

The Biggest Story: *Moving Out*

Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3

In this “biggest story” that God is working out in this world, today, at last, we come personally into the story. We sometimes think about stories only in the past tense. But, the “biggest story” we’re talking about isn’t like that. God’s story is going on right now. You’re a part of it. And, what we’re doing as a church here at Lake is a big part of God’s story too. In fact, I think our part really is a rather thrilling part of God’s story.

In last week’s message, we focused on Jesus coming into the story – and particularly on why he came. Do you remember? Jesus told us in Luke 4 that he had come into this imperfect world to make wrong things right, i.e., to heal what is damaged and diseased, to set free those in bondage, to release those who are oppressed, etc. And, we looked at what the Bible says happened in the lives of people when they met him, especially of a woman in Luke 7:36-50 who found a completely new life in Christ.

As you know, Jesus only ministered for about three years. Immediately after he died and then rose again, he only had a small group of followers – and his closest disciples were cowering in an upper room afraid they would be found by the authorities and put to death themselves. But, Jesus had said repeatedly that the good news he was bringing would reach all people groups in the world. He promised that what was small when he was buried in the grave would rise again to reach every tribe, language and nation. But how?

That’s where we come in. We see our place in God’s “biggest story” introduced in the Book of Acts.

When we open the Book of Acts, Jesus has been meeting over a period of 40 days with his disciples after his resurrection had taken place. According to Acts 1:1-3, Jesus used that time to teach them the most important things they would need to know in order to carry God’s message into this world. Then, just as he had declared his personal mission statement in Luke 4:16-21, Jesus pronounced a summary of what ours is in **Acts 1:8** – “*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*”

When you put those words of Jesus in Acts 1:8 into the context of the rest of Jesus’s teaching, **this is how the good news of Jesus will make it to the whole world:**

- 1) Those who believe in Jesus give witness to who Jesus is.
- 2) Others will come to faith in Jesus – and become witnesses.
- 3) All who believe in Jesus enter into the Church and a local church – and grow in Christ there..
- 4) Local churches will send witnesses to plant other churches until all people groups have heard.
- 5) Jesus will return and make all things right.

And, all this WILL happen. In **Phil. 1:6**, Paul said that what God has started in us, he will bring to completion. And Jesus said it more dynamically in **Mt 16:18**: “*I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it?*”

The Book of Acts tells how Jesus’s promised building of the church began and how it will reach to the ends of the earth. The first church took root in Jerusalem after the Holy Spirit came in a dramatic new way on Pentecost (which we will remember next weekend). In that church, people learned about Jesus, learned to worship together, and learned to care for one another (cf., Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37). The new believers went out into Jerusalem and cared for the sick and poor and called others to believe in Jesus. But they were all Jewish people and they stayed in Jerusalem. Jesus had said that they were to make disciples of all peoples and were to go into the entire world. But, it seems that they became quite comfortable with the way things were.

So, God sent them an unwanted gift – the gift of persecution. After Stephen, one of the main church leaders, was killed publicly, it became impossible for all the believers to stay in Jerusalem. Forced out by persecution, church people went to many other nearby towns and, as they did, gave witness to Jesus. But, they only told other Jews about Jesus. Or – most of them did!

A few of those Jewish believers, people originally from mostly non-Jewish cities like Cyprus and Cyrene (see <https://goo.gl/images/G1QAsW>), fled from Jerusalem and went way up to the city of Antioch (now in Turkey) and – well, they did what Jesus asked his followers to do. **See Acts 11:19-20.**

Those who had been scattered by the persecution... spread the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, people from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

I love this passage. One of the reasons is that Antioch was a church that reminds me of us here at LAC – or, at least, the kind of church I long for us to be and know we can be. I think that what happened there will help us to embrace our role in God’s biggest story. **What is so important about what God did in this church?**

1. **They had a bigger view of who can belong to the family of God** – “*Some spread the news only among Jews. Some however... began to speak to Greeks also... (11:19-20)*”

Antioch was the third largest city in the world at that time. Unlike Jerusalem, it was a multi-cultural, cosmopolitan city. Like Los Angeles, all kinds of cultures converged upon Antioch. It did have a Jewish community but they were in the minority. So, some of the Jewish believers fleeing Jerusalem – with urban backgrounds -- fled to Antioch. In their enthusiasm for their new-found life in Jesus, they shared the Gospel, Luke tells us, not only with their Jews -- but with Gentiles also. And that was a move which would have been out of keeping with their own cultural norm that told them not have social relationships with such people.

Luke tells us that these people were from Cyprus and Cyrene. That’s significant because it means that unlike the conservative Palestinian Jews who had grown up in Judea, these were men and women used to having relationships with all kinds of people. Different from Peter in Acts 10, they didn't need a divine vision to persuade them that it was O.K. to speak to a Gentile. They were almost certainly business people in the Roman Empire. Therefore, they would have been speaking with Gentiles all the time -- whatever the rabbi may have thought about it. **Think about it? Who would be most like a Gentile in your life?**

But, even they may have been caught off guard by the enormity of the response which their witness to the Gentiles produced. **See v. 21:** *The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.* So, this church in Antioch had great diversity from its very beginnings.

And, by the time we get to **Acts 13:1**, we see how diverse the church leadership was too -- *In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.*

Barnabas is the only expected type, i.e., a priestly Jewish man. Simeon’s nickname, Niger (meaning “black”), implies that he was black. Lucius was of Cyrene in Northern Africa. And then there was Manaen, foster brother to Herod Antipas, the one who had executed John the Baptist. And finally, of course, there was Saul -- the Pharisee and persecutor of the church but now saved by the grace of God.

So, both in its congregation and in its leadership, the Church in Antioch was what I like to call “God’s unexpected family.” It wasn’t unexpected to God. No, God had said this would happen all the way back in Gen. 12:1-4 when he had told Abraham that his line would be a blessing to all people. But, in our broken and divided world, it was an unexpected to see such diverse people all being in one church family.

This is what Jesus had said just before he died, i.e., the world will know we belong to him through our love for one another across the world’s divisions. I am praying that we will continue to grow in becoming what I have seen is a part of our church DNA, that we are held together by our shared faith in Jesus but that we are committed to being like the church in Antioch, with a much bigger view of including all in our church that Jesus includes in his – young and old, all races and ethnicities, all political persuasions – one in Christ.

2. **They were united in their commitment to the Lordship of Jesus and the centrality of God’s Word.** *For a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch (11:26).*

Up until this point, the church had been almost exclusively Jewish. In their world, most people viewed the church as a branch of Judaism. But, this church in Antioch broke that stereotype. It’s not hard to imagine that the church at Antioch must have been a very different kind of church from the one in Jerusalem. There were probably more Gentiles there than Jews in the church. Almost certainly, Jews and Gentiles ate together. Almost certainly, Gentiles were welcomed into the membership of the church without circumcision. They probably sang different hymns. Perhaps the husbands even sat next to their wives in church -- which would never have happened in the synagogue.

What held this “unexpected family” together in a church like Antioch? We see a part of the answer in that phrase, “*first called Christians*, i.e., followers of Christ, *at Antioch*.” So, it seems that **their new identity was that they all followed Jesus Christ as Lord**. That’s what I want us to be known for here at LAC!

But, it’s clear to me that **something else held them together too? As a church, they would be guided by God’s Word**: *For a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people*. In this we see the necessity of studying the Word of God if we will be a people who live for God and if you will be a person who grows in your faith. You cannot live for God if you don’t know how God would have you live. This is why the Apostle Paul told young Timothy “*to preach the Word in and out of season* (1 Tim 4:2)” – whether people want it or not. And, this is why, when you come to LAC or bring your friends or children to LAC, you can be sure we will teach the Word of God. Come, ready to hear it and to obey it.

The **Word of God led the church in Antioch to have some basic missional practices** that I want to be true of us too. Like what? To some of the priorities you hear at LAC week by week:

- a. **Ministry both “here” and “there”**– When I was candidating at Lake 11 years ago, we had a meeting in which anyone could ask me anything they wanted. One of the questions I remember was – “*Which do you emphasize – ministry to our local neighborhood or global missions?*” I remember saying that those are two sides of the same coin. The church in Antioch shows us that, when we have met Jesus, we simply have to tell those in our vicinity about Jesus and also show them the love of Jesus. But, when we have heard the words of Jesus in Acts 1:8, we have to send people out to places where people haven’t heard – like they did in 13:1-3.

A local church will never have an impact in the world, will never become a force for world evangelization, unless it possesses a vigorous passion for communicating the gospel to the community where it is. If we aren’t concerned for people where we are, we’re not really going to have a concern for people thousands of miles away. Many churches, I’m afraid, want to be like lighthouses <https://goo.gl/images/yoqRCL>. We want to illumine distant lands but are content to leave the area around their base plunged in darkness. The Bible calls us to ministry both “here and there”. On the authority of God’s Word, I do the same.

- b. **Ministries both of evangelism and compassion/justice** – In that same meeting 11 years ago, another question someone asked was this: “*Which would you emphasize if you became pastor here – evangelism or compassion/ justice?*” I remember saying that these two must go together. If we see people as Jesus does, we will care about the whole of their lives and to all that sin has done in them. We will care about their bodies and souls. The church in Antioch shows us this too. They called people to faith in Jesus and, when in 11:27-30 they heard of the famine that was going to come, they reached out with the love of Christ to meet the needs that the famine would bring about. Notice **11:29**: “*The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea...*” That’s the heart I want us to have here too. Don’t you?

All this is to say that, just as the church in Antioch was united in its commitment to the Lordship of Jesus and to the truthfulness and authority of the Scriptures to direct the life of the church, so we will be united in the same ways.

3. **They were in touch with and guided by the Spirit of God** – *While the leaders were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So..., they placed their hands on them and sent them off* (13:2-3).

Jesus had said that believers must wait until the Spirit of God came before they went out both to their own neighborhoods and then to the ends of the earth to tell of Jesus and live for Jesus. And, the Spirit has come. We see it in the Antioch Church. The grace of God at work led to many believing. Barnabas, described as being “full of the Holy Spirit” recognizes God’s Spirit at work in **11:23-24**. A man speaking in the power of God’s Spirit tells of a famine that is coming and leads God’s people to reach out to meet the needs of those affected in **11:27**. And then, in 13:1-3, the spiritual leadership, while they were worshiping and praying, sense the leading of God’s Spirit to send out their two leading representatives to carry the gospel to those unreached.

What we from this point on in Acts is how the Gospel of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit breaks through all sorts of barriers that had one time seemed impossible. Churches are formed in city after city. It's like ever-expanding concentric circles growing and growing until the whole world will be reached. (A bit like this: <https://goo.gl/images/vyuiCd> When the Book of Acts ends, the work will not be complete but launched.

And, this is where we come in! God's biggest story is still going on. And what should resound in our ears each week as we gather here at LAC is that we are God's people with a role to play in what God is doing. We who are alive and who have heard the Gospel (and been rescued by it) are to come and grow as we study the Word, pray, and worship with others. Then, we are take the message and love of Jesus to the world – both “here and there”. We are to do it with the same focus and fervor as we will see the people in Antioch did.

The point is not simply that the church has a mission. It is that God created the church to complete his mission. That's why we exist. We see that the power of the Holy Spirit is specifically a power given to do God's mission. In the power of God's Spirit, who are God's people can move forward in obedience to God into places we would never have visited. We can discover power to interact with all sorts of people like they did -- Samaritans and Gentiles and immigrants and people in the streets. Power to love those we would had never have loved. Power to speak the message of Jesus in ways we otherwise could not.

When the book of Acts ends in chapter 28, the story isn't over. Like a relay race, the baton is passed on to us – to grab, run with and pass on until God's biggest story is complete.

Let us have a Jesus-sized view of who can belong in our church family – one that includes Jew and Gentile, democrat and republican, baby-boomer and millennial all united under the Lordship of Christ and surrendered to the Word of God. I want us to be led by God's Spirit to do whatever he would call us to do. I don't want us to simply be a church where we can come and comfortably do what people in America have always done in church. We must begin by speaking of Jesus and living out the demands of the gospel in our community. When we do, we will hear the Spirit of God calling us to set apart some of our own to send where the gospel hasn't been heard. That's what happened in Antioch. It's happened here at LAC often over our 125 years. May it continue to happen until God's Biggest Story is complete – to his glory.