

Title: You can't make this stuff up
Text: Acts 11.19-30
Theme: The providences of God in the spread of the gospel
Series: Acts
Prop Stmtnt: God's plan is carried out in many surprising ways.

Read Text:

George Washington recommended a beautiful piece of land to his step son that was not far from Mt. Vernon. The young man purchased the land in order to be near his mother and the first president. However, he died as a young adult and the land passed on to his son who passed it on to his daughter who married a famous General in the Mexican War named Robert E. Lee. The Lee's lived there just outside of our nation's capital for 30 years until the Civil War forced them from their home. The Union, not particularly happy with Lee, confiscated his land and home, and when all of the cemeteries in Washington D.C. became full, they started burying Union soldiers on this land. After the war, the son of Robert E. Lee, descendent of George Washington sued the Federal Government for the land and the Supreme Court sided with him. What do you do with your land that is now the burial ground for thousands of soldiers? Charitable in his victory, he sold it back to the Federal Government for a minimal price. The secretary of War, (son of Abraham Lincoln) gave the son of Robert E. Lee the check, and the land became Arlington National Cemetery. As Jim Price likes to say from time to time, "you can't make this stuff up." There are many amazing coincidences in life, but history is more than the story of coincidences. History, particularly gospel history is the unfolding of God's providences. The actions of God are not gigantic coincidences. There is nothing random or chancy about them. God is always on the move. God is always on the move, and it is our mission to keep up. If we do not keep up, or if we try to thwart what God is doing, we will get run over. Either you keep up with God's plan or you will get run over by it, but you will not stop it.

When you read the book of Acts, it is good to keep in mind that some of these accounts were happening simultaneously and they were happening not only at the same time but in different places. So, when the early Jewish believers started to hear all of these stories of Gentiles coming to faith in Christ, it forced them to come to conclusions that they had not really considered, or even thought possible. But, there is more going on than what they know. For example, you can study microeconomics in college. Microeconomics focuses upon the behavior and decision making processes of individuals and companies. The lens is very narrow. Macroeconomics studies regional, national and global economies and how they relate to one another. What and where you choose to eat today is microeconomics. Tariffs on Chinese goods and their punitive response of not buying our corn and soybeans is macroeconomics.

Luke is giving us these micro-gospel-stories, but they are all connected to a much bigger macro-gospel movement. Here is what we know so far. In response to the persecution of the believers that broke out following Stephen's death, Luke told us about Philip's ministry to the Samaritans and the conversion of the official from Ethiopia. Those unlikely converts were only the beginning. The tip of the spear of the persecution, Saul of Tarsus became a believer. Then Peter is ordered by God to go to Gentiles with the gospel and their conversion is evidenced in the same way the believers on the Day of Pentecost were seen to be baptized by the Spirit. Now, this.

Gentiles are not only coming to faith in Christ, but these are Gentiles in a Gentile city in a Gentile country. Do you see what is going on? It is not just partial Jews coming to Jesus, or Gentiles who are Jewish proselytes, or Gentiles who live in Israel, these are really Gentiles. And there are bunches of them. These Gentiles who are coming to Christ are not an anomaly that the church has to figure out what to do with. If it were a few here or there, you could tell them to go sit in the back of the bus for now. But, that isn't going to work. So many are coming to faith in Christ, that they are not only filling up the bus, they are driving it.

You can't make this stuff up. So now, the world's most unlikely convert (Saul) is ministering to an entire group of unlikely converts, in an unlikely city. Antioch is the 3rd largest city in the Roman Empire and there is a wonderful gospel movement happening there that looks very different than the church life in Jerusalem even though the message is the same. And at the end of the chapter, a little side note appears about Agabus, a prophecy about a famine, and a relief offering, that becomes one of the most important events in the rest of the NT. This isn't just famine relief. Do you see what is going on here? There are Gentiles coming to faith in Christ and some of the Jewish believers are not sure that they agree with this. But just as God sent Joseph ahead to Egypt to provide relief for his family in their famine, now God is bringing Gentiles into the church who will turn around and care for their Jewish brothers and sisters whether they like it or not. It is pretty hard to be suspicious of people who keep giving you food when you are hungry. It is pretty hard to think of yourself as being better than someone else, when they keep giving you food when you are hungry. These Gentile believers become God's grace, God's love, God's care, and God's provision for the Jewish believers. God is loving the Jewish believers through the Gentile believers and he is making his church – one people and one kingdom.

So, when you read this text, you read about people involved in some really amazing new ventures. But, the hand moving the wheel of history is God. So, even though the sentences involve people doing things, the points of this sermon all start with God because God is bringing about the dawn of a new age and is making all of his kids get on board with it.

I. **God uses the wrath of men to praise him.** (19-21)

The text begins with history and geography. The history is a grief. Stephen was not only executed, but his death launched a wave of persecution against the early believers. The initial euphoria of the early church, the conversion stories, growth and joy of the people gave way to terror as the police started raiding homes and dragging people off to jail and to their death. People ran for their lives. Now, people were scattered. Some were in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. They weren't there because they wanted to be there. They weren't there because they thought that the Lord was calling them into missions and they raised some funds and went on a short-term mission assignment. They were there because if they didn't get out of Jerusalem or Judea, they would be persecuted and perhaps killed. But, here they were, not of their own choosing, but since they were there, they sought out other Jews and told them about Christ.

Apparently some of the believers who were from Cyprus and Cyrene (Northern Africa) who became believers, ended up in Antioch (3rd largest city in the Roman empire) and they didn't get the memo. They saw the email that told them to tell other people about Jesus, but they missed the

part that said, Jews only! Oops! Now, we've got a "problem." They not only told the Hellenists about Christ, but some of these Hellenists believed. In fact a great number of them believed!

Luke is making it very clear that the death of Stephen (as grievous as that was) resulted in believers scattering throughout the region which resulted in people hearing and responding to the gospel. People who weren't supposed to hear the gospel, heard the gospel. People who weren't supposed to believe in Jesus, believed in Jesus. People who weren't supposed to be saved by God, were saved by God. Wait a minute! If they weren't supposed to be saved by God, and God saved them, then, maybe they were supposed to be saved. Yes! The death of Stephen was a terrible grief to the early church. But, the wrath of man, as evil as it was, did not have the final word. God is not backed into a corner by the wrath of man. God's plan is not jeopardized by rebellion of people. God will work everything out according to the counsel of his will. And for the believer, we have this absolutely incredible promise, that "all things work together for good, for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose." All things, even the death of Stephen will work (synchronize) for good. Good is the advancement of the gospel and the glory of God and the advancement of the kingdom of Jesus. This is the heart of the gospel anyway. Jesus was condemned to die because people hated him. Their hatred of him was sinful and evil and his death was the greatest tragedy ever. But, God overturned it. Their sin was still evil, but evil did not win. God overruled their evil and used the death of Christ to be the perfect payment for our sins. This is what God does all of the time. He is so glorious that he overrules the wrath of man in order to carry out his plan. It does not make evil less evil. It just makes us realize how big God is.

Here is the collision of two world views:

View #1 – God is like the State Farm Insurance Company – “here to help life go right.”

View #2 – God was here first! This is God's gig. I am here to be part of his plan. I am here for his glory. I make plans but hold them with an open hand because I am on call. My daughter is on deployment. She is told that you are going to go here and do this job. But, where you are going and what you are doing may change. And you don't know if where you are going and what you are going to do, is going to make sense and if it is going to be worth it. Humanly, speaking, as a dad, I want to say, “Hey, this is my kid! She's a good one! This cause had better be a good cause. You guys really need to make sure that you have this figured out. Can they promise me that? No.

But, as a follower of Christ, we are on deployment. God uses even the enemy of our souls to put us into situations that will result in his good, glorious and beautiful plan being carried out. God is not here to make my little life of a few decades go right. I am here to be part of his eternal plan be fulfilled. Who else can do this? Is He not worthy of your trust?

II. **God uses unplanned events to carry out his plans.** (19-21)

There was no strategy session by the early believers that targeted the Hellenists. The early believers were primarily Jews and they did not yet have a fully developed category for what the church was supposed to look like. Telling other people about Jesus (other than the Jews) was not even on their radar. Sharing Jesus with Gentiles was not an option they were aware of. It was

God's plan, but not their plan. They hadn't connected the dots yet. These events were forcing individual believers (micro) to rethink things and it was forcing them to get out of a comfort zone they had created. But, remember this. In about 25 years, Jerusalem is going to get destroyed and Israel as a nation is going to cease to exist for 1900 years. What these Jewish believers do not realize is that they are helping to create colonies of the gospel around that region of the world so that when they and their children have to run for their lives, they have a people and places to go. That this macro view. They also do not know that there is a famine that is about to hit, and these Gentile believers are going to help keep them alive. They don't know that either. There are so many things that appear to disrupt our lives and we get frustrated because we tend to think that God is here to help make our lives go better. We are here for his cause. But get this. His cause is so much greater, so much more glorious, so much more satisfying than anything we could come up. Let go of your hold on your dream for his. His is better. We make plans for our lives – as we should. We make plans based on what we think is both right and best. But, do you know better than God what is right and best for your life? Do you know better than God what is right and best for the gospel and the kingdom of Jesus?

III. **God's plan forces us to get on board.** (22-24)

Now what? Unexpected people were coming to faith in Christ. The church in Jerusalem is still viewed as being home base. There is still a church(es) in Jerusalem. Not everyone left because of the persecution (another challenge to the unity, perhaps?). The result is that a "great number" of Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ. And the conversion of all of these Gentiles forces the early church to create a category that they didn't have.

The automotive companies are pouring millions of dollars into electric and self-driving vehicles. Some of you are involved in the research and development of this. You are seeing what is going on and realizing the impact that this is going to have on the rest of us down the road. This isn't just some little hairbrained idea that was funny, but never really went too far (like cars that turned into boats). You still see those things at car shows every once in a while, but it's not like everyone has one in their driveway. This electric and self-driving thing is different. This is a big game-changer. That is what is happening in Antioch. These guys were realizing that this was a major game changer. The church was not going to be what everyone had assumed. God is clearly making something happen.

So, Barnabas, the bridge-builder is sent. The early church trusted in him. His character was impeccable (v.24 – good, full of the Spirit and faith). He was kind, theologically astute, generous, and trusted. They want to know if the reports of the conversion of the Gentiles is legit. I love v. 23. He sees the grace of God and he is glad! Now, this is going to sound a bit crazy, but I've seen some people see the grace of God and get angry, like the older brother of the prodigal son – angry. Know what I mean? What if God saved your enemy? Seriously, what if your sibling who has been nothing but chaos and aggravation for your family, gets saved? Now what? These early believers were trying to figure out what this was going to mean. That's the big idea.

So, now it is happening. All along Jesus intended for his people to enjoy a new norm that included people from other tribes, languages and nations being together as one people. This is God's plan and when God makes these things happen, it forces his followers to re-examine

assumptions. Barnabas the bridge-builder was simply living out the implications of the gospel (like we heard Wednesday night). Is there common ground between libertarians, Democrats, Republicans, and environmentalists? Maybe not in Washington or in Lansing, but there is in Christ. And the gospel that brings us to Christ is sticky enough to keep us together and help us live out what it means to be the body of Christ even though we are Jews, Gentiles, rich, poor, Chrysler, Fiat, Renault (whatever you are at the moment), GM, Ford, Army, Navy, Wolverine or Spartan. Those are all secondary issues that some treat as primary, but we understand that the gospel is primary. Look at the end of history as we know it. People from every tribe, language and nation are going to be one people, one kingdom, serving under, reigning with one king and living together. That is God's plan and it is going to happen. The better we embrace that now, the more we provide a preview to our world of what life with God is going to be like.

IV. **God redeems people and their sin for good.** (25-26)

Barnabas sees what is going on. He sees the need for teaching, discipleship, and good theological education. These Gentiles were brand new to not only to Christianity, but they did not grow up with the OT. Years ago I did a survey of our congregation and found out that about two-thirds were from a Roman Catholic background. That is probably a little different now, but if you grew up Roman Catholic, you were introduced to some very helpful categories. You were taught that there is a God, that he is Father, Son and Spirit. You were taught about the virgin birth of Christ, his sinless life, the fact that he actually died on a cross and rose again. You were taught that there is such a thing as sin. All of those categories and ideas are very helpful. And while the Roman Catholic church has not understood the gospel, if you grew up Roman Catholic and you took those categories seriously, they helped prepare you for what the gospel actually is. The same thing was true for a Jew who took Judaism seriously. But these Gentiles, did not have any of that. They grew up worshipping idols. Community festivals and parades, were all completely enmeshed with worshipping idols. These believers were very raw recruits. So, while Saul may have found it a little difficult to be fully embraced in Jerusalem, he was fully embraced in Antioch. All of that training that he had used for the wrong purposes was now being redeemed for good. Saul was not only redeemed, but now his life was redeemed. God transformed Saul and was now using him, an unlikely convert to disciple other unlikely converts which formed the basis of what would become the church of Antioch that God would use to explode the gospel over the Roman Empire.

V. **God uses the groanings of creation for the sake of his new creation.** (27-30)

The church in Jerusalem appears to be embracing these Gentile believers. This is going to be tested in the chapters to come, but it is happening on some levels. There is a sharing of leaders. The churches are partnering together in ministry. One of the preachers, Agabus who was in Antioch (from Jerusalem) was given a prophecy by the Spirit. You ought to note that this prophecy came when Agabus was in Antioch. He tells them that a famine is going to take place. The Roman Empire is about to face a severe economic recession/depression. Whenever events like this take place, the people who have the least are the most vulnerable. This would mean the believers in Jerusalem. It is likely that many of the believers in Jerusalem, were still there because they did not have the means to get out of Dodge when the persecution took place. The scarcity of food would probably be their end. So, the disciples determined to do what they could,

to come to the aid of their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. This offering becomes a very important story line in the rest of Acts. Saul who will become known as Paul realizes that when Gentile believers sacrificially give to their Jewish brothers and sisters, that their hearts will be knitted together as one, and the multi-ethnic church will start looking like one people.

Last week, Nathan Eda (from India). Thomas first took the gospel to India. 1500 years before the rest of the world knew that our continent even existed, India had the gospel. I told Nathan, that we want to partner with him because we need India to have a major gospel movement so that in the future, India can send missionaries back here. That is what Christians have been doing. The pilgrims who came to this land, came and started churches. Those churches were homes to persecuted believers. This land was a mission field that eventually started sending missionaries back to where the gospel came from. In the 1500's, the idea that we would be sending some of our people to Scotland (home of John Knox) would have been unthinkable. No one had any idea then, just as we have no idea now of how all of this is going to turn out. We just know that it will.