

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
May 9, 2010

John 14:23–29
Acts 16:9–15

WHAT MESSAGE IS MOST IMPORTANT?

I suppose if you look at the book of Acts and you see Paul and his traveling companions, you could call this the “Travels with Saul Commentary.” Starting in Chapter 13 through the end of the book, we have one missionary journey after another from the apostle Paul—Paul, in silence, now traveling around the region called Macedonia. More importantly, it was a colony of Rome.

And in the setting for our passage today, there is a sense that Paul is experiencing a lot of firsts. This is first trip with Silas. Remember how he wanted to go there with Barnabas, but they had a friendly falling out and parted ways. It’s the first time Paul is redirected by the Holy Spirit since his Damascus Road experience. Up until now he’s been traveling pretty much to the letter of where he planned. But he has a vision, and he is re-oriented for Macedonia.

There’s Paul’s first convert—a woman named Lydia dealing in expensive cloth, called purple. And later after this, there will be an exorcism of an unclean spirit. A slave girl is possessed by what is in essence an imprisoning ventriloquist demon. Paul is writing what he knows to be true, and Luke records down what is happening in Paul’s life.

We often forget that books like the book of Acts were meant to be read aloud in public gatherings. They were to be heard as the truth, but also they were to be engaging and entertaining; that’s why this passage begins with a first person account—a first person mandate, if you will—a narrative that describes who we are to be as it tells us what they are doing together.

It’s interesting; it’s a fun read. It’s like a travel diary from the first century. Think of it the way I think of about one of the first books I was required by my mother to read. She got into teaching under something called Title IX. She was a reading instructor in some of the poorest parts of *our* Macedonia. She literally sat me down at an early age and made me read through the entire book. Not just the first chapter and the last as I was accustomed to doing. The book was titled, *Travels with Charley*, by John Steinbeck. If you are under 25 and haven’t read it, get a paperback. It’s an interesting read. By the time Steinbeck wrote this book in the 60s, he was already well known. But he had had a stroke and as he was recovering, he decided to take a trip and reconnect with America. He had done this 30 years earlier, but now he is going to do it with a Standard Poodle named Charlie. Who would have thought my mother could have been so prophetic in making me read that book.

They travel 10,000 miles, and being a man ahead of his times, Steinbeck ordered a special truck for the trip. He had designed and installed what he called a cabin on the back—an early RV, if you will. He set out on his journey re-interpreting what was happening in the life of America—lots of hilarious images. One I've never forgotten about is how, in the course of the trip, he invented a washing machine for their travels together. He took a trash can and hung it from the pole in the closet on the truck, put in the dirty clothes, enough water, and enough detergent to get them clean, and as he road along the highway, this “automatic” washing machine took care of his dirty laundry. What an idea! At a crisis, at a crossroads, to step back and appreciate again where we live as a people we share this great country with. This is how we are supposed to read Chapters 13–28 in the book of Acts. Read it like a Steinbeck memoir. Read it like the narrative that it is.

Next week we'll have the passage about a slave girl with whom Paul and Silas attempt to share the good news almost out of frustration as well as out of good intent. She's literally following them around, and the demon that takes charge of her life and imprisons her names them as God's spokespeople—identifies an opposite spirit within Paul and Silas than the one within her.

And that's the intent of our writer Luke. He wants to draw a distinction between good and evil. A contrast between actions borne of God—and there really is no other way to put it, and actions borne of our own grief. Think about it: how many problems in your life have at their root our insatiable greed. Not just for money, but for control—the way we are greedy with our forgiveness, the way in which we are greedy sometimes even with our friendships.

In the story to come, Paul and Silas will be in jail and not just in jail but in stocks—ankle bracelets. They will sing and say psalms together. They will be a gospel road show in Macedonia, much like Steinbeck experienced when going through the Bible belt.

Strangely enough, just like Lydia, the guard—the jailer that is watching over them—is amazed at their kindness, at their willingness to share who they are. His life is forever changed, just as Lydia's was. I wonder if Paul's approach to both of these converts was something like, “You think earthquakes are wild? You think preserving your life from the punishment of the Romans when you leave the jail is bizarre? You think the way in which we live is so different from the world? Just wait until you know the Lord. How different your life will be.

In an age when we seem to be repeatedly questioning ourselves, when we are struggling with what we believe God has given us, Paul reminds us that life in the Lord overcomes fear. But first we have to relinquish the control that we have carefully constructed for our own futures. Then the change will come: change is unavoidable, in case we've forgotten.

The status quo will never withstand the march of time. But that's how God intended it. It is part of God's recreating order for this world. And when we truly believe—like Stein-

beck in *Travels with Charley*, that good does overcome evil; like Paul in the book of Acts, that beauty always dominates over that which disfigures our lives—then the world around us will take on a whole new meaning.

Doesn't that sound like the gospel message that we have been entrusted to share with others? Courage over fear. Even laughter over cynicism. Surrender in place of control. And a marvelous transformation of everything that matters—everything that is the most important in our lives, creativity born of forgiveness. Creativity says enough with the status quo and enough with just maintaining. We have to reach beyond that, so God can embrace us in the future that is already coming into being. And so on this Mother's Day, I want you to go out and live your faith with joy and with new confidence—confidence not in your ability, but in who Jesus is within us. I want you to go out with a refreshed hope and trust in the prevailing goodness of our loving God. It begins here, and it infects every part of our lives—the goodness that the world needs to hear, that our neighbors need to experience.

So may we travel together. Amen.