

**“Reach: Crossing”**

**Dr. Jay Howell**

**Acts 16:6-10**

May 5, 2024

We pick up where we left off last week in this REACH series. We’ve been going through this pivotal part of the Book of Acts, a part that saw the church grappling with some internal struggles. But because, guided by the Spirit, the church turned outward, toward those God would draw into the body of Christ, those whom they didn’t really expect God to draw in, now they were really cooking with gas.

Last week we saw Paul, along with Silas and the newly joined Timothy, in south central Asia Minor, or modern Turkey, and this week we find them taking turns they didn’t expect. Let’s go to God’s Word together. Acts 16:6-10:

*They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Spirit of God, we pray for your presence with us this day. We pray for your direction. We admit we have the ways we think we should go, but too often our ways are not your ways. Help us to hear you. Give us ears to do so. And give us hearts to follow you and the guidance of your Word. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Paul probably had this whole thing mapped out.

The plan, such as it was, was to visit the towns and churches he and Barnabas had gone to and established on their first missionary journey. Barnabas wasn’t with him anymore at this point, but the plan was still there. It was what took him to Iconium and Derbe, what took him back to Lystra where he met and took on this young disciple Timothy.

Sometimes when you read through a text like this, which rattles off names and places pretty quick, the geography of it can get murky, but they speak to what Paul might’ve been planning. Going from places like Phrygia and Galatia, from towns like Derbe and Lystra, and with intention to speak the word in “Asia,” Paul roughly has a westward trajectory. (“Asia” by the way, isn’t a reference to the continent, but rather the name of the Roman province that made up western modern-day Turkey.) And if you were heading roughly westward, your likely destination was the city of Ephesus, one of the major centers of Asia Minor, which according to one source, was second only to Rome in size and prominence.

Sounds like a good plan. Well thought out. Logical. Check in where you’ve been before, but heading on for the gospel to this grand center in the region, a provincial capital and center of commerce.

Except that wasn't God's plan. Acts tells us they were "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia," that is, western Turkey, so they didn't go that way.

Then, it happened again. They tried to go into Bithynia, which would've been northern Turkey, and that would've made sense too. But again, no. It says, "The spirit of Jesus did not allow them."

So they kind of keep rolling in this northwestward direction into an area called Mysia and on to another called Troas, in the far northwest of Turkey, still not knowing what they're supposed to do. And they didn't know for a little while. Because of travel times, they're probably in a bit of limbo for something like a couple of weeks, a time of uncertainty, of recognizing, "Okay God, we know we're not supposed to do that, and we know we're not supposed to do this, but, just what do you want us to do? Because we're kind of running out of real estate going in this direction."

Then one night, Paul had a vision. He saw "a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" This represented something different, something new. Now granted, once Paul had gone to move westward toward Ephesus, he was going into new territory, but still in the same broader region. This vision, though, called for something different. It was a crossing, over the water into Macedonia. This is what would come to be known as this unofficial boundary between east and west, going into what we would consider continental Europe. Even though so much of this ancient world had been Hellenized by the Greeks generations before and subsequently Romanized at this point in time, something changed when you crossed over the water.

It was as if God was saying, "Okay that whole thing about bringing the gospel to the Gentiles, about including and empowering the Gentiles, that was serious. Are you still going to follow?"

There wasn't anything neat and clean about the crossing. The story leading up to this wasn't neat and clean either, for that matter. The story that kept leading from that point wasn't neat and clean.

If you were with us when we started this series, looking at the Great Council of Jerusalem, we noted examples of how those who came before us took the steps to welcome in those who weren't here yet. We looked at James White, the founder of our city, who gave the property that became our mother church First Presbyterian. We looked at how First Presbyterian stepped out and planted our church seventy-seven years ago. We looked at how the saints who preceded us here at Sequoyah time after time said we are not simply going to be only about those who are already here. And one common thread in all of those stories, to say the least, is that it wasn't neat and clean.

And there's one person whose story I didn't include four weeks ago, and that's of a man named Rev. Samuel Carrick. Some of you may recognize the name, but Rev. Carrick was the founding pastor at First Presbyterian in Knoxville. And it wasn't quite so neat and clean for him either.

I knew the broad strokes of his story, how he came from Virginia and became the first pastor at First Pres, but a few weeks ago Connie Greene—many of you know Connie—came by and gave me a gem of a gift: a short book titled "Lebanon in the Fork Presbyterian Church" by Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey, an account of the founding of the county's first congregation.

"In the autumn of 1789 or 1790, a company of...explorers, adventurers, hunters and farmers came to the junction of the French Broad and Holston rivers, on the trail to this place of their present meeting, there appears a lonely traveler on horseback.... Dismounting from his horse, the stranger bowed gracefully to the party he had approached, and saluted them cordially.... He informed the party that he was trying to reach the Houston Station

beyond Little River and the settlements then formed around and hear it; that these new settlers were once known to him in Augusta, and Rockbridge Counties, VA, and that his present mission to the new country was...with hopes of supplying themselves hereafter with a living ministry and the ordinance of God's house. The party with great eagerness clustered around the strange minister.... In these backwoods they were as sheep without a shepherd and wandering far in the paths of sin and folly.... But, now on the night of an ambassador for Christ, the lessons of their youth came back with vivid freshness and energy upon heart and conscience.

“The strange preacher alluded to was the Rev. Samuel Carrick.... Hearing of the spiritual destitution on the frontier, Mr. Carrick penetrated to the very extreme of civilization, founded and organized the first Presbyterian congregation in this part of Tennessee.

“Such was Mr. Carrick when he assumed the pastorate of ‘Lebanon in the Fork.’”

Now your first thought at this point might be, “Lebanon in the Fork? I thought you said this was about First Presbyterian.” It wasn't neat and clean. Our mother church didn't simply emerge from the ground. As these early settlements grew and adapted, the center shifted away from where it had been a few miles east of what is now downtown, and it wasn't until a few years later that Rev. Carrick, along with many of the congregants, again moved downstream to the site First Presbyterian currently sits on.

The point is, Rev. Carrick heard that call to cross, to cross the water, to go downstream. And when he got there, it wasn't all neat and clean. But he followed.

That following of the Spirit's leading is in our heritage as a church. From the founding of First Pres to the planting of our church to the continuation and growth of our church's ministry and mission, that call to cross over, to hear the call of those not here yet, yearning for the gospel, continues. The promise that that calling won't be neat and clean is in our heritage too, and it's a promise for us going forward.

Just as it wasn't neat and clean for Samuel Carrick, just as it wasn't neat and clean for Julian Spitzer, just as it wasn't neat and clean for all those who came before us, the commitment that's in front of us now won't be so tidy either.

I mean sure today, for many of us, today is a day of financial commitment, and that's important, and thank you for all the prayer and discernment you've already dedicated to this effort, because it can be one of the many powerful ways God sows spiritual seeds both within and through us. But if we expect this vision, this call to cross over to be a simple matter of filling out a card, writing a check, fulfilling a pledge, we haven't been paying attention.

As we'll see even in the next few weeks as the story continues in Acts, things didn't magically become easy and smooth once Paul and his group cross into Macedonia. Things won't magically become easy and smooth once we finish a campaign or construct a building or support a mission partner. The call to cross into unfamiliar territory, the call to commitment is a continuous one, because it's as if at every step God is asking, “Are you going the way *you* want to go? Or are you following me?”

But a powerful thing can happen when we keep following the Spirit's lead, even into uncharted territory. There was a hint at it right at the end of the reading today. Did you catch it?

V. 10 read, “When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.” Did you notice something different, just about that sentence, compared to everything else we’ve read in Acts up to this point?

The change is in one word: “**we.**” It said “*we* immediately tried to cross over.” It is the first time besides the introductory first sentence at the very beginning, that the voice of the writer, traditionally Luke, is in the first person: “we.” Now the simple explanation is that it’s at this point in the journey that Luke actually joins Paul, Silas, and Timothy in the missionary journey, so the account from this point forward isn’t information Luke had gathered from others, but rather from his own eye-witness telling.

That’s the literal meaning of the change. But more broadly, think about what happens when “they” turns into “we.” Think about what these stories have been telling us about: the welcome of those who weren’t there yet. Think about the commitment of all those who came before us, whether it was Paul seeing and following the vision across the water, or Samuel Carrick going into the spiritual destitution of a frontier town, or saints in our own congregation, think about the commitment that went beyond just the first step but through the times when it wasn’t so neat and tidy. And all along the way, they saw “they” become “we,” they saw how those who weren’t here yet become the ones who would later take that next step, and then the next, and then the next.

In the commitments we make today, may we consider for Christ, all the “theys” who might become “we.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.