

MESSAGE

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SCRIPTURE Acts 13:1-5

¹ Now 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. ² While they 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." ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. ⁴ The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. ⁵ When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

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I wonder if we can feel the excitement that sets up today's story

- A people who were excited about the Gospel of Jesus
- A church that was growing and developing in the gospel message and reaching people including those of power and influence – Manaen (brought up with Herod the tetrarch)
- A people who worshipped and fasted
- A shared spiritual experience of God calling forth a couple of them for special work.
- Their mission expanded as they deployed Saul and Barnabas to go forth

And so the missionary journeys began. Here's what happened:

SCRIPTURE Acts 13:6-12

<sup>6</sup> They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, <sup>7</sup> who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. <sup>8</sup> But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. <sup>9</sup> Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, <sup>10</sup> "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? <sup>11</sup> Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time,

not even able to see the light of the sun." Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. <sup>12</sup> When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

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This story that begins the first missionary journey of Paul, also begins the series of stories in which we hear over and over about how the Gospel message is received but also how it is rejected.

And it always gets me:

Why reject the Gospel message?

There is an approach that Paul and Barnabas use in their work which begins with them going to the local synagogue.

There they would proclaim

Typically they would retell the history of God's relationship with their ancestors ending with how the same God who delivered their ancestors from Egyptian slavery and who brought them home after exile had also been in Jesus; in his teachings and healings and in his resurrection. And then the big Gospel proclamation: that forgiveness of sins was given in Jesus' name.

I mean, what's not to love about the Gospel?

Forgiveness of sins? I'm in. Why would someone not jump onboard with that?

But it happened...over and over again.

And it makes me wonder why.

In today's story we see someone who not only rejects the message, but wants someone else to reject it.

Bar-Jesus

Ironically his name means "son of Joshua" or "son of the savior"

He is Jewish – with an odd profession for a Jew: a sorcerer/magician.....which is the meaning of his Greek name: Elymas

He claims to have certain powers that will exert influence or provide wisdom

He is a man with influence....the kind of "mystical influence that no one seems to question

And he has the governor's ear.

He's the one that the governor turns to when making decisions

And most likely he gets the governor to make the decisions he wants

Paul declares him to be full of "deceit and trickery"

Paul says he is the enemy of everything that is right which most likely means that he has no compassion for the poor and that he does not "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with his God"

Does he influence the governor to make decisions that do not help the poor but rather oppress them? That would certainly constitute what else Paul says about him:

Paul calls him a child of the devil (the complete opposite of his Hebrew name "child of the savior")

Maybe understanding that helps us understand why he rejects the Gospel

Why he wants the governor, Sergius Paulus, to reject the Gospel as well

Because if Sergius Paulus accepts the Gospel, then he just might give his ear to Jesus through Paul instead.

Bar-Jesus could lose his influence.

And he pushed back against Paul and Barnabas

Because he didn't want the Gospel to change his life and his livelihood

And as much as I would like to click my tongue and shake my head at such foolishness, this story calls me to check myself because the Gospel does call us to change what influences us in this world.

What influences us and how we exert influence:

For our own benefit

Or for the benefit of others

The biggest thing that influences us is our own selves

Our comfort

Our interests

Our way

We even may be tempted to vote according to how we are benefitted and not others.

If we feel that struggle, that temptation to reject the Gospel that Elymas (Bar-Jesus) did, we need to remember that Jesus said, "those who seek to keep their life will lose it but those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will find it"

And "no one has greater love than this – to lay down their lives for others"

To accept the forgiveness and saving grace of Jesus means to model our lives after that grace; which means our lives are no longer our own.

So I understand why Elymas rejected the Gospel and wanted the governor to do the same.

God keep me - God keep us - from doing the same.

Because I want to live like the church in Antioch...in love with the Gospel

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