

We're in the midst of our Parish Reading Project reading through the book of the Acts of the Apostles. As I said a few weeks ago, the book of Acts is not exhaustive. It doesn't tell everything about ALL of the apostles. In fact, there are two main "stars" of the book.

The first section of Acts centers mostly on St. Peter. Peter is the main focus, the lead apostle in chapters 1 through 12. Yes, there are also other apostles who are mentioned from time to time: James and John, the sons of Zebedee; James the brother of Jesus; the deacons Stephen and Philip. But the main focus of roughly the first half of Acts is Simon Peter. And that culminates in the lesson we heard today that I talked about last week—Peter seeing the vision of the sheet full of all sorts of kosher and non-kosher animals, and interpreting that to mean that non-Jewish people could convert to Christianity without becoming Jewish first.

But in the second part of Acts, from chapters 13 through 28, the main focus is on St. Paul. Paul, using his original Jewish name Saul, is mentioned briefly in chapters 7 and 8 as a persecutor of Christianity in Jerusalem. In chapter 9 we have the famous conversion of Saul, struck blind by a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus. In Damascus he is baptized and moves from being militantly anti-Christian to being a zealous proponent of Christianity.

At the end of our readings last week, we saw Saul start using his Roman name, Paulus or Paul. Saul and Paul rhyme in English. But their meanings couldn't be more different.

The Jewish name Saul means "the one who is prayed for," or the "answer to prayer." The Roman name Paul is not so lofty. It means someone small of stature or humble. Probably the best English equivalent is the nickname, "Shorty."

So Saul Paulus, the great St. Paul the Apostle, is probably a small man. There are a number of traditions that he was also bald and had crooked legs. There are some traditions that he also had a unibrow. Thus "Shorty Saul" was probably not a very imposing figure, physically. But he was a giant intellectually, spiritually, and in sheer determination to doggedly pursue his mission and his purpose. And we see those characteristics in his letters, the Epistles. And we also see it in the remainder, the second part of Acts.

Plus, St. Paul had another set of talents that we often skip over. Paul had an amazing ability to organize, to recruit leaders, to plant and build up churches. And he built a rather impressive organization to help him do so.

Some people think of Paul as some sort of Lone Ranger, a Christian Johnny Appleseed wandering around the Mediterranean by himself spreading Christianity. But Paul was not a solo Act. In fact, in the book of Acts, there's only one time, in Athens, where it mentions that Paul's entourage left him alone in a city while they went to do other things. The rest of the time, Paul is travelling with a team. He's almost always working with others. And when he sends out letters or Epistles, they are addressed as being from him AND others in the church.

If you think Paul stayed up late at night and wrote letters by himself, think again. His two earliest Epistles, are addressed, "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the

Thessalonians."¹ His next Epistle is addressed, "Paul an apostle... and all the members of God's family who are with me, to the churches of Galatia."² His next epistle is addressed, "Paul... and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God that is in Corinth."³ Most of his letters are not from "me to you." They're from "us to y'all."

Paul will often make reference to those whom he terms his "fellow workers." Over and over again Paul uses this term to refer to the men who are part of his missionary organization. They're his posse. His group. They're part of his church planting team: Timothy, Titus, Clement, Justus, Urbanus, Epaphroditus, Aquila, Jason, and many, many others.

Plus this team also includes a number of women. Amongst his "fellow workers" Paul lists Priscilla, Euodia, Synteché, Apphia, Nympha, Mary, Lois, Lydia. He also calls Phoebe a deacon. And he refers to Junia as one of the apostles. Women in these high positions would have been unheard of in the surrounding culture. When it came to the place of women in his organization, Paul was amazingly progressive in his own cultural context.

So in our Parish Reading Project the past week-and-a-half, we've seen Team Paul engaged in missionary work. Specifically, Paul and his companions set forth from their home-base in Antioch, and they go on a couple of missionary journeys. Acts will narrate 3 missionary journeys in all. And we have #1 and #2 as part of our readings this past week-and-a-half.

The First Missionary Journey is relatively short. Paul goes to the island of Cyprus accompanied by Barnabas and a young John Mark. John Mark is Barnabas's young cousin. John Mark is also traditionally thought to be the author of the Gospel of Mark, based upon the reminiscences of Simon Peter.

After doing missionary work in Cyprus, the group heads north into Galatia, what we would call central Turkey. Young John Mark bails out and heads back home. Paul and Barnabas continue into the interior of Galatia and plant a number of churches there. Then they return to their home base in Antioch.

On the First Missionary Journey we see Paul and his fellow workers establish a pattern and develop a playbook that Paul would use time and time again.

Their basic pattern was to go into a town. They would start hanging out at the local Jewish synagogue. There they would talk about how Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and that God proved it by raising Jesus from the dead. They would keep coming back for weeks or months until the local Jewish leaders got fed up with them and kicked them out. Then they would hang around the town and keep proclaiming Jesus in the public square, until the local leaders again got fed up and asked them to leave, or forced them to leave. Then they'd head on down the road to the next city, and start all over again.

¹ 1Thess 1:1; 2Thess 1:1

² Gal 1:1-2

³ 1Cor 1:1-2

Paul and Barnabas use this pattern on the First Missionary Journey. After this Paul and Barnabas are planning a Second Missionary Journey. But they disagree with each other over whether to take John Mark with them. Paul says, "No—he bailed on us last time." Barnabas however really wants to take him. It causes a serious enough rift that Barnabas and John Mark return to Cyprus to check on the churches there.

And Paul sets out with a new travelling partner: Silas. A little later, Paul and Silas pick up a new convert named Timothy who joins them in their travels.

And they apparently pick up a new companion, Luke himself. This is not explicit. But it is implicit. In our readings this week we ran into the first of three sections in Acts that are labeled as the "we" passages. The reason for this nickname—there's a shift in pronouns—from 3rd person to 1st person. There are 3 sections in Acts where all of a sudden, things shift from "they" to "we." The traditional thought is that Luke joins Paul's entourage at these points.

And on this trip, something else important happens.

Paul revisits a number of churches that he founded on his 1st missionary journey in what we would call Turkey. But then in chapter 16, Paul has a vision. This vision will actually be our lesson for next Sunday. Paul sees in a vision "a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'"⁴

And the translation, "pleading," may not be strong enough. Begging. Imploring. Beseeching. "Come over to Macedonia and help us." At that point Paul is 150 miles away across the Aegean Sea from what we would call north-eastern Greece.

This wasn't the original game plan. Paul and his companions were planning to stay in Turkey. But Paul and Silas and Timothy and Luke apparently perceive that God is calling them to travel to Greece. And they are obedient to that call.

It's at this point that we have the shift in pronouns. For 16 chapters, the book of Acts has been narrated in the third person--he did this, they did that.

But now it switches to first person plural: "When (Paul) had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them."⁵

And not only do the pronouns shift from they to we. The narrative also begins to be much more detailed in describing the travel. It'd be like saying, "They went from New York to St. Louis to Amarillo. Then we travelled south on I-27, stopping off in Canyon, then going to Happy, then we had dinner Plainview. We spent the night in Hale Center, and then finally went to Lubbock the next day."

⁴ Acts 16:9

⁵ Acts 16:10

This extra level of detail probably reflects Luke adding his own eyewitness remembrances to these portions of Paul's journeys. He's not just reporting what others did. He's remembering what they did together at these points.

And one of the most significant things here for us is that for the first time, the Gospel is being taken to the continent of Europe. Our Episcopalian tradition comes from Western Christianity, European Christianity. So this is a hugely important moment for us. If Paul had stayed in Turkey and not crossed the Aegean to Europe, our history might have been quite different.

Paul and his companions paying attention to small spiritual signals and visions means that the Gospel is taken to a whole new continent for the first time.

And there, on that new continent Paul baptizes the first European convert to Christianity. Her name is Lydia. And she will become an important part of Paul's Fellow Workers.

It goes back to that important nature of Paul's ministry that is shared with his fellow workers.

God's mission doesn't just belong to Paul. It takes a bigger group to carry on God's work. That's an important reminder to us.

Paul is no Lone Ranger. And we also are not called to be Lone Rangers. We are called to carry out God's work together.

And we're called to be in discernment together. What is our mission? How might it be changing? How is God calling us to involve others as fellow workers in this mission, which is really his mission?

We each have a role to play in making the world a better place. We have talents and gifts and resources. And together God calls us to use them to build his kingdom.

How will you respond to God's promptings?

How can we further God's mission?