

This week we read quite a chapter in *The Story*.

I'm sure the editors of *The Story* had a hard time condensing and editing all the stories from this period after Pentecost, when the life-changing Good News of Jesus spread across the whole Mediterranean region. Just Google a map of the Mediterranean from this period and look at all the places where Christian churches were planted.

And leading this movement was the man who formerly been one of the leaders persecuting Christians, but then was changed dramatically after Jesus spoke to him on the Damascus Road.

Instead of breathing murderous threats against Jesus' disciples he became one of the leading disciples, an Apostle to the Gentiles, because an Apostle is one has been called and sent to proclaim the Good News.

I want to talk to you more, later in this sermon, about what we mean when we say Good News. It means something very specific in the Bible. But first more about Paul.

After his conversion, Paul lived in the city of Antioch, and grew strong and bold in his faith. Antioch was a vibrant center for trade, and a great launching point for the early church. So from Antioch, Paul set off on three separate missionary journeys over the course of approximately eight to ten years. As you can imagine travel, in those days, was difficult.

Today, travel is easy.

For Confirmation Sunday, my parents and Marin's parents will just hop on a plane and travel the 2,000 miles to get here. But in Paul's day, you either walked, rode a camel or donkey, or, if you were really brave, you traveled across the Mediterranean Sea, on a small ship. Paul did all three. But his courage and his passion to travel came completely from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit compelled him to go and travel and suffer persecution in so many places.

On his very first trip, Paul arrived in place called Pisidian Antioch, which is in modern day Turkey.

When Paul would enter a town the first place he would go was the local synagogue. And so when he arrived at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch he was invited to speak.

And Acts 13 records what he said to the people there:

The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. <sup>28</sup> Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. <sup>29</sup> When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. <sup>30</sup> But God raised him from the dead, <sup>31</sup> and for many days he was seen by

those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

<sup>32</sup> “We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors <sup>33</sup> he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus...

“Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. <sup>39</sup> Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.<sup>1</sup>

So, essentially, what Paul was doing was connecting the dots for this audience of faithful Jews. He was showing them how their own scriptures – pointed to Jesus. Everything that happened to Jesus had been foretold in the Old Testament including his suffering and death. And then Paul simply looked out at this audience and invited them to believe their own prophecies.

The people in this particular synagogue were so intrigued that they invited him to come back on the next Sabbath and speak again.

Word got out, and on that day, nearly the entire population of Pisidian Antioch gathered around the synagogue to hear Paul. But the local religious leaders got jealous and were threatened by a challenge to their authority and they started to make trouble for Paul and his traveling companions. And that’s where the persecutions began. They stirred up the people.

And so Paul spoke again to the people of Pisidian Antioch and said:

“We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. <sup>47</sup> For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

“I have made you a light for the Gentiles,  
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”

That was a quote from the prophet Isaiah. Israel was called to be a light to the Gentiles. As we’ve been studying this year, God blessed Israel so that they might be a blessing and bring the message of salvation to the whole world.

Paul heard that call and was carrying out that mission: bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to all nations.

And this week in Chapter 29, we had the opportunity to read all these amazing stories about God’s power, through the Holy Spirit, working through Paul and his missionary companions.

We read parts of his letters to the Thessalonians, the Galatians, and the people who lived in Corinth and Rome.

Many people are drawn to these letters because they are filled with so much practical wisdom, and instruction for how to live as Christians in this world.

But at the heart of each of these letters is one thing: and that's Paul's passion to preach the Gospel.

And this is where I really want to draw you into this sermon, because I want everyone as you leave here today, to know what the Gospel is, and be able to explain it.

I won't ask you to turn to your neighbor right now and do that, but I do want you to think for a moment just to yourself, and answer this question: "In one sentence what would you say the Gospel is? What is the Good News?" Please do that now.

Now I'm going to give you several verses where Paul describes the Gospel and here's the first one:

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.<sup>2</sup>

For Paul, the key to preaching the Gospel was to preach "Christ crucified." So the key phrase in that verse is "the message of the cross."

So if someone asked you "What is the Gospel?" You could say, "It's the message of the cross." And if they asked you "What is the message of the cross?" You can tell the story of how God sent his Son into this world, because He loves this world so much. And because this world is broken by sin he sent his Son to love us and to save us through his death and through his resurrection.

Now when the Gentiles heard this message they would have thought this was the strangest thing they ever heard. They worshipped all kinds of deities and they had never heard of a god who was crucified.

And so that's why Paul wrote that this message was foolishness to the Gentiles. They did not understand how the message about a god who is crucified is Good News.

And this is how Paul answered their bewilderment.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.<sup>3</sup>

The message of the cross, the message of Jesus is Good News because it is Good News for sinners. Sin separates us from God. Sin takes us down roads that only leads to suffering.

But in Jesus, we are made a new creation.  
 Through his death and resurrection, God promises to make all things new!  
 Things in heaven and things on earth!

That's the Easter promise!  
 Jesus is Risen and in Christ, God is already healing things that are broken in this world.  
 In Christ, God is reconciling us back into a life-giving relationship that begins now and continues into eternity.

So the Gospel is the message of the cross, is the Good News that God took this instrument of death, what men meant for evil, and turned it into an instrument of life.  
 God turned it into victory: Jesus' victory over sin and death.

And here's one of my favorite passage, where Paul describes how the message of the cross is good news for you and me. In Titus, chapter three Paul wrote:

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures.  
 We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.<sup>4</sup>

Do you know why this is one of my favorite passages?  
 Because that's me.

That sinful nature that Paul is describing, I resonate with that, because that's me.  
 It's within me, and it's within you.

How many times have you done something you're ashamed of?  
 It'd be pretty hard to count wouldn't it?

How many times have you said something or done something that has hurt someone that you love? You mean I'm not the only one?

How many of you love reading the second part of this passage where Paul writes:

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us.

Not because we've done so many great things that we deserve it. That's not how salvation works. That's why God calls it mercy: not getting the punishment we deserve.

And that's why God calls it grace: getting what we don't deserve the love and kindness of God our Savior, who freely, freely gave his life to free us from our sins.

God comes through the Holy Spirit and fills us with that grace every day. It's a divine empowerment that gives us the desire to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. It's the Holy Spirit that gives us the desire to honor God and give glory to God in our daily lives.

Is that Good News?

That message was the heart of what Paul preached wherever he traveled.

And that eternal life that Paul refers to, is not just a life that begins when we die. It's life in Christ that begins now, the hope within all who believe.

That's why we can say with Paul:

“I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”<sup>5</sup> Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 13:27-33,38-39

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:17-18

<sup>3</sup> Romans 5:6-8

<sup>4</sup> Titus 3:3-7

<sup>5</sup> Romans 1:16