

Acts 18:1 ...Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

It must have been an interesting feeling for the Apostle Paul every time he entered a new city. If you have moved around at all in your life, you know how exciting, terrifying, liberating, frustrating, and a host of other i-n-g adverb-ing words moving to a new city and situation can be. There's the new church, the new home, the new job, the new neighborhood, the new grocery store, the new medical, dental, and optical connections, the new...well, I'd go on, but I'm sure that I am already causing some of you to break out in a cold sweat.

So now imagine what it was like for the Apostle Paul to enter a new city. He would immediately head to the marketplace – the beating heart of any ancient Mediterranean town – and reconnoiter. He would talk with people. Look for members of the Jewish community. Find out if there was a physical synagogue or if the group was small and simply met by the river. He might set up his tent-making stall and look for a place to stay. And through it all, he would work to connect the dots for the Jewish community between their Old Testament faith and its fulfillment in Jesus of the Nazareth, the promised Messiah.

For example, ***Paul...went to Corinth. ² There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, ³ and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. ⁴ Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. ⁵ When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.***

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In many ways, that sounds a lot like when we move to a new city: church, home, job, neighbors, involvement in the community. But imagine being the Apostle Paul and knowing that something like the following could and, most likely would, happen: ***the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive.***

Quite frankly, this was a mild opposition compared to some of the towns Paul entered. In some places he was flogged, beaten, stoned, left for dead. Here, the Greek indicates that the Jewish leaders fought against him and in the process literally blasphemed God. Eventually, Paul had enough: ***...he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."*** ⁷ ***Then Paul left the synagogue.***

Only, he didn't go too far. We're told that ***Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God.*** This man was not Jewish by birth. He was a gentile. But he was Jewish by faith and the message of Jesus, through the work of the Holy Spirit, found eternal lodging in his heart. So, TJ offered Paul temporal lodging in his earthly home that Paul might continue to preach the good news. And as it turned out, people were reached. Besides TJ, ***Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the***

Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized.

So it comes, maybe, as a bit of a surprise when Paul starts to have some doubts, anxieties, fears, about the new town. Then again, maybe it doesn't. I mean, when we move to a new town, even if we're super excited by some aspects of the new everything, other aspects can cause anxieties and fears. The house has unexpected / undisclosed issues. The job isn't what was promised. The neighbors are jerks. The doctor isn't taking new patients. And to top it all off, the grocery store just doesn't feel the same.

OK, so maybe Paul's fears weren't about the grocery store, but we do get some insight from his first letter to the Corinthians (2:3). There Paul admits, ***I came to you*** (literally, I was with you) ***in weakness, in fear, and with much trembling.*** And so, ***One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. ¹⁰ For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."***

As you know, Paul had already experienced verbal attacks from the Jewish community. But as Paul knew from first-hand experience, it was likely only a matter of time before those verbal attacks became legal and physical. Sure, some people were being brought to faith, but maybe it was time to move on while the getting was still good. After all, Corinth wasn't exactly what one would expect to be fertile ground for the planting of the gospel. The city was huge. It is estimated that some 650,000 free people and slaves comprised its population. It contained at least 12 temples to various Greek and Roman gods. Here is one author's description:

About 45 miles east of Athens lay Corinth, the capital of the Roman senatorial province of Achaia (Greece). It is located on the isthmus which joins northern and southern Greece. It was a commercial center and, in

a world where sexual immorality was the rule, Corinth was notorious for its sexual immorality. (People's Bible: Acts, p. 196)

To put it modern terms, it would be like combining portions of Washington D.C., Chicago, and Las Vegas into one. And so as Paul continued to preach and teach, he also feared and teared in prayer, longing to move on to a better field, to richer soil, to fewer birds and stones.

At first glance, I'm sure that this will seem a bit of stretch, after all, we aren't facing the same threats that Paul did. And yet, aren't you ready to move on from all of this that is going on in the world? Yes, some of the rioting did target churches. Yes, domestic terrorists have done the same. But for the most part, the worst abuse you and I will face is a rejected invitation to join us at church, mockery of our Christian morals and priorities, or maybe some missed opportunities from godless friends.

Even so, we long for the days when we can, all of us, once again come together in our Sanctuary to worship. We long for the days when we can, all of us, once again share the handles of serving spoons in crock pots and sample *several* deserts all at the same time. We long for the days when we can, all of us, once again shake a hand, give a hug, lean on a shoulder. We long for the days when we can, all of us, once again give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord without all the fears and tears. O Lord, its time, isn't it, time to move on? Time to get past this? Time for a better field, richer soil, fewer birds and stones?

You are undoubtedly familiar with the expression, but probably don't know its origin. It was a 16th century Bishop of Geneva, Francis de Sales (1567-1622), that said, *"Truly charity has no limit; for the love of God has been poured into our hearts by His Spirit dwelling in each one of us, calling us to a life of devotion and inviting us to bloom in the garden where He has planted and directing us to radiate the*

beauty and spread the fragrance of His Providence.” To put it simply and in a more familiar form, bloom where you’re planted.

Just look again at how the Lord responded to Paul’s longings and fears. ***“Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you...”*** I have to admit that when I think of those words ***do not be afraid***, I feel a sense of responsibility. I mean, if someone comes along and threatens, “Be afraid.” (And I know, “Be very afraid” is a movie quote from the 1986 horror film *The Fly*. I’m not into the whole horror film genre. But it seems to be a popular quote.) Anyway, if someone comes along and threatens, “Be afraid,” I can do that. I can conjure up the fear, work up my anxieties, twist my stomach into knots. But when God comes along and says, ***“Do not be afraid,”*** I feel like I need to suppress all of that, keep from feeling any of that, not reveal any of that, especially to God.

But if you take a closer look, ***Do not be afraid*** is actually an invitation to do...get this...nothing. You see, the verb is passive, literally, *be not afraid*. In other words, *God* offers to eliminate those fears *for* you, lift those anxieties *from* you, fulfill those longings *for* you in his time and way. Through his Word he promises forgiveness of sins, new life in Jesus his Son, and eternal salvation for all who believe. This is his sacrifice for you, his joy for you, his gift to you, all by grace for you. And in grateful response to his goodness to you he invites you to share this same goodness with others around you, no matter, and in many cases especially because of, the circumstances in which you find yourself. Again, the Lord to the Apostle Paul and to you and to me, ***Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you...***

Truth be told, what Paul feared would happen, did, in fact, happen. The Jewish rabble rousers eventually brought Paul before the ruling governor. The synagogue ruler was, irrationally, beaten to prove some kind of point. But God’s

promise - ***I have many people in this city*** – held true. Priscilla and Aquila, the tentmakers, became believers. Titius Justice, TJ, the gentile became a believer. Crispus the synagogue ruler and his whole family became believers. Sosthenes, the next synagogue ruler also became a believer (he’s the man who would be later beaten by the rabble rousers). In fact, as Paul would later describe it in a letter to these same Corinthian believers, he ***planted the seed***, others ***watered it***, and God ***made it grow*** (1 Corinthians 3) into a beautiful gathering of believers around the gospel in Word and sacrament. Yes, the people of Corinth, under the shower of God’s grace, bloomed where they were planted.

[Paul] stayed there [in Corinth] a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. He, too, bloomed where he was planted until the Lord transplanted across the Aegean Sea to another little town that you may have heard of, a town called Ephesus. And so the gospel goes...on and on, from generation to generation.

None of us can say how long our current circumstance will continue, with its myriad challenges. We also cannot say what God will accomplish through all of this. Just know that among the challenges are also opportunities, opportunities to be in the Word more than ever, to share the hope that you have in unique times and circumstances, and confidently live your faith as a witness to God’s goodness in your life. And through it all, ***Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For [the Lord] with you...***as you bloom where you’re planted. Amen.