

## **The Continuing Acts of Jesus: Acting out the Spirit's Call**

Acts 13:1-3

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Are you thankful this morning? Certainly we've got lots to be thankful for in this country. But aren't you thankful that God, in His infinite wisdom, saw fit to have the Scriptures recorded so that we could hear His voice on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017? Do you believe that Jesus has been planning something to say to us today? Do you believe that He has coincided the Scripture we will be digging into with the place you are at or the struggle you are experiencing? I do. It's just happened too many times to be coincidence.

Let's get into it. If you've been with us over the last several months you know that we are continuing to look at the Acts Jesus did through the lives of His followers after He ascended to heaven. Acts is a book built on the premise that Jesus had just recently died, been buried and then come back from the dead. Hundreds of eyewitnesses bore testimony to this fact.

And then, 40 days later, Jesus left His 120 followers and ascended back to heaven. But His departure wasn't a retreat, it was an onslaught. Jesus had promised that when He would leave His Spirit would come, and then He would begin working in and through His disciples to build His kingdom in a way they had never experienced before.

10 days later, at Pentecost, it happened. And while there had been believers before this, this was the moment that Jesus' church was born. This was the moment the prophets had foretold. God's Spirit was now residing in each of His followers. And the result was used-to-be timid women and men were changed into bold witnesses. And they began turning their world right side up by shining the light of Christ into it. As a result, thousands of lives were transformed.

But the enemy wasn't happy about this, and so when a godly man named Stephen stood up before his Jewish brothers and connected the Old Testament with Jesus, rebuking them for their hard hearts, the people were enraged and stoned him to death. This sparked a period of intense persecution.

But contrary to what was expected, far from destroying the church, this oppression became the catalyst to propel Jesus' mission out from the local and into the global scene. Jesus followers began popping up all over Rome.

For a time things were calm, and then about 14 years later Herod Agrippa executed the first of the Apostles – James. And when he saw how much this pleased the Jews he proceeded to arrest Peter also. But the church prayed, and God responded with a radical rescue.

Now as we get into chapter 13 the challenges are changing from physical external threats to emotional internal ones. The Spirit is now pushing the church to put the advance of Jesus' mission before their own comfort.

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If you've brought a Bible please open it to Acts chapter 13. If you didn't bring your own, please grab the one in the pew in front of you. You will find Acts 13 on page 781. Please do follow along. I don't want you to take my word for it this morning, you need to hear Jesus speaking.

Let's start in verse 1:

[Read Acts 13:1]

My goal today is to extract three things from the church in Antioch that Christ wants for Fort George, and every church today. And my hope is that as we hear this we will be encouraged and challenged to continue pursuing Christlikeness, and that our passion to be passionate about what Christ is passionate about would increase. Do you want that this morning?

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Antioch was a very special church in the first century. In fact I would say that even more than the church of Jerusalem, this was a church that was imaging Jesus.

And this is ironic, because at this time – as chapter 13 gets going – all the apostles are back in Jerusalem. Peter and John and Andrew and Philip and Thomas and Matthew. All these guys are back home doing church in Jerusalem. But God is on the move, and He is working out of Antioch.

Now I'm not saying that the apostles were up to no good. Peter and John are going to be involved in writing scripture over the next few years. But the vast majority of the men Jesus had spent His ministry pouring into are flying so far under the radar at this point that they aren't ever going to be mentioned again in Scripture.

Now the church of Jerusalem is still going to be a central place. They are going to deal with some heretics in Acts chapter 15 and they are going to be there to welcome Paul warmly when he arrives home in chapter 21. But other than that, they essentially are missing out on God's mission to spread His gospel into the four corners of the world.

Here is the point: God is on the move, and He doesn't stop moving when we sit down to catch our breath or take our bearings. And His kingdom is tied to no person. None of us are essential. He is increasing His glory with or without us. And that's true whether you are "just a lay person" – something I don't actually believe exists – or whether you were one of the original apostles.

And so here in Acts 13 the story shifts away from the people everyone thought it was going to be about – this story is simply not the Acts of the Apostles, it is the Continuing

Acts of Jesus. And so it begins to follow a bunch of people He is at work in that we have never heard of before.

And Luke gives us a list of the leaders in Antioch. And they are a motley crew! Luke gives us this list as evidence that Jesus is present, because these guys are getting along!

So let's unpack these unusual suspects a bit – imagine leading a church with a group like this.

First there is Barnabas and Saul. These are the two guys we know in this list. And notice how Saul is at the end of the list. He is still the lesser of the two. But that is going to change in verse 13. And from then on we will refer to him as Paul, and Barnabas will be his helper. But here Luke wants us to remember how opposite these guys are. So when we first came across Barnabas back in chapter 4 we read:

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:36-37)

This is the first time we hear of Barnabas, but he makes such a big splash that the apostles rename him. "Hi, I'm Joseph." "No, we don't think so. You've blessed us so much we are going to call you 'encourager.'" It's like a superhero alter ego – "I'm Joseph by day and The Encourager by night.

Have you ever been around someone with that kind of a reputation? They are continually speaking life into you and other people. When people start gossiping, they aren't involved. All they want to do is find the good side of a person and a situation. Do you know someone like that? Are you like that?

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Barnabas was this kind of a guy – he built people up. And Jesus hadn't just impacted his personality, every aspect of his life had been transformed including his wallet.

So Barnabas sold a field. And then he just handed the money over to the Apostles. He didn't put any strings on it. He didn't say, "this is for buying a new organ for the church basement." He just handed it over. "Use this to build God's kingdom." He was a generous encourager.

But maybe you're a bit skeptical. "Barnabas probably just did this for the publicity or to gain some power in the church." Certainly lots of people have used their money to do this in church – I'll give, but only as long as people are listening to me. If that starts changing then I'm pulling my support." That's not godly. But that's not Barnabas.

And we know that because the very next story is about Ananias and Saphira who try something like this and God kills them. So it's a pretty safe bet to say that Barnabas is legit. Barnabas looks like Jesus.

But then we have Saul who's a bit different. His story picks up in chapter 8 with him overseeing a mob murder. This is how Luke describes it:

And Saul approved of their killing [Stephen]. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and...  
Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. (Acts 8:1-3)

So Saul watches Stephen, shining face – full of the Holy Spirit and praying “Father don’t hold this sin against them” – as they stone him. And Saul says: “yup, it’s good we are killing this guy. Now let’s go get his friends?”

Nobody was giving Saul the nickname Barnabas. He was about as encouraging as a wet blanket in November. It isn’t possible to find two more opposite characters in Jerusalem. One of them is donating his livelihood to increasing Jesus’ church and the other one is investing his passion in tearing it down.

But even more than that this would have been personal. It is a pretty safe bet that Barnabas knew the people Saul was hauling off to prison. The church in Jerusalem wasn’t huge at this point. And so when Saul kicked in a door and hauled women and men off to prison they were the people from Barnabas’ Care Group.

And Saul wasn’t hauling these people off to fair trials and justice. Remember Herod from chapter 12? The legal system in the first century wasn’t anything like ours. And so if you got hauled off to prison then your house was getting looted and your whole world was crumbling down.

And Barnabas would have watched this happen. If I was Barnabas there would have been animosity in my heart towards Saul. Wouldn’t it be easy to home a grudge against a guy who hurt your friends?

But Barnabas has Jesus flowing through his veins so much that when Saul is converted Barnabas is the one who takes a chance on him.<sup>1</sup> That’s incredible! But make no mistake Barnabas and Saul are peas from totally different pods. And yet here they are working together in Antioch. That’s a Christ-like church.

But they aren’t the only guys here, Luke keeps unpacking this idea. So next he tells us there is a guy there named Simeon and a guy named Lucius.

Now we know nothing about either of these guys except what Luke gives us here. But what Luke gives us is diversity. So we don’t know where Simon is from, but everyone calls him “Niger”. Niger is Latin for Black. So every commentary agrees this guy has black skin. And then Luke tells us Lucius of Cyrene was there. Cyrene was in modern

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 9:26-27

day Libya. So Lucius is an African. Antioch then was a church lead by people of different temperament and race and nationality from different parts of the world.

And then we get Manaen who Luke tells us grew up with Herod the tetrarch. Now we had a Herod lesson two weeks ago, so just a brief review here. Herod was a title not a name. So there was a family of Herods running around. And none of them were great even though that's what they called themselves.

So Herod the Great was the first Herod. He was into killing babies. And in chapter 12 we spent some time looking at Herod Agrippa who got eaten by worms and then died. That's after letting people call him a god – not to mention killing James and attempting to kill Peter.

But Herod the Tetrarch isn't either of these guys, he is Herod Antipas, the one who killed John the Baptist. You remember that story. So Herod married his step-brother's wife, and John called him on it. So he locked him up. And that's when in dances Herod's step-daughter. Herod is so impressed with her – he's not proud of her like a dad, he's full of lust – that he asks her what he can *do* for her. She asks for John's head on a plate. Herod decides this is worth it and serves it up hot. This is a messed up dude!

This is also the Herod who was there when Jesus was arrested. He was the guy Pilate the coward sent Jesus to as a way to weasel out of having to figure out the situation himself. But Jesus wouldn't give Herod a magic show, so Herod beat Him and sent him back to Pilot. That's Herod Antipas the Tetrarch.

And that is how Luke introduces Manaen. “Oh, and on the resume of this other guy we've got on the board is the fact he grew up with Herod. Their moms were friends, and they were buds from day one.”

And now Manaen is one of the leaders in Antioch. Man, there is a story there, we just don't know it! But here is the point, Jesus is obviously at work in Antioch because you couldn't possibly find a group with less in common than these guys. Barnabas and Saul, both from Jerusalem, but from totally different sides of the tracks. Some black guy. Some African guy. And some guy who used to be besties with one of the worst guys around. And all these guys are on the board together in Antioch. Wow!

Antioch is a testimony to the power of God to transform lives. And somebody needs to hear this today – you aren't the exception to this rule. Yes, you've made some mistakes. But it isn't about how awful you are, it is about how awesome He is. And so if anything, you are exactly the kind of person Jesus wants to work through. So stop moping about how much of a mistake you are, and start embracing Jesus' plan for your life.

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Antioch was a church full of people from all walks of life who had nothing in common except that they had all been transformed by Jesus. And this transformation was so

complete that unity grew out of their mix – together they were discerning the voice of God.

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This is the second way the church in Antioch was imaging Jesus – they were tuned in to hearing the voice of God. Look at verse 2:

[Read Acts 13:2]

Now it is so easy to come across a verse like this and just keep reading like nothing has happened. We think, “Well, somehow God was sending these guys text messages – that would be nice. And we just resign ourselves that God doesn’t speak like He used to. It’s just a different age. But nothing could be further from the truth. Remember, the most exciting thing about Acts is the absolute absence of any mention that any of this has come to an end.

Jesus prophecy to His followers was:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

And then Jesus started working through the lives of His disciples, but His prophesied mission isn’t done yet. His kingdom is still expanding to the ends of the earth, and so now He is continuing to work through His disciples, and those disciples are us.

So when we read about God speaking, the implication is that He is still speaking. And the imperative for us is to listen like the people in Acts were listening.

So the question we need to be asking is “how do you listen so you can hear God speak?”

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One of my previous pastors said “Discipline is the act of putting yourself in a place where you can hear God.” So God is speaking, the question is are you tuned in? If you can’t hear Him it is probably because the TV is on and your brain is in sludge mode. Or you are so busy working that you never have a quiet moment. Or any number of other reasons. But put yourself in a spot where you can hear God and things will change.

And God speaks in all sorts of ways. The other day Elliana woke up from a dream, and Grand-maman said “you need to pay attention to these dreams, God is speaking.” God can give you dreams.

Some people have impressions – they just feel like they really need to do something. Other times God will say the same thing to you through two people who don’t know each other. It’s a way of confirming. But here is the one consistent thing that overrides everything else about hearing the voice of God. And that is God will never contradict His written word.

What this means is if you want to know the voice of God you need to get to into the Bible. That's how you are going to be able to discern the difference between whether what you are hearing is from God, or whether it is from somewhere else.

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Have you ever gotten a letter from someone you know really well. And as you are reading it you can hear them actually speaking in your head? That's what this is about. If you are going to hear the voice of God you need to get to know God. Discipline is putting yourself in a place where you can hear God. And the scriptures are the means He has provided.

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Now there is one more part to this that is really important, and that is that we hear God in community more than we hear Him as individuals. You see, as individuals we can get wrapped up in our own issues way too deep to be able to hear anything at all.

The classic example of this walks into my office once every several months, and that is a young, or sometimes older, person who is in love. And as we talk they say "I just feel God telling me we are supposed to be together."

And then I ask "Well, does she loves Jesus?" And he says – "not really, but that will change. I'm not too worried about it." And usually it doesn't matter what anyone says at this point the person is going to pursue this relationship no matter what. When we are wrapped up in our own things it is impossible to actually hear the voice of God. We need each other.

And so in Antioch there was a community of people who are discerning God's voice together. They were praying, and fasting, and worshipping together. And out of this God leads. We don't know exactly what it looked like, but maybe it was Herod's buddy Manaen who said "I feel like God has something special for Barnabas and Saul." And then the African and the black guy said, "Yeah, that feels right to us too." And they could say this because they knew what the voice of God sounded like.

Don't you love that? Don't you want to hear God's voice? Friends, the God of Antioch is the God of 2017. And He is still speaking. So we can.

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The final thing I think is an encouragement for us today is the way Antioch embraced a new way to imitate, and image, God. Look at verse 3.

[Read Acts 13:3]

So in chapter 13 and 14 we get *Paul's* first missionary journey – he goes on three total. But this first one started in Antioch and went to Cyprus, and from there North to Pisidian and another Antioch. And then on to Iconium and Lystra and Derbe before returning home. This is the first intentional mission trip described in Christian history.

So up to this point the Gospel has spread randomly. Or rather people have played no roll in the specific places that it had grown. So it started in Jerusalem because this is

where Jesus left from. And it stayed there until persecution expelled it out into Judea and Samaria – but there was no human plan involved in that. And then it extended to the Gentiles in Caesarea because God sent an angel to Cornelius and a sheet full of bacon wrapped calamari to Peter. But none of this was Peter's idea. People were simply allowing themselves to be swept up in what God was doing.

Now this is a great place to start. What this meant was that the earliest church was not Peter's church or Paul's church, it was Jesus' church through and through. He was the one who was causing it to accomplish His mission from Acts 1.

But in Acts 13 something new is birthed by the Spirit – verse 2 says it was the Spirit. And the Spirit directs the church into a time of intentional mission. God says "Make a plan and systematically see to the expanse of My kingdom.

And from this moment on, Acts is going to change from individual stories about God showing up, to larger sections of history where we see God work to expand His church through the strategic efforts of His man Paul as he uses his gifts for God's glory.

Now you might be tempted to say, "well, this is where things are going to go bad. Now this is Paul's church instead of Jesus' church." But to say that is missing the point. It is the Spirit, Jesus' Spirit, that led Antioch into this. And as the church begins to move into this season of mission it is still imaging Jesus.

And here is why – the God we serve is a missional God. Jesus was the first missionary, not Paul. He and the Father conceived a plan to save humanity. And then, by the power of the Spirit, Jesus left the throne of heaven, followed the plan, and accomplished His mission. Our God is a missionary God. And so in Acts 13 we see the beginning of the missional movement – a movement which continues to this day. So it's great when God drops an opportunity to partner with Him in our lap, but we must also be prepared to intentionally make plans, and carry them out. We must work in the places we've been put, with the resources we have to increase Jesus' kingdom.

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In closing I want to bring this close to home. Fort George is in a neat spot right now. God is on the move in our city, opening doors, and the power of His gospel is changing lives. And a lot of this is being dropped in our laps. Let me give you just one example:

One of the things Spencer and I have been dreaming about is running ALPHA in the high schools across Prince George. This idea was birthed last May at History Maker – the youth conference our kids went on down in Chilliwack. But the high schools of Prince George are closed off places. Just think about the pressure the school board put on Ness Lake last year. Our schools are anti-Christ.

But this last week Spencer got a call from one of his contacts who said "Kelly Road has just opened up. A teacher there wants to run a Youth ALPHA course out of their classroom. And there is another teacher at PGSS who wants to do the same." And we were blown away! We hadn't even done anything to pursue this yet, and God is just



dropping it in our laps. This is God working in our city just like He worked in Acts 1 through 12. He is doing the work, and we are being invited to go along for the ride. And over the last five weeks that Lighthouse has been running here Saturday nights there have been so many examples of this.

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But a time is coming where we as Fort George are going to have the opportunity to make deliberate steps to intentionally partner with the increase of God's kingdom among the young people of our city. So there is going to be a town hall meeting here November 5<sup>th</sup> – please plan to attend. At this meeting you are all invited to come downstairs for some soup and buns after the service and ask any questions about Lighthouse you want to ask. And out of this discussion the goal is to see what kinds of plans we can make to push forward what God seems to have dropped in our laps.

And so, over the next month I would ask you to please pray, like the church of Antioch, that God might speak. And pray that in spite of the diversity between Lighthouse and Fort George we might be unified in our conviction about where God is leading us to God. Will you pray for this?

I'm so thankful for you guys. Let me pray for us.