

Series: Upstream

May 22, 2016

Title: Against the Flow

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Text: Acts 14:8-20

A Strange Encounter

The Story of Baucis and Philemon:

In ancient times the people living in what is now south-central Turkey told a story about a night when the gods came calling. A poor, elderly couple heard a knock on the door of their cottage. Opening the door they saw two travelers: one was a quiet older man, the other a younger man who was the talker of the two.

They invited the strangers in and served them food and wine. To their astonishment, no matter how often they filled the guests' cups, the pitcher was still full. Their guests were more than mere mortals; they were the gods come down to earth.

They learned that the older visitor was none other than the greatest of the gods: Zeus. His companion was Hermes, or Mercury as the Romans called him. Zeus thanked them for their hospitality and told them that they were the only people in the entire region who had opened their doors to them. As a result, they alone would be spared the judgment that Zeus was about to unleash on the greedy, wicked populace!

A great flood washed away the entire town, but Zeus turned the little cottage into an ornate temple. The old couple became its guardians.

A Strange Encounter:

One day, in real time, two strangers arrived at the gates of the city of Lystra, just a few miles from the territory where the legend of Philemon and Baucis was supposed to have happened. One of the two strangers was older and quiet. The other was a young man in his prime, energetic and filled with things to say. Their names were Barnabas and Paul. Little did they know it, but they were in for a very strange encounter.

Luke tells us that as Paul was sharing the Good News about Jesus to the people of the city, he noticed that a lame man was paying particular attention to him:

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Acts 14:8-9a NIV

In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking.

Paul seized the moment:

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Acts 14:9b-10 NIV

Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, "Stand up on your feet!"

At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

So far, so good. The same Jesus who had healed a lame man in front of the Temple in Jerusalem, had healed a lame man in front of the Temple of Zeus in Lystra.

But that's where the similarity between the two healings ended!

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Acts 14:11-12 NIV

When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!"

Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker.

With that they ran into the temple of Zeus to share the exciting news. The priest knew exactly what to do:

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Acts 14:13 NIV

The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

Same Time, Same Place, Two Stories:

Same time, same place, same healing, but two totally different stories!

When Paul and Barnabas saw faith in the lame man's eyes, they thought: Jesus, the Lord of the world, was introducing His Kingdom. When the people of Lystra saw the lame man walk, they thought: Zeus and Hermes have returned. And we'd better treat them well!

Now Paul and Barnabas had to make a choice: would they go along with the story that the citizens of Lystra were living, or would they swim against the current and tell their own story?

The only thing we are forbidden to say is that there is but One True God. That would be frightfully intolerant.

Good News?

"We're only humans!"

Paul and Barnabas immediately drew a bright line between themselves and this attempt to worship them as gods.

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Acts 14:14-15a NIV

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, "Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you."

Paul had spoken to the people of Lystra, and the lame man, in Greek – the language known all across the region. When the locals hailed Paul and Barnabas as gods, however, they had done so in their local language of Lycaonian. Thus, for a short time Paul and Barnabas wouldn't have known what they were up to. Once they did catch on, they tore their clothes to signify that what was happening was blasphemy against God, and did their best to put an end to the proceedings.

You see, for Paul and Barnabas there was a bright line between the One Creator God and *everything else, including humans*. For the pagans of Lystra, and everywhere else in the Roman Empire, the line was fuzzy at best. Hadn't the great Caesar Augustus proclaimed that his adopted father, Julius Caesar, had ascended to heaven when he died to become a god? Hadn't a comet appeared at the very time Julius Caesar was being recognized as a god? Wasn't Augustus divine? The empire was filled with temples where he was worshiped, right alongside the traditional gods and goddesses? Weren't all the other emperors gods as well?

And then there was that story about Zeus and Hermes. Hadn't they come down as strangers looking for a place to spend the night?

Drawing the line between God and the rest of us: It's the challenge that you and I face every day in our increasingly post-Christian culture. The world we live in invites us to see ourselves as gods and goddesses. We decide the rules. We define our own identity. We tame the earth. Our gods, such as they are, have all come down to earth: sports phenoms who are paid astronomical salaries, entertainers who increasingly serve as the moral conscience of society, even the occasional politician who gets to rule the world for a few years.

Good News:

So Paul has his work cut out for him! He chooses to meet the people on common ground: a shared creation:

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Acts 14:15b-17 NIV

*"We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. **[Slide 8]** In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."*

See the bright line? Humans and God are not in any way *the same*. Humans are not "little gods." They are not, and never will be, on the way to becoming gods. There's only room for One at the top: the One God who

created everything. He alone is *uncreated*. We find our meaning and life *in Him and nowhere else*.

And doesn't His Creation speak so eloquently of His Presence and Power? The earth He created nourishes us; His skies shower us with rain. He alone is the Source of Life.

Mob violence:

Scary things happen when people feel like their story is slipping away. To be without your story means to not have a way to understand yourself or the world. Luke tells us that Paul's message could barely hold off the blasphemy:

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Acts 14:18 NIV

Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

And it would get worse. Luke tells us that Paul's Jewish enemies came along and stirred up the crowd to the point that a mob dragged him out of town and stoned him, leaving him for dead! Such an action would have had at least some level of official permission – formal or informal.

What happened? It seems that the people of Lystra had a story – Paul and Barnabas were the gods come calling. When Paul and Barnabas refused to be part of that story – and told a very different one which contradicted everything they knew and believed – they had to make a choice: ditch their old story or get rid of these strangers. They chose to hang on to their story.

Against the Flow

Swimming in the River:

Luke tells us that after Paul was left for dead, "the disciples gathered around him." He got up and *returned to the city!* (Acts 14:20). Think of what that says about Paul's attitude toward a hostile culture. He could have dusted off his sandals, spewed a curse on the city and moved on. Instead, from start to finish, he showed a love for these benighted people.

First of all, he and Barnabas *came* to this pagan town. Then, they shared the Good News about Jesus with pagans. What's more, they healed a lame pagan stranger on the spot in Jesus' Name.

Even his sermon is filled with heart-felt longing for the people of Lystra to come out of the darkness of paganism and into the light of knowing the true God.

How's that for "swimming in the river"?

Swimming in a New Direction:

But swimming in the river didn't mean drifting with the current. The current of the times dictated that there were many gods on many levels. People could and did become gods; gods could and did become people. Most of the time, relating to the gods meant keeping them happy so that good things happened to you.

But Paul and Barnabas drew that bright line between God and His Creation. God was the Ruler of the real world; no place or need for legends and mythology. The world itself was testament to God's power and goodness.

And now the Creator God had come in Jesus to restore His broken world. That was how Paul could command a man lame from birth to jump to his feet and walk.

Paul and Barnabas insisted on swimming against the culture that carried men and women forever away from their Creator. Their upstream journey offered to bring those same men and women back to the place where new Life begins.

Against the Flow:

The culture we live in does much the same thing to people today, if in more subtle ways. Our culture carries us *away* from knowing and trusting God. It tells us in a thousand ways that we define ourselves, our happiness, our story. We create ourselves. We become our own little god.

We are called to a different journey – the upstream journey. We celebrate the bright line between God and His Creation with every thought and every action. We allow *Him* to show us how the world is supposed to work. His values are our values. He is the King. What He commands, we do with

grateful hearts. We allow Him to define us as human beings. After all, we are His handiwork.

That means swimming every day against the flow of this corrupted and broken world. As Paul explained to Christians living in the heart of Rome itself:

Romans 12:2 Phillips New Testament

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God re-mold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.

Against the flow: we were made for this!