader of the Greek pantheon. Even though they couldn’t understand the Lycaonian language, Paul and Barnabas were celebrating with them and having a good time thinking that they were receiving the gospel. But then they began to realize that something wasn’t quite right. Especially, when the priest of Zeus showed up with a bunch of bulls and wreathes. They were wondering what’s going on and then it became clear that he was planning a sacrifice. Uh no….

Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes, which was a sign of great distress and a state of mourning and tried to stop them saying, “Whoaaa wait a minute…” They didn’t want any part of what was going down because to them, it was such a blasphemous act. Maybe they remembered what happened to Herod Antipas when the people started calling him a god? Herod was struck down and died when he stole God’s glory by not denying it. They weren’t going to take any chances. However a lot of people are tempted to seek honor for themselves. This is a weakness of mankind and a sin against God. Instead it would be better for us to heed the warning of Herod and learn from Paul and Barnabas and put that temptation as far away from us as possible.

How did Paul and Barnabas help them? Take a look at verses 15-17. “Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to **turn from these worthless things to the living God**, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. **16** In the past, he let all nations go their own way. **17** Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.” Paul’s message was to turn from idols to the living God. This was really good news but it was a difficult message for the

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people of Lystra to hear. It meant that their entire culture was based on worthless beliefs that they needed to turn from immediately. This would be like a Muslim or Hindu hearing the gospel for the first time and they are told they are idol worshipers. Imagine their reaction. Our culture is somewhat different, because America has a Christian foundation and yet there are many practical idol worshipers in our country today. Most of the time it's really hard for us to see our own idols. I heard a story about a pastor who was visiting India. On his tour he was truck with how many idols he saw through the land. The place was littered with them. Along the way met an Indian woman who had been to America so he asked her what she thought of the country. She replied, "I don't like it and will never go back because there are too many idols. You make the movie stars your idols, corporate leaders your idols. You make everything your idols." Needles to say this guy was speechless. Sad to say, so many people, who say they believe in Jesus, do not make time to worship God. They just don't want to make the effort because they have made themselves their idol.

Paul encouraged them to turn away from idols to the one true living God, the source of life itself. Paul says two things about God. First, God is the creator of all life. Everything that lives in the ocean, or on land or in the sky has been created by God. (Ps146:6) All idols are useless. Be it Zeus, Hermes, money, power or whatever, all of them can not do anything for you. They are dead, but our God is alive for he is the Creator, in him is life.

Second, Paul reveals how merciful God is. The Greek and Roman gods were nothing but myth. They weren't real but existed only in the minds of men. And even if they were real, they were more like spoiled children than noble deities. They cheated and stole from each other. They were not merciful or compassionate but treated helpless mortals terribly. The thought of them only tortured the minds and hearts of people. But the Creator God is different. He is merciful and compassionate. He shows his kindness by caring for our every need by sending rain, crops everything we need, he even fills our hearts with joy. Maybe these people have never heard of God before but surely they had SEEN him in his miraculous works of nature. God reveals himself through nature. Like the birth of a child for example. Or how salmon find their way to the birth place. The list can go on and on.

However Paul's sermon was cut short, he doesn't quite get the chance to talk about Jesus which is the most important reason to believe because Jesus is the Christ, the one who fulfills the promises of God to save us from our sins and give us eternal life. Through Jesus' resurrection he conquered sin and death and ascended to the right hand of God. From there he will come back to judge the living and the dead. And all those who believe in him will be saved, but those who reject him will be condemned. Jesus is Lord of lords and King of kings.

Take a look at verses 18-20. "Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. **19** Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. **20** But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and

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Barnabas left for Derbe." The Jews that came from Antioch and Iconium came about 100 miles away to give them a hard time. A hundred miles, that like 2 hours by car and they probably walked which would be about 25 hours, that's like 3 days of full time work. They were serious people. They turned the crowd against Paul and they stoned him until they thought he was dead. He was probably close to it. But when the disciples gathered around him, probably praying Paul suddenly got up and went back into the city. Was he crazy? No. He trusted in God. To him there was no doubt. What we see here is faith in action. Paul is telling everyone to trust in God but when he meets such terrible opposition, it seems they always want to kill him, how hard it must have been to trust in God. But here we see just how much he believes in God and he is being a good example because he is practicing what he's preaching. And through it all he begins to understand that for those who believe, we will have to go through many hardships on earth before we enter into heaven. However this is not just for Christians. All people on earth experience hardships. That is just a fact of life. Life is a b!@#$ and then you die. I remember when I was a young Christian I asked M. Deborah, now that I've become a believer, when does life get easier? She said, "Never." I thought that life will be easy but it's not. However we do believe in Jesus, we can have joy in the midst of those hardships and maybe even come to find a reason for them. This is in contrast to non-believers who may lose hope and give up. The shooting at Fort Hood is a good example, the shooter lost hope and decided to take out as many people as he could before he committed suicide.

When Paul and Barnabas re-visited each of the new churches they carried out three essential tasks, first they strengthened the disciples. This probably refers to more Bible study as Paul would instruct them in their young faith. Second, they encouraged them "to remain true to the faith." Don't give up. Your labor in the Lord is not in vain. Also the fact that they would face many hardships when they decide to live according to God's word. That's why it's called the narrow road. This was not a fluke, this happens to all sincere Christians. And thirdly, they established leadership in each of the churches. And they blessed them with fasting prayer. Thus the first missionary journey was finished when they return to Syrian Antioch where they gave their mission report to the church that had commissioned them in the first place. Verse 27b marks a transition. The subject of opening "the door of faith to the Gentiles" would be the main topic of the Jerusalem Conference in the next chapter.

Through all he experienced, Paul knows that he can't trust men for their applause, because they are untrustworthy and it won't last for they always change their minds. But Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever.

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