

BEING SENT

**SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION
OF THE CHURCH.**



Catalog No. 20170115
Acts 12:25–13:52
16th Message
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January 15, 2017

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His name was Mr. Morrison. He taught eighth-grade science at the middle school where I grew up in Connecticut. Everyone called him Mr. Mo. And everyone was afraid of him. He had slicked back black hair that he'd run his hands through and a thin black mustache. He would look down at you through his wide rimmed glasses without saying a word. And you would know the true meaning of fear.

I remember hearing about Mr. Morrison as soon as I started sixth grade. I was an anxious little kid and I was terrified of the day when I would be in his class. Thinking about him these years later, I tried to find him on the internet. All I could find was this quote from someone's blog reminiscing... "Mr. Morrison was kind of psycho and he was known for smashing kids into the walls if they got out of line during class changes."¹

We had group projects in Mr. Morrison's science class. We worked at lab tables of three to four students. When we had a question, we had to decide which one of us was going to be brave enough to ask Mr. Mo. It was a dreaded assignment, but it was similar to a rite of passage. We would muster our courage, prepare our question, and walk to the front of the room to fearfully ask Mr. Mo what we needed to know.

This morning we're going to hear about a group of people who did something similar. They were a group project of sorts. They decided to nominate a few people to go out from their midst in order to complete part of their assignment. Not all of them were successful. One got scared and gave up. But the others carried on, facing risks and surprises even greater than the eighth-grade science teacher Mr. Morrison.

We're continuing our series in the book of Acts called *SENT: Living the Mission of the Church*. We took a short break from the series during the holidays, but we resumed last week as Corrie Gustafson preached about the amazing rescue of Peter from prison.

We've seen a lot happen in the book of Acts. A daunting task from Jesus. The power of the Spirit. A vibrant community in Jerusalem. Deadly persecution. A surprise conversion. A new church in Antioch. The dramatic rescue from prison.

A lot has happened, but up until now, no one has been actually sent. God has scattered the disciples, but there hasn't been any intentional sending of anyone, anywhere.

Until today. This morning we will see the actual sending of the first missionaries as we read through Acts 13. Finally, the book of Acts will live up to the name of this preaching series. Today we'll see what is really involved in "Being Sent."

I'm excited that we're moving into this section of Acts. Today begins the first of three missionary journeys that comprise most of the second half of this book. We'll follow the apostle Paul as he travels to different cities and tells people about Jesus.

At the beginning of this section, we gain a window into what it is like to be sent. Think about that eighth-grade group project and nominating a representative to talk with Mr. Mo. We're going to find out who does the sending. We'll talk about what it is like to be the one who is sent. Also, we'll see a pattern for how to go about doing what you're supposed to do when you are sent.

Who sends? What is it like? How do we do it? These are practical questions that we'll see answered in our text this morning.

We'll see that being sent always involves some kind of a surprise. It will never play out the way you expect or the way you're afraid that it might. Some of the things that you are scared of won't be issues at all. Other things that you didn't even consider might give you more reasons to fear. Being sent is always an adventure.

Let's see how that's true for the first group of missionaries in Acts 13.

Who sends us?

Last week we learned that Peter went to the home of a woman named Mary immediately after he was rescued from prison. She had a son named John Mark. Our story this morning picks up there with Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark leaving Jerusalem.

Acts 12:25–13:4:

And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

13 Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Notice, first of all, that the text describes Barnabas and Saul as returning from Jerusalem. They are going home to Antioch. Right away, this is a huge shift. For a thousand years, Jerusalem had been the headquarters of the people of God. But now the main characters are going home to Antioch and that is the city that becomes the hub of all the later missionary activity in Acts.

Antioch is a vibrant, healthy, diverse church full of mature leaders. They were doing what followers of Jesus do: worshipping the Lord gathered together. And God asked them to set apart two of their members for a special purpose. So they did. They commissioned these two people and they sent them out.

This event is described in the text in an interesting way. The text says that the church sent them off. But, immediately following, we read that they are “sent out by the Holy Spirit.” Which one is it? Did the church send them or did the Holy Spirit send them? I think you see where I’m going. The question doesn’t make sense. Yes, the church sent them. And yes, the Holy Spirit sent them. It’s the same. It’s both.

We send each other. Here’s what we need to understand: God sends us. We are SENT by God. But it is equally true to say that we send each other. We send each other out from here. This is what the church does.

It gathers together to worship Jesus. We pray and we learn. And we send each other out.

That’s why at the end of our gatherings at PBC we don’t have a “dismissal.” You are dismissed from class. You are dismissed from a meeting. Being dismissed implies that you finally get to leave. I know none of you feel that way about church.

You aren’t dismissed at the end of a gathering. You are sent out. That’s why we call what happens at the end of our services the “Sending Out.” That’s why as you drive out of our parking lot, you read the words of Jesus, “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.”

One of the mistakes that we make as we follow Jesus is to think that we leave church to get back to our “normal life.” Sunday is holy and Monday is mundane. We meet God in here, but not out there. The truth is that all of life is about following Jesus. We don’t leave here. We are sent from here with Jesus into the world.

Yesterday on our pastor/elder retreat, we talked a lot about how we equip each other for the work that God calls us to. We noticed from Ephesians that the work of ministry is meant first of all to accomplish unity among God’s people.

That’s one of the main motivations behind our building remodel. We want all of our different communities at PBC, from families to the Recovery Ministry to high school and children to be spilling out onto the same patio—mingling with each other, rubbing shoulders.

It’s very appropriate that today, during our Church Wide Service with youth and children joining us, we should be thinking about sending each other out. This is how it works. We are unified as a community across all our different demographics. And together we send each other out.

It’s not that the adults send out the kids. The kids send adults. The seniors send the kids. The adults send the seniors. We all send each other. We gather together as one so that we can send each other out to represent the one who unites us out there.

We don’t just go to our jobs and our families and our vacations and our classes. We are sent. By God. By each other. We send each other out from here with a purpose.

What is it like?

Part of the problem is that being sent out can sound scary. None of us wanted to be sent to ask Mr. Morrison a question. Some of you today might be fine coming to church. But you didn't sign up for being sent into the world. What is that really like?

Paul and Barnabas are about to find out. Their first big mission brings them to the Mediterranean island of Cyprus. They experience quite a lot on that island.

Acts 13:5-12:

When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. 6 When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. 7 He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. 8 But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. 9 But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him 10 and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? 11 And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. 12 Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

Let's review all the things that happened on the island of Cyprus. Paul and Barnabas and crew set sail from Jerusalem and landed at Salamis on the eastern edge of the island. They started preaching in the synagogues. As they did this, they traveled along the southern edge of the island (since there is a huge mountain range further north) in order to get to the Western port city of Paphos.

As they traveled, they would have passed the famous birthplace of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. She was rumored to have emerged from a coastal bay on the southern shore of Cyprus. The whole island was obsessed with her—this was Aphrodite's island. That meant that the business of romance and sex was a big part of the economy of Cyprus.

When Paul and Barnabas arrived at Paphos, they were opposed by a false Jewish prophet named Bar-Jesus, which means son of Jesus. This is definitely a bit of irony as he was far from a child of Jesus. And they had a surprise invitation to the court of the Roman proconsul, one of the most powerful men on the island. To their great surprise, of all the people that were interested in the message of Jesus, he was the one that believed.

Preaching in synagogues. A sex-crazed culture. Strenuous coastal travel. Heated opposition from a magician. An invitation into the home of a Roman official and a surprise convert. This was an action-packed trip.

Remember who was on this trip. Before leaving, Paul and Barnabas had taken a young man named John Mark from the home of his mother in Jerusalem. Let's speculate a bit and assume that this young unmarried man hadn't seen much of the world. Perhaps he had never been outside of Jerusalem. How do you think John Mark felt about everything that happened?

In verse 23, we read, "John left them and returned to Jerusalem." John Mark went back home to his mother. He was done. I think he was overwhelmed. I don't think he realized that being sent would involve all those crazy things. I think he felt inadequate and like a failure and he just wanted life to be normal again. So he cut loose from this mission and he went home.

The calling to follow Jesus sometimes brings us to places that we don't understand. We can get overwhelmed and think that circumstances are over our head. Being sent can be confusing. Being sent is confusing.

In middle school—it could have been the same time that I was in Mr. Mo's class—I was invited to be part of a meeting that I barely understood. It was called something like "The First Selectman's Council on Drugs and Alcohol." This council was a group of educators, law enforcement, and civic leaders who were trying to address drug and alcohol abuse among students.

I think they must have wanted students as representatives, so maybe they asked the principal for some suggestions. I'm guessing my name came up because they thought the nerdiest kid in the school who knew the absolute least about drugs and alcohol could have some useful perspective. They were wrong.

I had no idea what I was doing. I literally sat in meetings and said nothing for months. I didn't know what was going on. I had nothing to add. I was completely confused and overwhelmed the whole time.

I'm pretty sure that's how John Mark felt as he and Barnabas and Paul traipsed across Cyprus. It's no fun to feel confused and useless. So he left and went back home.

At our pastoe/elder retreat yesterday, we talked about being equipped for ministry. Many of us observed that when we started doing ministry, it was because someone asked us to do something that we had no idea how to do. The phrase "sink or swim" came up several times. When you are sent, you often have no idea what you are doing. And that's okay.

It gets better. Because John Mark shows us that it's even okay if you get scared and confused and give up. This is what is so amazing about serving God. Failing is okay.

Give it a try, even if you don't know what you doing. If you fail, no big deal. God is bigger than your failure. So try again. Or retreat and lick your wounds until you feel ready. It's all fine. God can use all of it.

This isn't the end of John Mark's story. He has more tough times ahead of him. But in the end, it all works for the best. John Mark ends up as one of Paul's most trusted friends. He writes the Gospel of Mark. But none of that would have happened, apart from the overwhelming, confusing, trip to Cyprus that he gave up on.

Being sent will always be a complicated mixture of feelings. And you'll never know exactly where it will stop. That's okay. It's part of the journey. It's okay if the idea overwhelms you right now. Put yourself out here. Sail to Cyprus. And don't feel bad if you decide you can't handle it and have to sail home. Another adventure awaits you tomorrow.

How do we do it?

Okay, so we're going to go for it. We'll give it a try. But what do we do? How do we go about being sent? If we want to talk about Jesus or share the Gospel, what do we do?

In this section, we see Paul and Barnabas arriving at their first city. Antioch of Pisidia is in Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. It's a different Antioch than the city from which they left. We're not going to read all the parts of this story. Instead, I'd like to read through some of the major verses and we'll construct a pattern for what being sent looks like from how Paul and Barnabas approach this first city.

Acts 13:14-15:

They went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. 15 After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it."

They arrive in the city because of a likely connection from Sergius Paulus, the proconsul from Cyprus. Scholars think he had family there and gave Paul and Barnabas a reference. They go to the synagogue. They were used to going there. They knew the rules and what people expected. They had an immediate connection. And eventually, all of this resulted in an invitation to speak.

We sometimes make sharing the Gospel more complicated than it has to be. We start where God has put us, with the groups and patterns that are familiar to us. We don't have to force things. Go to familiar places and wait. Look for opportunities. Look for an invitation.

Then when you see an invitation, take it. That's the important part. You don't have to create the invitation, but you do have to respond to it. We sometimes get caught up in thinking that we have to create all these opportunities and we don't have to do that. God will open the doors for us.

But we do have to walk through them. Look for an invitation. And when you find it, accept it. That's the critical moment. Don't back down before an invitation. Step up.

This is what Paul does. He is asked to speak and he does.

Acts 13: 17-18:

The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. 18 And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness.

Remember that he is talking in a synagogue. He begins with the fact that God chose Israel. He talks about the four hundred years that the Jews spent in Egypt. He reminds them of the Exodus and the forty years of wandering. He continues to describe how God led them into the Promised Land. He tells of the period of the judges and then the kings: first Saul and then the great King David.

Paul begins by telling people about the big story that they are a part of. This is so important for us. The Gospel doesn't begin with us. The Gospel doesn't begin with Palo Alto or the Bay Area in 2017. The Gospel began with God a long, long time ago. We find ourselves as part of this huge story that the creator of all has been telling for thousands of years.

Once we accept the invitation to speak, we have to start with the big story.

Around Silicon Valley people are fond of the famous quote from Steve Jobs. Years ago when he was trying to recruit John Sculley as the Apple CEO, he wanted to lure him away from Pepsi. Jobs asked him, "Do you want to sell sugar water for the rest of your life, or do you want to come with me and change the world?"

Many people think that Steve Jobs did change the world. But whatever changes technology have brought to our world are nothing—absolutely nothing—compared to the Gospel of Jesus Christ which our God set into motion thousands of years ago. This is the stream that we find ourselves carried along as the people of God.

The question that we have for our world is, "Do you want to be obsessed with sugar water or a phone in your pocket? Or do you want to come to Jesus and be part of God's eternal transformation of the world?"

Our temptation is to get wrapped up in our story—all the details of everything going on in our lives. But we are part of a big story. Tell people about it. Invite them into it.

They say that in the ancient world all roads led to Rome. In the same way, this grand story that we are a part of always leads to Jesus. That's where Paul goes.

Acts 13:23 23:

Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised.

Paul goes on to talk about John the Baptist. He tells of the crucifixion and the resurrection. He tells of the Jesus' appearance to the disciples and how the Psalms found their fulfillment in him. The story eventually gets to Jesus. The story has to get to Jesus.

When you are sent out from here, talk about Jesus.

People have all sorts of false impressions of what it means to be a Christian. We are not inviting people to be part of our club. We are not a political party. We are not a group of hobbyists. We are not a philosophical worldview. We are not a system of ethics or a non-profit full of activists. We are first and foremost, last and always, followers of Jesus.

We are about Jesus. We worship Jesus. We encounter Jesus. We are sent into the world as Jesus was sent. So when we are sent out from here, we talk about Jesus.

But we don't just talk about the stories of Jesus. We talk about what the stories of Jesus mean to the world. That's where Paul lands this sermon

Acts 13: 38-41:

Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, 39 and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. 40 Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about:

"Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish; for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you."

Paul accepts the invitation. He starts with the big story. He talks about Jesus and then he tells them what it means. I want us to make sure to notice three big ideas here. These ideas lie at the heart of the Gospel.

This is the Gospel that we offer. This is the message that we are sent with. Once you've accepted the invitation, told the big story and brought it to Jesus, tell them the Gospel. Give them the Gospel.

First, Paul proclaims forgiveness. We are all too familiar with our fears, failures, and foibles. Even the smartest and most accomplished people among us are insecure and unsure. We compare ourselves to others. We desperately want to know that we are okay; that we are included and we are loved.

With forgiveness comes freedom. Everyone who believes is freed. The law can't free you. New Year's resolutions can't free you. An app to track your habits and patterns and sleep cycles can't free you. Don't you want to be free? Don't the people you know just want to be free? Only Jesus who proclaims your forgiveness can give you freedom.

Jesus offers the world forgiveness and freedom. Acceptance. Transformation. Belonging. Rest. It's what we want. It's what everyone wants.

That's part of the problem. Everyone wants forgiveness and freedom. For a lot of people, this Gospel of Jesus seems too good to be true. It sounds like a fairy tale, like a crutch for weak people who can't get by in the real world.

That's why the apostle Paul ends with a warning: Beware lest what the prophets said should come true. The prophets warned of a people who had become cynical. A people who had stopped having hope. The prophets said that ears would be stopped and hearts would be dulled. Because this kind of favor and freedom sounds too good to believe.

As we give people the Gospel, we have to give them the warning of the prophets. Don't allow yourself to become cynical.

Now, realize that there is a difference between skepticism and cynicism. We live in a world that treasures skepticism. We want to be able to prove things. People don't accept something unless they see it in real life. All of that is good. Be skeptical. Test the Gospel. Examine the Bible. There are no hidden secrets. There are no weak links in the story. It holds up.

Listen to how a self-proclaimed skeptic describes these two things. "Skepticism is the best way of finding out the truth." Cynicism is "a knee-jerk rejection of others' beliefs and is rather closed-minded."²

We live in a world of cynics. The Bay Area is full of cynics. Cynics have a knee-jerk rejection of anything that sounds too good or too much like religion. But, if we can help cynics become skeptics, then we've made some progress.

Warn people away from cynicism. There is no truth down that road. Encourage them to be truth finders. Explore it. Examine it. Be skeptical, but if the truth is clear, embrace it.

After a brilliant sermon like the one Paul delivered, you'd think everyone would believe. But like all brilliant sermons, it receives a mixed response. Some people respond with excitement. Others reject the message and run Paul and Barnabas out of the city. This is how we are sent: do our best and expect a mixed response.

Look for an invitation. Tell the big story. Talk about Jesus. Give them the Gospel. Be prepared for a mixed response.

Conclusion

In middle school, I was terrified of being the one who was sent to talk to Mr. Mo. For years leading up to his class, I was scared of being his student.

But as it turns out, Mr. Mo wasn't actually as scary as his reputation made him out to be. After a few weeks of being his student, I was sent to talk to him. And I started to learn something about him. Behind the thin mustache and the heavy glasses was a lightness. A fondness for students. Even a glimmer of humor. The whole scary teacher thing might have been just a front.

In fact, to my great surprise, my relationship with Mr. Mo developed something I had never imagined. We started pranking each other. The scary Mr. Morrison was actually a fan of pranks. It all culminated in a great April Fools joke we played on Mr. Morrison when we turned every single filing cabinet backward so the drawers faced the wall. Were we scared? No. He loved it.

Perhaps we'll find that as well when we think about being sent. Maybe we don't have that much to be afraid of.

This morning we've watched Paul and Barnabas and John Mark sent out from their home to travel the world. That won't be the experience for many of us. Some of us are sent to faraway places. But most of us are sent into the places where we spend our lives: our places of work; our families; our circles of friends; our schools and classrooms; our clubs and activities and passions and interests.

This morning we do what we do every Sunday morning. We gather. We pray. We worship. And we send each other out from here to live and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus in our world.

You don't need to have an agenda. You don't need to make anything happen. Just go. Be sent. Look for an invitation. Invite people into the big story. Talk about Jesus. Give them the Gospel.

If you end up completely overwhelmed and feel like a complete failure, don't worry—your story continues. The work of God continues. Come back next week and be sent out again. Be sent. Live the mission of the church.

Endnotes

¹ Woog, Dan. "Stop The Presses: Kids Walk To School!" Web blog post. *06880 Where Westport meets the world*. WordPress. 18 June 2012. 11 January 2017. (<https://06880danwoog.com/2012/06/18/stop-the-presses-kids-walk-to-school/>)

² pardi. "Critical Thinker Explains Skepticism vs. Cynicism." Web blog post. *Pacific Standard*. Pacific Standard. 13 October 2011. 11 January 2017. (<https://psmag.com/critical-thinker-explains-skepticism-vs-cynicism-d39babe16c9a#ajgy23z86>)