

October 22

The Call – Called to be Faithful

Acts 28:1-11, 14

It is so good to be with you again. I am looking forward to sharing with you about the things we saw and learned. Today, I want to finish the story of Paul's life and, more importantly, talk about why it matters that we know about St. Paul. When last we were together Paul was finishing up his third missionary journey. He had collected an offering from the churches he had started for the faithful in Jerusalem who were suffering persecution for their faith. Paul was hurriedly heading there so he could worship at the temple at Pentecost. After delivering the offering he goes with some of his disciples to the temple to worship. Some Jews, from one of the cities Paul had visited on his journeys, were also in Jerusalem. They recognize Paul and begin to shout about how he is the one who was attacking the faith in Asia Minor. They even falsely claimed that Paul brought Gentiles with him into the Temple. A riot breaks out and the Roman Centurion, who was in charge of the fort located beside the temple, sends out a force to take Paul into custody. The Romans were very sensitive to the possibility of trouble happening here. Riots leading to near revolutions had occurred before starting at the temple. That was why the Romans built their fort on the edge of the temple mount. Paul tries to talk to the crowd but they will not listen. The Roman soldiers are about to flog Paul when he proclaims his Roman Citizenship to avoid a beating. He remains in custody and so the Romans take Paul to the Sanhedrin to try to figure out why he had caused a near riot. Paul's skill as a debater were put to use pitting the Sadducees against the Pharisees. Such an argument broke out about the validity of eternal life that nothing happens and Paul is taken back to prison. The centurion learns of a plot to kill Paul so he takes him to Caesarea where he is kept in prison for two years. Finally, when Paul deduces that he will never be released because the Roman governor wants to make the Jewish leadership happy, he appeals to Caesar, a right of all Roman citizens. He is put on board a ship and along the way a violent storm occurs, blowing them off course. They are shipwrecked on the Island of Malta and remain there three months. During that time Paul converts Publius, the governor of Malta after healing his son.

Let me show you some pictures of Malta.

Paul then travels by ship north, first to Syracuse and then to Rhegium and finally to Naples.

Again let me show you some pictures

Paul finishes his journey to Rome where he will be under house arrest for several years. During that time he is given much freedom. People are allowed to visit him and care for his needs. It says that he preached to the soldiers guarding him and many of the Praetorian Guard, the elite forces of the Caesar, were converted by Paul. Scholars are divided as to whether Paul was released for a time and journeyed to Spain or stayed under arrest in Rome. Finally, in 65 AD, Paul was taken outside the walls of Rome and beheaded, again a death that was reserved for Roman citizens.

We did not get to see the church built at the site of his death. It is called the church of Three Fountains. The name comes from a rather grizzly story that says when Paul was beheaded his head bounced three times and at each bounce a fountain of water erupted. Paul was buried outside the walls of Rome by his disciples and later a beautiful basilica, the second largest church in Roman Catholicism called St Paul's outside the walls was erected over his grave.

Again, let me show you some pictures.

Now there are many more pictures to share another time, but for today let us talk about the lasting implications of Paul's life for the church today.

Paul's burial was not the end of his story. The churches he founded, the converts he made, the letters he wrote, and the theological reflections he left behind would become the driving force of the Christian faith. Much of Christian theology would be shaped by his words. Most importantly, Paul made the death and resurrection of Jesus personal. Without Paul these pivotal events might have been just a part of Jesus' story. But Paul grasped the greater vision of what this means for us. In his letters he talks about: how death has been swallowed up in victory; nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God, or to live is Christ to die is gain. Our core belief that

death is not the end but is a door to life eternal is based on Jesus' life, but more importantly on Paul's understanding of what those events mean for us.

What drove Paul to spend his life sharing the Good news was his belief in Jesus and that in following him we find the life truly worth living. He knew a life can be transformed by faith in Jesus. It had happened for him and he wanted that same life changing power to be given to others. He believed this Gospel of Grace was the most powerful message of Jesus and could transform not just lives, but the world.

So, we leave Paul, a Jewish Rabbi who became a leading Christian missionary and theologian. Because of his upbringing, Paul was rigid in some areas of thinking, had a less than positive view of women and believed structure was essential in forming a church. That mindset crept into his letters and we still, as a Christian faith, struggle with the implications of some of his thinking. On the positive side he shows you how a life can be transformed, that it is possible to turn and go in new directions in faith, and what it means to live fully and completely for Christ. Every time I am in difficult situations I give thanks for Paul who reminds us that we can be content in all situation. Every time I am with one who is preparing to die I give thanks for Paul who reminds us that in Christ, death has been swallowed up in victory. And yes, when I am in a long church meeting I give thanks to Paul who reminds us that for the Spirit to be set loose to transform the word you need churches organized for mission and ministry. For all of this I give thanks.

Adam Hamilton ended his lectures to us with this challenge and I want to end my series with it as well as well. What is God calling you to do? Even more importantly, "What won't happen if you don't say yes to God's call today?"