

Christ Presbyterian Church

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“Up From Ashes”

Acts 15: 36

Do you have a friend ~ a really good friend? Someone you enjoy just hanging out with ~ watching the ballgame, walking the neighborhood, just “shooting the breeze”. Someone you can be honest and open and vulnerable with. Someone who will gently chide you. A friend who knows you and loves you anyway.

Barnabas and Paul had that kind of friendship. Right from the start they hit it off. When Paul claimed to be a new follower of Jesus, most were skeptical. They knew him as a Zealot who persecuted Christians. Barnabas was different. He did not stand back in judgment. Instead, he listened to Paul’s story. He befriended Paul. He mentored Paul and was the first to trust him.

It wasn’t like Barnabas needed friends. He was an apostle ~ a leader in the early church. Luke calls him a “*good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.*” When a “revival”, of sorts, broke in Antioch, Barnabas was dispatched to find out what was going on. One of the 1st things Barnabas did was to send for his good friend Paul and brought him over to Antioch. For a full year, Barnabas and Saul worked side by side, teaching, and talking about Jesus. They were so successful in Antioch that those who became believers under their ministry were nicknamed “*Christians.*” It was the first time this description was used for followers of Jesus.

Barnabas and Saul were inseparable companions. Together they took famine relief to the church in Jerusalem. Together they were “ordained” as *Apostles to the Gentiles*. In the first years of their friendship and partnership, Barnabas took the lead, but in time, as Paul’s own faith developed, their roles reversed and Paul became the chief spokesman. Together they travelled to Cyprus and then throughout Asia Minor sharing the wonderful experience of seeing God work through them. As a result of their partnership, the church of Jesus began to take root and grow throughout the region.

Sometimes they were hailed as “gods.” At one point Barnabas was called *Zeus* and Paul, *Hermes*. Some of the people wanted to make sacrifices to them. Can you imagine the conversations they shared at the end of each day as they stretched out on their cots? “*They thought you were Zeus ~ the king of the gods of all things!*” ☺ “*Yeah, and they thought you were my son, Hermes ~ must have been the winged sandals!*” ☺ “*Yeah, well you look old enough to be my father!*” ☺ At other times they faced hostility and threats to their safety. “*Paul, I thought you were a goner today. I wonder if we should return to Antioch.*”

After they did return to Antioch, Barnabas and Paul were summoned by the Elders in Jerusalem who sought their insight and counsel in resolving the first major challenge facing the young church.

For 5, maybe 6 years they were inseparable. Best of friends. Partners in ministry. As Forrest Gump might say, *they went together like peas and carrots*.

This brings us to our text as we continue Luke's story in Acts 15. One day Paul suggested to Barnabas that they return to all the towns where they had preached earlier. Barnabas wanted to take his cousin, John Mark who had accompanied them on an earlier mission. Paul did not think it was a good idea because Mark had left them at Perga and had not been part of their work in Asia Minor. Verse 39 says, "*They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.*" Eugene Peterson translates the Greek this way, "*Tempers flared, and they ended up going their separate ways*" (The Message).

The intimacy of their friendship was broken by this conflict. The text does not tell us what it felt like for Barnabas or Paul ~ we can only surmise from our own experiences. This must have been terribly distressing for Paul and Barnabas and for those who knew them.

I remember a time when a good friend and I went separate ways. I phoned, left messages, sent e-mails, wrote letters, ~ and there was no response. I was brokenhearted, almost devastated. What more could I do to repair the breach?

As distressing as it is to read of their break-up, there are some surprising and redemptive byproducts: 1) John Mark got a second chance to prove himself, 2) Silas' was elevated to a position where his gifts could be used in leadership, 3) and instead of one ministry team, now there were two: Barnabas and Mark returned to Cyprus and Paul and Silas went into Asia Minor and then continued on to Macedonia and Greece ~ and the Good News about God spread throughout the Empire.

Even in difficult circumstances, God can bring redemption.

A similar phenomenon happened earlier in the book of Acts, chapters 6 & 7. Stephen was one of the early leaders of the young church. We are told that he was "*full of grace*" and did wonderful work among the people. His testimony for God was powerful. His articulate presentation of The Gospel persuaded many to follow Jesus. His preaching also riled up those opposed to Jesus. Stephen was seized and taken before the High Court of the Jews. He was charged with blasphemy against Moses and God.

When the High Priest asked if the charges were true Stephen began to outline the work God had been doing through Jesus ~ "*the one you have betrayed and murdered.*" Infuriated by this direct confrontation, his opponents dragged Stephen outside of the city where he was stoned to death. And we read in chapter 8, "*On that day, great persecution broke out against the church. All, except the apostles were scattered . . . and Saul began to destroy the church.*" (8:1-3)

What a horrible and seemingly senseless death. Should Stephen have toned down his rhetoric? Wouldn't it have been better for everyone if he kept his beliefs private?

Again we see that ***even in difficult circumstances, God can bring redemption.***

For one thing, Acts 8 tells us that *“those who were scattered preached the word wherever they went.”* Believers were not intimidated by Stephen’s death, they felt empowered, and as the Good News about Jesus spread, many more folks became followers of The Way.

Also in Acts chapter 8 we are introduced for the first time to Saul, *who stood by giving his approval to the stoning.* I don’t know the actual timeframe ~ perhaps a few weeks, perhaps a few months ~ but by the beginning of the next chapter we learn that Saul went to Damascus seeking authority to expand the persecution of Christians. It was on that trip that Saul was overwhelmed by the power of God. His life and his name were radically turned around and Saul became Paul, the greatest missionary of the church. I wonder, what impact did the character of Stephen and the strength of his conviction, even in death, have upon Saul’s decision to follow Jesus?

I am not here to suggest that Stephen’s death by stoning was a good thing. I am here to suggest that ***even in the presence of evil, God can work for Good.***

This was the testimony of Joseph in the Old Testament book of Genesis. Perhaps you remember the story of *Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.* Joseph was the 11th of 12 sons of Jacob ~ and he was the favored son of his father. In jealousy, his brothers plotted to kill Joseph, but his older brother, Reuben intervened and, rather than killing Joseph, his brothers sold him into slavery. Separated from his family and everything familiar he was taken against his will to the distant land of Egypt where he was forced to become Potiphar’s slave. There he was falsely accused of sexually assaulting his master’s wife and was thrown into prison.

Through a series of amazing circumstances, Joseph eventually rose to power and became #2 in command under the Pharaoh. His leadership prepared Egypt and the surrounding region to survive a massive drought ~ and that eventually brought his brothers back to Egypt looking for famine relief and food assistance.

At 1st his brothers did not recognize Joseph so in the course of events, Joseph revealed his identity them. When they learned who he was they were terribly frightened ~ afraid that he would want revenge. As the book of Genesis closes, Joseph’s brothers throw themselves on the ground before him and offer to become his slaves. Joseph replied, *“Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”* (50:15-21)

Last Sunday afternoon I was sitting in my recliner reading the paper. There, in a story about Mary Stauffer, I saw almost the exact words, *“What Ming intended for evil, God intended for good.”* Thirty years ago Mary Stauffer and her daughter were kidnapped by one of her former students, Ming Shiue. A little boy who witnessed the abduction was also taken and he was killed. For two months Mary Stauffer was assaulted by her captor while her 8 year old daughter, Beth was threatened and kept in a closet. By the grace of God Mary and Beth escaped. One year later, during the trial, Ming snuck a knife into the courtroom and slashed Mary with that knife while she was testifying. She needed 62 stitches to close the wound.

Now, 30 years later, Ming is eligible for parole. The parole hearing brought the horrific events of 1980 back to the front pages of our newspaper. It was during a recent interview that Mary said, *“What Ming intended for evil, God intended for good.”*

I cannot think of anything good about the events that Mary and her daughter experienced. I cannot think of any thing wonderful about the treatment Joseph experienced at the hands of his brothers and the false accusations that led to his imprisonment.

Yet I do know, that in the midst of their terror, God did not abandon Joseph or Mary or Beth and that ultimately, in spite of their circumstances, they witnessed the goodness of God.

They learned firsthand that **God can bring good out of Evil**. They learned that, as Romans 8:28 says, *in all things, God works for the good of those who love him*. I do not suggest in any way that God sends Evil for our good. I am suggesting that even in the most difficult and hurtful circumstances God can act redemptively for his people.

Some time ago I was talking with a CPC'er who had come to several of our Adult class offerings. As we chatted before one of the classes he began to tell some of the journey that had brought him back to CPC.

Max had been married for 15 years. As with any marriage relationship he experienced challenges. Rather than drawing closer to the faith of his childhood in those times of struggle, he moved further and further away from God. When his wife asked for a divorce Max said, *“It shook me to the core.”* One day in his downtown office Max dropped to his knees and asked God to once again direct his life. *“That experience drove me back to the church, and I can tell you that this year has been an incredible blessing as I have once again asked God to steer my life.”*

Max is not happy about the break-up of his family, but he is grateful that in the midst of this awful experience, he rediscovered a God who loves him and wants to walk the sometimes difficult journey of life with him.

At about that same time Mark told his story. Abused as a child he developed inappropriate relationship patterns and “acted-out” in his adult life. Then his behaviors caught up with him and his world came crashing in. In his brokenness he found God's gracious forgiveness and the power to make healthy choices. Out of his own recovery Mark established a healing center, located right here in the Twin Cities, that literally touches broken people from around the world (Faithful and True Ministries, Eden Prairie, MN).

Even in difficult circumstances, God can bring redemption.

No event communicates this truth more graphically than the crucifixion of Jesus. With perspiration seeping in great droplets from his temples Jesus pleaded, *“Father, if it be possible, please let this cup pass from me.”* Then later, from the cross Jesus called out in agony, *“My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?!”*

Yet from the horror of crucifixion, God brought redemption for all of humanity. It is through his sacrificial act that we may find forgiveness.

Hundreds of years earlier Isaiah gave voice to the ministry of Jesus with these words: *The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted . . . to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.*

God promises: 1) gladness in the place of mourning, 2) a garment of praise in the place of despair, 3) beauty rising from ashes of destruction.

In some ways I wish life could be lived without pain, yet I have learned that it is often in our pain that God meets us most profoundly.

I frequently find myself returning to words from Ephesians 3:20 ~ words that remind me, *God is able to do immeasurably more than all we could ask or imagine.* Even in places of darkness, God can surprise us with goodness beyond our wildest imaginations.

So God gives us this promise: *Call upon me, come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you,* declares the LORD, *"and I will bring you back from captivity.* Jeremiah 29: 12 - 14

Why do I tell these stories today? Why do I say that "God can act redemptively even in the midst of heartache or sadness?" Am I trying to minimize the pains of life that we all go through ~ that some of us are facing right now? Am I trying to say, "You shouldn't feel that way?" or "Get over it?" Not at all!

My intention in this sermon has been to offer a word from God, a word of encouragement, a word of hope that will carry us through and lift us in the difficulties of living.

On Friday afternoon I wrapped up this sermon and prepared to head home. Before I left, I decided to check Sarah's blog. Sarah was our daughter's roommate in college. 4 year ago she was diagnosed with Ocular Melanoma, which 6 months ago metastasized in her liver. Sarah has kept a public journal about her cancer. This week she wrote these words:

I have often heard Cancer referred to as a "gift." This is a huge, steaming pile of pig crap. Cancer is not a gift. It is a nasty, vicious disease. It is scary and horrible. It forces the person living with it to question everything – every choice, every relationship, every meal. It creates a sense of agonizing urgency over the most mundane moments of our lives. A cancer patient, who really should be thinking about more important things, is suddenly consumed with the absurd thought "Is this really the last book I want to have been reading when I die?" or "Do I have time to grow out these ridiculous bangs before my funeral?"

*Cancer is not a gift, **but it can be a catapult** . . . If you need to say what is on your mind, and tumor cells are ping-ponging their way through your blood stream – then move over Moses, your tongue has just been loosed for the Pharaoh. If you have spent a lifetime being afraid of your demons, and you've just been told the mother of them all has set up residence in your liver – then step into the light my friend because, as in the words of Glinda, The Good Witch of the North, "Poof! [those demons] have no power here." (www.loveinfinitysquared.org/)*

I in no way mean to minimize the challenges of life. Sarah makes it abundantly clear this would be wrong. I am trying to say that even in those most horrible places, God can bring a measure of redemption ~ God can **catapult** us to see even small measures of good even in places of evil.

So today, if you find yourself mired in sorrow or anger or hurt ~ if circumstances seem overwhelming, I invite you to seek God:

- 1) pray for God to meet you in that difficult place;
- 2) look for God to step into your circumstances, and
- 3) wait in expectation for God to do immeasurably more than all you could ask or imagine.

May our Gracious God bestow on us crowns of beauty in places of ashes.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.