

“Let’s Dance”

Theologian Rubem Alves once wrote, “Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith is to dance it.” The crippled man in our passage had never danced...at least literally. He had never walked, ever. The Scripture says that the man was lame from his birth. As a child, he had never run nor played active games with the other children. Because of his malady, he was destined to sit, which was his posture when Paul was preaching. He no doubt wanted to walk, and had longed for the day that he could. That was his hope. He could hear the melody of the future; he simply could not dance to it yet.

To have a lifelong illness in that society, or ours for that matter, was debilitating. There was not much hope for this man who was lame; there were no miracle cures. Yet the unnamed cripple sat and listened to Paul. Lystra was a pagan town; given its locale, organized Judaism in that region was a very remote possibility. The presence of a Temple to Zeus reflected the godless culture. Yet this man sat with faith in his eyes to hear this unknown expound regarding his *own* faith.

Paul recognized that the disease had not jaded the invalid. The lame man had not allowed the affliction to cripple his hope. Adversity *can* steal hope, but this man, who had never walked, still had dreams of standing on his own. His *presence* reflected his *hope*. The invalid may have tried miracle drugs and numerous home remedies offered by well-meaning acquaintances. Yet in the man’s eyes, Paul *saw* faith. Paul saw healing, because the man had not lost hope.

So Paul singled him out of the crowd. To the man with faith in his eyes who had never stood upright, Paul said, “Stand on your feet.” Standing alone was something the man had never done. Given his unfamiliarity to standing, logically the man would have eased onto his feet, moving slowly and deliberately. The man did not rise sluggishly, skeptically wondering if Paul was just another traveling medicine show. The Bible reads that the man jumped up! That’s the kind of faith he had; he leapt to his feet. He had been waiting his entire life to stand and walk without assistance. The man’s hope was fulfilled because he continued to listen to the melody of the future. His faith gave him the opportunity to dance. It was a miracle.

People *notice* miracles, because I think people are *looking* for the miraculous. People will notice events that are out of the ordinary. We want to believe that supernatural phenomena still occur; it undergirds our belief in the Almighty. Yet some misconstrue the heavenly. Sometimes God doesn’t get the proper credit. Such was the case in the healing of the cripple. Those who had gathered to hear this preacher were not followers of God. They were pagans, unbelievers who probably had never heard of the true, living God. Their religion was steeped in mythology. They were polytheistic; they believed in many gods. When they viewed the miracle, they spoke to one another in their native tongue saying that the gods had arrived in human form. They alluded to an incarnation, an incident where their gods had taken flesh. Paul and Barnabas were oblivious to what they were saying because Paul and Barnabas did not speak the Lycaonian language. They spoke Greek, the accepted dialect of the region. The locals were bilingual, speaking both their native tongue and also Greek. The locals referred to Barnabas as Zeus probably because he was older than Paul; Hermes was the title given to Paul. In Greek mythology, Hermes was the inventor of speech; since Paul was doing the talking, they called him Hermes.

The King James Version uses the Roman titles Jupiter and Mercury. The euphoria of the crowd over their perceived visitation from their gods resulted in an attempt to make a sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas. Bulls were the animals used in offerings to Zeus and Hermes. A priest from the Temple of Zeus placed a garland around the bull signifying its readiness for sacrifice. The Temple even housed a statue of Zeus. The locals were experiencing misguided thankfulness.

All of us have performed similar acts. We may not have sacrificed animals, but we are all guilty of not giving God the proper credit. We like to think that we have achieved some grand accomplishment, and we pat ourselves on the back. Or we experience some loving gift from another Christian, and we thank *them* but forget *God*. We can love, because God first loved us. We give of ourselves to someone, and we see that the assistance makes a difference. And then how often do we forget to thank *God* because we have the resources to aid someone who is less fortunate than ourselves.

We receive healing from the flu, and we are thankful for a capable doctor, an experienced pharmacist, some knowledgeable scientists, yet we forget God. Misguided thankfulness is not reserved for the unbeliever. Those of us who proudly wear the label of Christian often forget that Jesus paid it all.

When Paul and Barnabas realized what was happening, they rushed to throw water on the flames of misguided thankfulness. They reminded the crowd that they too were persons like everyone else. Paul later would write, "All have sinned and fallen short of God's purposes." (Romans 3:23) They couldn't believe what they were seeing. They wondered why the locals would be so frenzied. How did they get so confused? They said, "We put our pants on every morning just like you do. We are human, no different from you. We come with the good news that you should turn from worshiping these idols who do not live. Walk away from observing rituals to mythological legends. Instead, embrace the God who lives; the God of whom I speak is the Creator of all you see around you. The true God fashioned the heavens, the earth, and the seas. The living God formed all creatures that you see. Evidences of the true living God are rain and crops, food and joy. These are all from our God, the One who has granted us the power that offered healing to the cripple."

This was the first sermon delivered to a pagan people; the gospel had been offered previously to Jewish audiences, but not to a *godless* culture. The message offered by Paul and Barnabas was to repent. To turn from their gods to the One True God required a *leaving* of allegiances to the other gods and a *cleaving* to the One Living God.

Paul and Barnabas called the worship of Zeus and Hermes vain. Our God is a *living* God, not a statue like you see in the Temple. Although Zeus was regarded as the god of rain, Paul asserted that rain and fruitful seasons come from his God. That particular region was often dry, so Paul was speaking to their interests. Hermes was regarded as the god of merchandise, which meant that he also dispensed food. The origin of their food was claimed by the God of Paul and Barnabas. These simple folks were listening to a sermon that they could understand.

Yet, the crowd still sought to offer the sacrifices. Paul and Barnabas were not convincing enough. The locals still saw them as gods.

And if that wasn't enough, along came the zealous Jews from Antioch and Iconium. Paul and Barnabas had found great success in offering the gospel to the Jews of Antioch and Iconium; these zealots were jealous. So great was their jealousy, that they traveled more than 100 miles to discredit Paul and Barnabas in their next stop on the missionary journey. Their vigilance persuaded the crowd against the two who had been perceived as gods. Since Paul and Barnabas were only men and *not* gods, the locals would have quite naturally been ready prey for the persecuting Jews. The locals seem to forget the healing of the cripple and allowed these Jewish zealots to stone Paul inside the city wall. This was an example of mob violence. The vigilantes hated Paul and Barnabas so much that they hit Paul with rocks until they thought he was dead. They then dragged him outside the city wall where they thought no one could find him. The disciples then went to Paul, who mustered enough strength to get back on his feet and re-enter the city. He spent the night there but left town the next morning.

What a story. It started out so nicely with Paul healing a crippled man who had never walked. Paul saw faith in the man's eyes. This action was misinterpreted by the locals, and Paul and Barnabas were seen as gods. So strong was their feeling that they refused to believe Paul and Barnabas. But when the vigilante Jews came, they were able to convince these men of Lystra otherwise. Despite the good deed that Paul and Barnabas did, the Lystrans allowed these other outsiders to attempt murder. They

watched an innocent man get pummelled by rocks and stones; so great was the attempt, that Paul looked lifeless.

Throughout the book of Acts, we see success stories followed by tragedies. Dr. Luke not only wrote the Gospel that bears his name, but he also wrote Acts. In Acts, he was attempting to convey to his readers that in the life of a Christian, there will be ups and downs, experiences on the mountaintops and in the valleys, successes and failures. As a result of Paul's stoning, did he give up? It would've been so easy for him to say, "I have done a great deed for God by offering the gift of mobility to a man who had never walked. And this is the thanks I get? Is God punishing me for something? I thought I was doing well. I'd be willing to continue if God would work miracles through me, but if my life is going to be endangered, I'm quitting." He could've thrown in the towel; many of us probably would have.

Instead, he went back into the city where he was almost killed, spent the night there, and left the next morning to offer the gospel in *another* city. His love for God was not contingent on what happened to *him*. His devotion was not a response to how he was received by others. He offered his life as a living sacrifice to God, because Jesus had sacrificed his life for Paul...and for you and me.

Who are you in the story? Are you the cripple, the one hoping for a miracle with faith in *your* eyes? Do you have a long-standing problem that only God can overcome? Are you hopeful? Is your faith as solid as the lame pagan?

Or, are you like the men of Lystra, placing your faith and trust in a person or persons instead of in the One true God? Have you placed someone on a pedestal and were surprised at their humanness? Maybe you have idolized a friend, a parent, a teacher, a minister, a mentor, your spouse or your child. Remember we are all people. Do not confuse the message with the messenger. Someone may have said the right thing or may have been there for us at a critical time. Are you guilty of misguided thankfulness? Or have you watched these you have idolized become thrown by the wayside because they have fallen or were knocked from their pedestal?

Some today may be like the vigilante Jews. You are jealous of someone's successes and will go to great expense to discredit them. People will travel extensively to satisfy a vengeful spirit. But revenge is empty.

And hopefully some today can identify with Paul and Barnabas. You see someone in need and try to help them. Despite their past, you only see their future. Your actions have been misunderstood by the faithless, and some have even attempted to place *you* on a pedestal. Your life is a living example of what it means to be a Christian, a little Christ. You have been undaunted by the pitfalls that have appeared on your journey. Despite hardship, your faith, hope and commitment remain steady and secure.

Some of us may identify with all the characters in the biblical account. Recognizing that we *need* to repent of our wrongs is not the same as *turning* from them. Realizing that we *need* to change is not the same as *changing*. What was done in the past is gone, but a future awaits us every second. Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith is to dance it. How will you live differently? Let's dance.