

Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 13, 2007
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Mullens, WV
Acts 14:8-18: "We are mortals just like you."

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The Bible is an amazing book. It is found in most homes, read daily by countless numbers of people, and looked to as a source of guidance and inspiration by us all. As literature, the Bible and its sayings have found their way into everything from Shakespeare to our day-to-day language.

The Bible is "God's Word" – and The Word – capital T capital W – is very powerful indeed. God speaks and things happen.

In the broadest sense, the Bible is the story of God and his people. It tells how God created us, nurtured us and redeemed us. In the course of doing so, it can be somewhat bawdy, lyrical, occasionally dull, sometimes contradictory, and at times downright funny. The Bible is, in short, intensely human.

Today's readings are a good example of the variety in the "good book." The Gospel we just heard contains a strengthening message from Jesus that is just as direct and alive today as when first spoken.

In the Epistle, we share the vision of John's revelation of the final days. In truth, we're not very certain about the author of Revelation, about who this "John of Patmos" really was. The book itself was almost omitted from the Canon of the New Testament. It is often confusing and difficult to understand, but today's reading is a relatively straight forward view of the Kingdom of God which is to come, and how it will differ from the kingdoms that presently exist.

And then we have the Acts of the Apostles from which we read the story of Paul and Barnabas visiting Lystra.

Written by the author of Luke, Acts is a primary source book for what we know of the early church. If you're at all interested in that time, read the Acts of the Apostles.

And what a wonderful story we have today, in all sorts of ways.

Lystra is located in south-central modern-day Turkey, and in Paul's time it was populated by an isolated group of people who spoke their own language. They were not thought of as being the most enlightened of people. With their speeches and healing, Paul and Barnabas make an enormous impression in Lystra.

You can imagine the scene when the "city boys" (Paul and Barnabas) show up in town and begin to do mighty works. A man who has never been able to walk is healed, not because he asked to be – which is what we normally encounter in such stories – but because Paul looked into his eyes and saw evidence of the man's faith. How Paul did this is left to the imagination, but Paul shouts at the man "Stand upright on your feet."

One does wonder if the lame man is so startled at being yelled at by the fellow from out of town that he jumps to his feet. But the man is healed and everyone is amazed.

The people shout to one another that the gods have come down to them, but neither Paul nor Barnabas understands what's being said about them, since they don't speak much of the local language. They probably go inside to rest, congratulating themselves on a good beginning to the preaching and healing mission.

Meanwhile, the local priest of Zeus shows up from the temple just outside of town and wants to offer a sacrifice to the two powerful strangers. When someone explains what's happening, Paul and Barnabas are mortified!

Running outside, they tear at their clothes, showing their great distress, and in one of the great lines of all time, Paul says – now remember, everything is confusion, the bulls that were to be sacrificed are probably acting up, people are running all over the place, and Paul says: “Friends, why are you doing this?” He continues, and this is the part I enjoy so much as I try to imagine someone actually saying it, Paul says: “We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.”

Rushing on – once you get Paul on a tear it's hard to stop him – he says: “In past generations he allowed all nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good – giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.”

But the very structure of the statement, which I find so amusing, is vintage Pauline speech. And it's enough for the writer of Acts to be impressed. He says: “Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.”

It's interesting to me that, even faced with Paul's explanation of the power of the living God, and faced with the reality of the healing of the crippled man, the people of Lystra stick to their own version of what has happened. They continue to want to offer sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas, making them a part of their view of God. In other words, they want to keep things the same and avoid accepting what is right before their eyes.

Faced with the reality that the man is healed – after all he’s dancing around and shouting “Look at me – I can walk!” – the people naturally provide an explanation for this, one that fits the new events into the old beliefs.

Now their “natural explanation” would probably not be natural for us today, but I submit that many of us and many in our world would and do respond in the same to the present power of God. Faced with some evidence of God’s power, we explain it away.

Belief is curiously missing from this story – not missing from the lame man who is healed, he who does not state his faith – but missing from the other people who, faced with a miracle, explain it the old way – the gods are visiting them. And belief is missing from a lot of people’s lives today. Faced with something new, we cling to the old.

My experience with people these days is that we will jump through a lot of hoops to avoid saying “I believe that the reason this marvelous thing happened is that God caused it to occur.”

We live in an age of science and of proofs, of a search for certainty, and I think many of us probably seek explanations for things in our lives that step around our faith.

I offer a couple of things for you to consider as you encounter the unexplainable.

First, there is nothing wrong with saying “I don’t know” when we are asked why something happened or how something worked. Mystery is part of life. We do not know everything.

Second, there is nothing wrong with saying “I’m not sure about the answer to that question,” and then to take some time to think and pray about it.

Third, there is nothing wrong with saying “My faith leads me to believe such-and-so to be the truth – I can’t prove it, but I believe it nonetheless.”

At the same time, there is no need to profess a faith you do not feel. God is very patient with us, and there is every indication he will wait a long time for us to come to him. Some churches put incredible pressure on people to “come to Jesus,” and to profess a faith they may not truly feel. I see that pressure as coming from the people and their desire to have their own beliefs confirmed, not from any wish that God has to be glorified in them.

In the Bible, God has given us stories about others and their journeys in faith. Some of those people argued with God – came right out and told him they weren’t up to doing what he asked. Some heard God’s call early in life – King David is a good example, and for some the call comes much later. Sometimes people hear God’s call and misunderstand it, and someone else has to show them what is happening.

The wonderful truth that emerges from reading the Bible is that God is always waiting for us to come to him. And when we do, he lifts away the things that cripple us, and gives us fulfilling lives.

We’re not asked to have a faith with an answer for everything. Instead, we’re asked to know that the answer is God. Like the crippled man, we don’t even have to speak our faith, but what joy when we do and when we can share that faith with others. If this “amazing grace” were anything other than the acts of Almighty God, it would be too good to be true. But it is God, and it is true. Thanks be to God for all his love to us.