

Acts 20:1-16: Second Pilgrimage to Jerusalem I: Launched

Introduction:

Well, friends. Let's gather up!

I never know if it's going to be easier or more difficult to bring us together when there's fewer of us...

Today we're starting a new section in our journey through Acts. We're still walking with Paul, as we will through the end of the book, but now we're with Paul as he makes his second journey to Jerusalem. He's gone before, but it simply wasn't that big a deal, as far as Luke presented it. This time, though, his journey there and all the stuff that happens becomes the central action of the story.

And so, you know, these passages really are linked together, flow into one another. Today's passage is the launch of Paul's return journey to Jerusalem. And it really has three parts. We'll look at each, focusing on the center. And when we do, I think we'll be reminded of something basic about what it means for us to gather together.

Let's pray together, first!

Prayer:

I/III: Going & Coming:

The first thing that Luke does is set us up for the journey to come. He tells us where and who is going on this journey.

I'll read that introduction in a moment. What we realize is that Paul isn't alone. He has seven others with him, and Luke and some nameless people will catch up with him after he starts his trip. They all come from cities and regions that Paul has been, and if we flipped through Acts or the New Testament, we'd hear all but a couple of their names again. (Secundus and Sopater only appear here.)

Paul decided, back before the Ephesus riot we talked about last week, to go to Jerusalem, but to visit Achaia and Macedonia provinces first. These basically line up with southern and northern Greece, if we have a map of the world in our heads. In case we don't, here's an ancient one, and it even calls Achaia Greece. So. Paul decides to travel by land up and around, and then

apparently wants to catch a ship from Corinth out to, most likely, Antioch in Syria, maybe to follow the coast down to Jerusalem.

But the plan doesn't work, because some people want to sabotage him, so instead, Paul will get together with Luke up in Phillipi, while everyone else keeps going, and meet everyone in Troas.

Here's a map:

MAP (Explain)

Here's a larger version.

(Explain: See Syria, although not labeled)

Let me read everything I just summarized. Notice this, though: These early Christians, who were nearly all Jewish or God-fearers before they were Christians, they're still shaped by the cultural and religious practices Judaism's given them. Still marking time and God's historical movements with high Jewish Holy Days.

We read:

20 When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said goodbye and set out for Macedonia. 2 He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, 3 where he stayed three months. Because some Jews had plotted against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia. 4 He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia. 5 These men went on ahead and waited for us at Troas. 6 But we sailed from Philippi after the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and five days later joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days.

So they're in Troas. Paul, his eight-person-plus cohort. They're in town for a week, Saturday to Saturday. Remember, always, that the first day of the week is Saturday, not Sunday, despite all the calendars we're surrounded with that show us Monday and a week-

end. They gather up on the Sabbath, their last Saturday in town. We read this:

II/III: Troas Teaching Troubles

7 On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. 8 There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. 9 Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. 10 Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "He's alive!" 11 Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. 12 The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.

hahahaha. Look, this reads like an I Love Lucy episode. It's comedy. It would be tragedy if the boy had stayed dead, but Paul saved him. I hear Yakkity Sax playing

when I read this.

I love this passage. As someone who preaches a lot, this passage is just...it's beautiful. I've put people to sleep. I've put you to sleep. I've been boring. But I've never literally bored someone to death. And I feel like I should get some credit for that, you know? No matter how boring it is: We're alive, at least; no need for miracles.

My favorite part of this is that Paul is so focused, that after he heals the kid, literally brings the boy back to life, he's like, "We're not done. We've still got communion." And then he preaches on till dawn.

hahaha. Oh, I can't stand that level of intensity, you know? I just...it's not me.

In all seriousness, this is a powerful moment. Luke draws us into this room, where many lamps are lit, people are all around. There are puffs of smoke as someone breathes too much or the wind gushes in a window. Eutychus, so and so's kid, is sitting in the window, too, because it's cool, and there's just not much room. And then someone shouts! Eutychus just fell out the window. And there's a thump, and he's not

moving, and everyone hustles down the ladder or perhaps stairs to him. He's hoisted up in someone's arms, but is dead. And Paul wraps himself around the kid, and says, "No. He's alive." This echoes Jesus, who said nearly the same thing when a young woman died. People leave with the boy; we assume at that moment, but it's not clear, and they're "greatly comforted," as Luke puts it, which makes sense. And, of course, church service keeps on happening till daybreak.

Luke wants us to see the miracle in this, and it's a huge one: Paul brings someone back from the dead. Nothing about the way Luke writes this allows us to say Eutychus, whose name means something like "fortunate" wasn't dead from this fall. Paul raises this sermon casualty up just as Jesus did for others and was raised to life himself. I also think we're meant to see how intensely interested in following Jesus the Church is. We're meant to see the way this young man--not an adult, but past puberty--is here with the Church, learning about Christ.

But this is, simply, a hilarious miracle story. Luke doesn't hide the fact that Paul has been preaching on and on. He doesn't blame Eutychus at all. This is just a

thing that happened on the way to Jerusalem, you know; a story everyone--especially Eutychus' family--tells every year when Passover's over, because they all remember again.

III/III: Sailing, Sailing!

They decide to head out at daybreak. Paul goes by land; the rest go by sea. Let me read this long passage. You can try to follow along; I can't even do it, and I'm reading it, so. You know: Do your best! I'll throw up a map for us when I'm finished...

13 We went on ahead to the ship and sailed for Assos, where we were going to take Paul aboard. He had made this arrangement because he was going there on foot. 14 When he met us at Assos, we took him aboard and went on to Mitylene. 15 The next day we set sail from there and arrived off Chios. The day after that we crossed over to Samos, and on the following day arrived at Miletus. 16 Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost.

Make sense? Here's the map I promised...

Insert Map

Paul wants to get to Jerusalem around Pentecost because Pentecost is now doubly-important for Paul. Worth celebrating because of its Jewish importance, of course. Remember that “Pentecost.” Pentecost means “fiftieth,” and it’s shorthand for a religious festival called “Festival of Weeks,” or Shavuot. It’s still celebrated today, in various ways, but during Jesus’ time was one of the pilgrimage festivals, meaning folks would flood into Jerusalem. But now, for Paul, Pentecost is celebrated for its witness to Jesus. Paul wants to skip Ephesus, but he doesn’t want to ignore them. He just knows that to stop is to really stop, and that’s not what he wants. We’ll see next week as he calls the leaders of Ephesus to him, and shares his intentions and sense of what the future will bring.

One, Three:

Today, though, we’re left with this three-Part passage. The First and Third Parts do remind us of things. Holy Days are important, for faith and in every human culture. To have celebrations, especially ones that remind us of God and God’s work for us, these things matter. It’s Labor Day weekend, a cultural day if not a

holy one, and so, maybe: Celebrate. Remember what we're meant to remember on Labor Day, if you can. Embrace it, and if you can connect this cultural day with the holy one, then do that, too.

We see relationships in all their importance. The protection and blessing of a cohort of people surrounding Paul, the importance Paul makes of checking in with these communities of faith that he's had significant influence shaping and building. You could say something about leaders' responsibilities to those who they lead.

Two: Legitimizing Paul

But it's the middle of this scene, the meat of this traveling sandwich, that's the most important, and most hilarious, today.

Luke includes this because it is a big deal. Paul brings a kid to life.

We may not need to have Paul legitimized the way Luke wants this moment to legitimize Paul, wants this moment to speak to Paul's authority and power as an Apostle. It still does, though. Paul, like Jesus, brought someone back from the dead. So. Perhaps we should

listen to him, shouldn't we? Try to understand what he says? Even though, as Peter notes in his second letter, Paul isn't always easy to understand.

Two: When We Gather

But there can be things for us from this, even if we don't need persuaded to believe Paul, or God who stands behind him.

For us, we can remember this very, very basic thing: When we gather together, sometimes it's a snooze. Sometimes it's so boring it feels like we're dying! I'm exaggerating. But the truth is that when Christians gather together, it won't always be energizing and awesome and line up perfectly with all our tastes. Sometimes it'll go on and on, and we'll get sleepy, and we'll be bored no matter what our age is. Sometimes things will go later than we think they should, or disrupt our plans. Sometimes they'll be some kid-centered scene. We may miss out on the miracle of being brought back to life, but if we miss out on dying because the sermon is too long, that's not terrible.

My point is this: Whatever people thought was going to happen that evening when they gathered to hear from Paul, I doubt they expected what they got. I

doubt they expected death and resurrection and an all-night worship session. Whatever expectations we have when we gather together, I think that we maybe ought to hold loosely to them, just in case.

But in that upper room in Troas, what the Church definitely got was God. They learned about Jesus; they experienced his power; they took the bread and cup in memory of him; they took it together, with others. And I think, too, that in being a part of an accident, in their fear and their relief, something true about what it means to be a person known by God was experienced.

So. Our preferences may not be met. Things may be boring in the worst ways, or exciting and stimulating in the worst ways. Things may not go as we planned when we get together with other Christians. There may be accidents, and fear, and relief. But God is with us, sometimes in great comfort, sometimes in great power, always reminding us that what we're doing and why we're doing it matters, because we ourselves do.