**Acts 13:14-16,26-33** May 19, 2019

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*Acts 13:14 On the Sabbath [Paul and his companions] entered the synagogue and sat down. 15After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak.” 16Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said…*

*26“Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. 27The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. 28Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. 29When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. 30But God raised him from the dead, 31and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people. 32We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers 33he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’ ”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Where can I put my money so it is safe? When I was a little kid, my parents gave me a Band-Aid box. Not a cardboard one, but like they used to make them, out of metal. It was to keep the money safe, so I wouldn’t spend it, and wouldn’t leave it lying around. It was not really secure, but when you are talking $1 or $2 or $10, it did the trick. A few years later my parents introduced me to my first savings account.

As people grow, they get more money. If someone is blessed with more money, they start looking for safer places for their money, and places that will give a return on their money. You hear the commercials… for why you should invest in gold; commercials for investment brokers who guarantee that you won’t lose money even in a market downturn. People tire themselves out chasing after money, and when they actually reach their goals, they worry themselves to a frazzle about not losing that money.

There is a proverb in the Old Testament that says: *“The sleep of a laborer is sweet… but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep”* (Ecclesiastes 5:12). How marvelous that the man who puts in an honest day’s work and has little to show for it other than a day’s food—how marvelous that God blesses that man with sound sleep. But the rich man who has what everyone else wants, he can’t sleep!

Anyway, what if you could find a safe investment, even for what little you had? And what if you could be 100% certain that the wealth manager wasn’t trying to add you to his client list just so he could afford a vacation home in the Caribbean?

The only way that will happen is if you measure wealth by something other than this world’s wealth. In our reading, Paul on a certain Sabbath Saturday tells people about just such a solution. He would give them a great treasure, and a treasure which adds no trouble, but instead security.

People had gathered at a Jewish synagogue, a Jewish place of worship. There they worshiped the God of Abraham. This one true God had promised that there would one day be a Savior to offer the one time sacrifice for sin. To these people who believed and trusted in the Lord, to these Paul came to speak about Jesus Christ who was the fulfillment of all they hoped for.

Paul sat in their Jewish worship service, many hundreds of miles from the land Jesus had trod. Here, in these far-off lands they had not yet been told the truth about Jesus of Nazareth.

So they worshiped as Abraham’s children had for centuries. In their worship services there were “synagogue rulers”. These synagogue rulers were men who oversaw the worship in the local congregations. They could invite rabbis, teachers, to teach. Which is what happened in our reading. Paul had probably introduced himself to the synagogue rulers earlier in the week, and after having proven himself a learned Jew, the synagogue rulers invited him to speak at their Sabbath worship service ***“after the reading from the Law and the Prophets.”***

Now we will eventually get to Paul’s sermon in our sermon, but it is worthwhile to pause over the opening details : ***“On the Sabbath [Paul and his companions] entered the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, ‘Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak.’ ”***

Sometimes people speak of our “Lutheran” way of worship. But notice what is happening in the worship service Paul attended. Notice the pattern. God’s people gathered. They heard God’s Word – multiple readings from God’s word. Then a teacher was invited to preach upon that word. This was a worship pattern that God’s people had been following already for half a millennium before Jesus. From the earliest times, these worship services placed God’s reveled word, not human ethics and wisdom, at its core.

The synagogue service that the Apostle Paul attended in Acts 13 was the norm. They read from God’s Word, first from the Law of Moses (the first five books of the Old Testament) and then the Prophets. After the reading, Paul was invited to explain and expound it. Even Jesus himself, when he preached at his hometown, even Jesus followed this already ancient custom. First he read the Word of God and then preached on it. Though the Son of God certainly had the authority to preach a totally new message, even he started from God’s Old Testament word. You will find that in Luke 4. Jesus followed the ancient worship custom of God’s word being the starting point, and then preached from there.

Thousands of years of pre-Christian Jews, and then Christians have worshiped in this way. Jesus himself followed this way of worship. We do well to keep God’s word at the core of our worship services.

Here I think of an acquaintance whose sister-in-law attends one of those so-called mega-churches. She suggested that my friend listen to a wonderful message from her preacher, a preacher in a huge church of thousands. All the congregation loved it! --And according to my friend, it contained no direct quotation from the word of God anywhere.

There are habits that creep up in modern churches that should make us think, that should make us concerned. For example when preachers market their messages as “God-talks” rather than sermons. Sermons say, “Thus saith the Lord!” and people know that and preachers know that. So in order to indulge a people who want God’s ways to be comfortable to their thinking and lifestyle, they have “God-talks.” “Let’s not confront people with God’s ways, but let’s add some syrup to the medicine so they won’t be unpleasantly surprised by what God’s Word says.”

Another habit which is not necessarily wrong, but should make us ask questions, is when preachers as a rule don’t start with a sermon with God’s Word. Instead they talk about moral and ethical arguments and eventually bring in a Bible passage or two to support their point when it is convenient. But you get the distinct impression that if it came down to choosing between quoting God’s Word or a funny sermon illustration about Aunt Betsy’s chickens, he would choose the poultry. We should ask if this isn’t a case of the tail wagging the dog. Or is God’s word simply used as a Band-Aid, rather than the fountain of life?

Beware of worship services that find three readings to be just a little too much. Maybe better to just have one Scripture reading. After all, the Bible is an old book written to people of a different time. Again, there is no God-given rule here. But is less and less reading of the Scriptures catering to human weakness? Generally, yes. Is it to get to do more of what the audience wants to hear, or what the congregation needs to hear?

There is a reason that I nearly always begin my sermon by reading the Scripture. I am signaling to you that I must be guided by God. And I want you to trust me only insofar as I am guided by God. There is a reason that our Lutheran church services give a central place to the word of God. Without God revealing his will to us, we have nothing.

There is a reason we worship the way we worship. And we find much of it in these first two verses of our reading… ***“After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, ‘Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak.’”***

But to the message of Paul’s sermon…

Paul followed the usual practice of letting the worshipers hear the word of God first, and he confirmed it in his preaching. Even though he was speaking the new message of Jesus Christ, the Savior from sin, he repeatedly drew them back to God’s Word of the Old Testament. In presenting Christ, Paul presents an intersection of real-life evets and long standing prophecy.

He talks about Jesus’ rejection. And the first question that would come into the minds of Paul’s audience in this far-off city is, “Well if Jesus was all that you say he is, the Son of God and all that, then why did people reject him? Wouldn’t God make sure he wasn’t rejected?” Paul says, ***“The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath.”*** And they would remember some of those prophecies like Isaiah 53:3: *“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.”*

Paul spoke of Jesus’ death by execution, and people would ask if God would really let his Savior be rejected in that way and he said, ***“Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. When they had carried out all that was written about him.”*** Again he points out that the great events of Jesus’ life not only happened, but were prophesied in the very words they heard week after week in their worship services.

After speaking of Jesus’ rejection and death, corroborated by prophesy, Paul spoke of the greatest miracle of all: ***“But God raised him from the dead…”*** But don’t be surprised, ***“What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus.”***

At point after point, Jesus is portrayed as the supremely reliable place to put our faith because of what he has done. And the proof that this is God’s plan is that God’s own word had prophesied and testified to him.

In this book of the Bible, the book of Acts, we have several sermons from Jesus’ apostles. You will find that every single one of them focuses on Jesus in this way. Their sermons focus on what Jesus has done for us. Not us doing, not on us “being blessed” (which in the parlance of today’s preachers means getting the goodies what we want). Their sermons always focused on Jesus dying because of our sins, for our forgiveness; and raised to life for our final acceptance by God.

Once in a while it happens that a preacher has a little trouble corralling the thoughts of a sermon. This morning there were two distinctly different thoughts that I would like you to take away. First, remember that God’s Word must always remain the center of all our religious thought. We cannot rely on popular opinion or brilliant human logic. Christianity must not become a series of Hallmark card sentiments. We must continually go back to the same source book of all spiritual truth. And it must remain the focus of our public worship.

When we do, that source book continually draws us back to one person, Jesus Christ. Since he is the fulfillment of all that God prophesied about a Savior, we recognize in Jesus our Good Shepherd. One who supplies all that we need and more. One who holds us securely in his hand. Amen.