

# The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Sarah Harrold

March 14, 2010 – Lent 4

Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



On the web at [www.bethel-madison.org](http://www.bethel-madison.org)



## The Sermon Text — Acts 13:1-5

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John also to assist them.

### SERMON

Sometimes I think we just need to be reminded how exciting life really is. It's the middle of winter, our jobs (or lack thereof) continue in the same fashion, our children remain their paradoxical selves of being at the same time a joy and a frustration, and for students, I think the few weeks before spring break are always the hardest to get through. We are in the middle of things – not exactly stuck, but not exactly moving anywhere fast, either. Perhaps it is also why we find ourselves amongst more illness than normal – both physically and emotionally – it can be very hard to rejoice in life when so much of it resembles our current weather conditions – dreary, rainy, foggy, and just an overall chilly dampness.

However, all that means is that we now have the perfect opportunity to sit in a coffee shop on these dreary days and take the time to refresh our memory of what really IS exciting. To ask the questions we see in our study of Acts this season – questions such as: "What does it mean to be out-of-control of our life and faith?" "What does it mean to be 'captive' to the Holy Spirit?" and "What does it mean to be 'sent'?" It is an evangelism and mission pastor's dream to not only think about these questions, but to also have the opportunity to preach on them.

Life in this world. I think it is exciting. For instance, did you know that at least 60-70% of the people in this world are bilingual? That means knowing the word for "parsnips" in another language. That amazes me. And did you know that about 200,000 people have served in 139 countries through the Peace Corps since it began? That is a lot of service, learning, and relationships that have been experienced. I am sure many of you watched the Olympics – if that is not enough to get you excited about the possibilities of human life, I'm not sure what is. On top of that, we have the ability to communicate instantaneously with people around the world, we have the ability to control the temperature in our own homes, and we have the ability to walk down the street to a major university and learn about everything from quantum physics to marketing.

However, if none of that does it for you, how about these stories: in Sudan, churches are coming together to address the issues facing their country and coming up with ways to solidify a peace agreement. They are looking for ways to work with the upcoming election. In Malaysia, a Lutheran church went around the community giving gifts on the Chinese New Year and ended up having conversations with people who were genuinely interested in becoming a part of their worshipping community. In another country, a female, Muslim, Arabic tutor told my friend about dreams she has had that involve Jesus and the Gospel. In Los

Angeles, young adults who have been court-ordered to do community service, are finding encouragement and grace through a pastor who serves along with them at her church. And all of these are stories that I have heard just in the last two weeks. If that is what one person hears in two weeks, I cannot imagine the enormity of what is actually happening.

Bringing it closer to home, "Team Bethel" is in third place for the Million Pound Challenge this year in Madison, and has brought in over 4,000 pounds of food to our food pantry. The Hope House continues to be full and to help young, single mothers get on their feet both economically and as parents. Our relationship with Ukraine continues and we will be hosting children this summer for dental work and English classes and general respite from tough situations at home. A group of us just came back from Puerto Rico, where we grew in our relationships with our friends there as well as help them with some of their building needs – and they are coming to visit us this summer. We have opened up our computer lab a couple days a week to be of service to our homeless friends and to help them fill out job applications. The stories continue. Life is exciting.

Nevertheless, sometimes the mundane is just a bit overwhelming. On the other hand, there are situations in our own individual lives that seem to overshadow the good that is happening. Illness and death have been especially prevalent lately. The reality of "change" is always scary. Not knowing the status of our job security is sometimes a bit much. And even the most loving of relationships have their days, months, and years. Our personal and individual lives often get in the way of seeing the big picture of all that is happening in this world. We might "know" that we are not really in control of our faith and life; we might "believe" that we are captive and held by the Holy Spirit; and we might remember hearing something once about being "sent" out into this community and world. But it is enough to think about just making it through the week without being bothered about what all of it means and how God is a part of it. The stories we hear about what's happening in the world – or even here at Bethel and in Madison – are great to hear about, but it's hard to think that they actually apply to us (to you) personally. Well, they do apply to you. You are part of the story and you are not in control of your faith and how that guides your life. You are held by the Holy Spirit. You are being sent out into this world.

This same reality – of being both overwhelmed and at the same time called and sent – are where the believers found themselves to be in our text today. The five verses that we read are, in many ways, rather mundane. We have five men who are hanging out together and praying. They are told that two of them are to be set apart for some specific work. They pray some more, and then these two head off. The end. It is nothing spectacular, especially when you set it in the context of the rest of this book, where there are miracles, prison breaks, visions, and all such things. But perhaps instead of seeing it as mundane, we should see it as a brief moment of rest and rejuvenation in the middle of what would have been an absolutely crazy reality. It is a season of dreary weather that, instead of being depressing, is a chance to regroup and energize for the mission to come.

Because it really is quite the mission that these men are on. Already they have experienced dramatic conversions – including one of their own, Paul; they have lived in a foreign city for a year and taught believers there; they have delivered relief funds for a famine in Jerusalem; and they have traveled back to what appears to be a sort of home base in Antioch. Then, the experiences to come – those they don't know about yet – include being proclaimed gods in one city, countering evil magicians, being stoned but escaping alive, simply relating their stories to people in other churches, and attending a major conference debating how the Jews and Gentiles could both be part of the same faith community. So this time spent “simply” fasting and praying and gathering together was probably a sort of welcome relief.

These men were part of a community who would almost certainly have felt out-of-control of what was happening. What would you be thinking if, all of a sudden, 3,000 more people showed up in this place next week? Then after that people started selling their homes and giving that money to the church? What would you be thinking if, all of a sudden I asked people to come forward to be healed of their illnesses right now, in front of you? Then, at the same time all of this is happening, it is shown clearly, without a doubt, that God shows no partiality between the Christians and the Muslims, but works among both? What would you do? What would you be thinking? And before you get to far in those thoughts, remember that a sudden, massive influx of people – and not just in numbers, but in types and lifestyles and worldviews – creates a lot of problems. It is not an easy thing to coordinate life between many thousands of people, all of whom claim faith in the same God, but have different ideas as to what that means. This is what those believers we are reading about were experiencing. It would have been beyond belief, had they not been seeing this with their own eyes.

Now, the exact stories are not the same, but our community is held by the same God. So what things are you witnessing that make you feel out-of-control? What changes are happening too quickly for you? What strongly held beliefs of yours are being challenged? It is part of life and faith that we should feel like this. We are in a relationship with a very active God. What makes us think that everything would stay the same as it was 5 days ago, 5 years ago, or 50 years ago?

But as much as this text shows these men coming together to pray about their world and what was happening, it is also a reminder to them – and us – about the reality of being held by the Holy Spirit. There are a lot of ways to read this book of Acts. One is as a log of the journeys that Peter and Paul took. Another is about how miracles are possible. And yet another is about the reality of God being extremely active in this world and in our lives. Everything that happens in this book happens because of God's direction and God's activity. Angels are sent at God's command. Speeches are made out of the prompting of the Spirit. The story that is told over and over again is the story of Jesus' life and death and resurrection. And even in this passage we read today, the Holy Spirit interjected into this time of worship and prayer and spoke to these men, telling them who to set apart for work, and why. As soon as that finishes, Saul and Barnabas are sent out “by the Holy Spirit.” Nothing happens outside of the realm of God, of the Holy Spirit. In everything, God is present and active.

And again, it works the same way with us today. It is just that we do not often use the language of the Holy Spirit in our conversations, so we tend to miss it. Every day I hear about people praying and the strength and challenges they are receiving from those times. Every day I have conversations with people who have questions about faith and life. Every day I see people walk into the

doors of this church looking for relief from the cold, from hunger, and from emotional exhaustion. Every day I work with people who continue in their work here because of a passion and a faith given to them by God. Whether we recognize it or not, our lives and our faith are captive to the Holy Spirit.

So. Where is the Holy Spirit active in your life? What are the questions that are being prompted to you? Which relationships are being lived out as a result of the glue of the Spirit? What courage is being given to you in your life? What things have you witnessed that could only be the result of the presence of God? And where are you being sent?

I think that is the hardest part. We read that Saul and Barnabas were sent out by the Holy Spirit and then they had all these grand adventures. Difficult, but grand. We see them as heroes of the faith and ones who were truly called by God for this work. And called they were. There is no denying that there are some people – like Saul and Barnabas – who are set apart for certain types of ministry. But. That calling of people is the norm and not the exception. It is normal for God to send people out to witness to the world. It is normal for God to not allow people to sit still in their lives, simply being content with their life and faith as it is. And yes, you are part of this “normal.” You are part of God's efforts to give this crazy, out-of-control, grace-filled life to the world.

I suspect that for some of you, I am preaching to the choir. This being out in the world and experiencing the craziness is right up your alley. To those of you for whom that is true, bear with me through this next part. But for those of you who have either fallen asleep on me or aren't quite ready to believe that you are being called and sent by God in major ways, listen up. These stories that I told you at the beginning of this sermon – about churches coming together in Sudan, about people in Malaysia being interested in worshipping communities, about Muslims dreaming and speaking about Jesus, about relationships and faith growing through relationships with people in Ukraine and Puerto Rico – all of those stories come from ordinary people. All of them come from people whom I have walked with in life: we have cried over relationships, been frustrated with the church, have felt as though God had abandoned us, and have been told together that we are inadequate for something. The stories that you read in this book of Acts, involve ordinary people of faith. Dorcas did something as “ordinary” as making clothes for people, and experienced being raised from the dead. Saul was doing his job when Jesus encountered him on the way to Damascus. Peter was a fisherman by trade. And yet, these are the people that we are still reading about 2000 years later.

The catch? They did not just sit around waiting for God to do something magnificent in their lives. They were out living. They did not think that these stories were nice for other people and had nothing to do with them. They prayed through these end-of-winter, dreary times instead of reminiscing over the loss of the past.

We have the amazing privilege of being called and sent by God. We have the incredible blessing of being intimately connected to the very believers we are reading about in this book of Acts this season. And we have the overwhelming opportunity to witness the powerful work of God in this world. You – every, single one of you – is being called in this very moment of your reading – to speak of the presence of God in this life. This is your sending into the world to proclaim the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as what gives life to this world. Rise up, oh redeemed sinners of God's. Rise up. You are held in life by the Holy Spirit. You have been given the gift of life. And you have been given the commissioning of being a witness of God in this world. Life is certainly exciting. Amen. © 2010