

*Meanwhile ...*

After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus. He had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul visited with them. Because they practiced the same trade, he stayed and worked with them. They all worked with leather. Every Sabbath he interacted with people in the synagogue, trying to convince both Jews and Greeks.

Acts 18:1-4 (C.E.B.)

I am aware that many people – most people – give very little thought to how a scripture text is chosen for preaching, especially when there are guest speakers who use their own criteria for what text to use. But even I wondered why this text? How does it fit our context and our setting for today?

Paul leaves Athens, arrives in Corinth, meets Priscilla and Aquila and joins them in making tents. He attends the synagogue every Sabbath, which he has done since he was a youth. That's it. There isn't much else to work with!

The truth is preachers generally have two options. We can either come up with a scripture text for a sermon or we can have one "assigned" to us.

- Those who come up with their own might pay attention to what's going on in their lives, in the life of the congregation, or they may address some other issue facing society. The sermon could even be written before the text is determined.
- Those who begin with an assigned text generally use the Lectionary, the most common of which is an international and interdenominational set of readings for each Sunday of the year, following a three-year cycle.

Last fall, I started an experiment. After spending most of my 35 years of ministry following the Revised Common Lectionary, I decided to follow the Narrative Lectionary for this, my final year of preaching. I did so for at least two reasons.

- First, I didn't want to become complacent and simply rework old sermons from my previous years of ministry – although I have not hidden the fact that I have drawn on those sermons.
- I also was genuinely curious about how this new Narrative Lectionary would feel.

We are almost finished with that experiment. You see, the Narrative Lectionary begins every September with stories of the creation, and then it follows the Old Testament through to Christmas; from Christmas to Easter the Narrative Lectionary follows one gospel. Since there are four gospels, it operates on a four-year cycle. After Easter it turns to a sampling from Acts and the Epistles until Pentecost.

There are no assigned texts for the summer months allowing churches and pastors to explore various themes based on the perceived needs of the congregation. That means our experiment ends May 19<sup>th</sup> – the day of Pentecost. I already have some tentative assessments of this experiment. But I'm also curious about your impressions. If you have feedback, let me or someone on the Worship Commission know.

Of course, most people don't even notice – until there is a text like today's.

As I said, preachers have choices about where to start with a sermon. We can begin with the perceived needs and questions posed by the congregation or we can begin with a text and ask what it means for the congregation. For the most part, I prefer to begin with the text.

But there isn't much to work with today.

Like last week, our text today comes from the book of Acts. And like last week, it is a passage I've never used in a sermon before. That means I had to work harder listening for the voice of God in the text – and I got the blessing of hearing new things.

The sermon title came to me as I was pondering this text, by the way. It felt as though Paul was taking a break, waiting for God to speak again. If we read a little further, it sounds as if he is waiting for some of his companions to join him before moving on (Acts 18:5). And while he waits, he finds a way to keep busy.

It was in that context that I thought about what happens “meanwhile,” while we're waiting for the next thing. While we're waiting for a new pastor, perhaps. While we're waiting to hear about a job or waiting to hear from the doctor. What does Paul do that might help us when we are in between, in the “meantime.”

Then one evening I found myself staying up late – for no particular reason, I just wasn't tired when it was time to go to bed. So I watched the late news and then *The Late Night Show* with Stephen Colbert. I don't know if any of you watch that show, but one segment he often includes is what he calls “Meanwhile.” He names lesser-known news items and then makes jokes about them.

As he went on with his humorous reminders of what “else” was in the news that week, I wondered what else was going on in the world while Paul was waiting in Corinth. What kind of context is in the background of this story?

Our text only gives a glimpse of Paul's work in Corinth. From other sources we know Corinth is a major crossroad in the Roman Empire. Ships would enter the safe harbor where their goods would be of-loaded and carried across the small isthmus before being loaded onto new ships, thereby avoiding the more treacherous rocks around southern Greece.

Today there is a canal that cuts through that isthmus. But in Paul's day, merchants from east and west would meet here. And it became known as the most sordid of seaport cities, complete with street prostitutes, beggars, and people hocking their wares. There were temples to various gods. Philosophers met and argued about abstract ideas, much like countless groups of people meeting in local coffee shops who still “solve the world's problems.” It was a multi-cultural hub, to say the least.

Our text simply recounts Paul's arrival from Athens, however. While in Athens he had done what he was so good at – making effective arguments about Jesus and winning over many people (Acts 17:34). He was so successful in Athens I really don't know why he left!

Nor is it clear what Paul plans to do in Corinth. He simply arrives from Athens and then tries to fade into the background as he makes a living making tents. Presumably that was his trade before becoming an evangelist.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile – if I may borrow a line from Stephen Colbert – Paul finds allies with a couple of refugees, Priscilla and Aquila, people who are also new to Corinth (Acts 18:2). Together they join in making tents while talking about Jesus and sharing the good news on the weekends with people who gather in the synagogue (Acts 18:3).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.gotquestions.org/Paul-tentmaker.html>

<sup>2</sup> The C.E.B. translates it as leather rather than tents.

Meanwhile, churches today are still trying to decide if full time pastors are better than those who are “tentmakers.”<sup>3</sup> Some people refer to them as bi-vocational pastors. (I often wonder if it matters what that *other* work might be. I’ve known of school teachers and college professors, for example. I remember a funeral home director who was also a pastor. But I wonder if any bartenders would make it into the pulpit? What if they are airline pilots? And what happens when their flights get cancelled?)

Meanwhile, Paul takes time out from making tents to write letters to the church in Thessalonica, the church he started and then was forced to leave (as we heard about last week).

Meanwhile, tradition says “doubting” Thomas is in India, sharing the good news in a land far away. (Kinda makes Paul’s journey seem like a short excursion; the biggest difference is that Paul does a better job of documenting his trip, so we know more about him than we do about Thomas.)

Meanwhile, Peter is in Jerusalem, trying to manage the beginnings of the church, including leading Vision Council meetings and organizing volunteers to meet the needs of the hungry. He and the church are trying to figure out their relationship with the Jewish Temple as well as with the Roman Empire. (I’m sure he was jealous of Paul who never stayed in a church long enough to deal with the inevitable conflicts that arise. Paul had the luxury of dealing with conflict by writing letters from far away.)

Meanwhile, Brittain is under Roman rule. (Hard to imagine that, isn’t it? I’m going to guess that’s why some people insist Paul wrote his letters in King James English.) 😊

Meanwhile, the Roman Emperor Claudius is beginning the last year of his reign – although he doesn’t know that yet.

Meanwhile, I find myself realizing that Paul never stops sharing the story. He is chased out of one town and continues to tell the story in a new place, in a new setting. (It makes my complaints about “failing retirement” seem rather hollow.)

A couple of weeks ago, Ronda and I went to see the movie, *Cabrini*. Have any of you seen that movie? I confess, I hadn’t even heard of it; but it was one Ronda wanted to see, and since I gave her gift cards to AMC Theaters for Christmas, we went.

*Cabrini* is a 2024 biographical drama about the life of Catholic missionary Francesca Cabrini. She pursues a dream of opening orphanages; in China first, and then throughout the world. But the Pope refuses to give her permission to do so. She persists, however. And when he finally relents, the Pope demands that she begin, not in China, but in New York City where many Italian immigrants are dying.

Most of the movie recounts her experiences in New York.

Not surprisingly, she encounters resistance when she gets there, both from the community and the church. The resistance is deeply rooted in both sexism and anti-Italian bigotry. Despite a severe lung disease, Sister Cabrini persists. She continues to seek and follow God’s call in her life. She often loses sleep as she wanders the city looking for orphans. Like Paul, she cannot rest until she knows she has done all she can do to bring people to know God’s loving embrace.

---

<sup>3</sup> Faw, p. 223

And in the end, she is successful. She stays in New York long enough to get the work established and then moves on, opening orphanages and hospitals throughout the world, including China. We know her chain of missionary outposts by the more familiar name Sacred Heart.

Meanwhile Paul stays in Corinth longer than he does in any other city .. a full 18 months (Acts 18:11). During his stay, it's no surprise to learn he stirs up trouble in the synagogue and gets kicked out. Then he establishes a church – one that sounds as if it is right next door to the synagogue (Acts 18:7)!

Next week, and again the following week, we will be reading from Paul's letters to the church in Corinth. But our text today only talks about his arrival. He comes into town with a quieter disposition than usual, almost as if he is sneaking into town rather than flamboyantly proclaiming his message. I'd say he has learned his lesson and is keeping a low profile– except he returns to his old habits again in other places.

Maybe he is just waiting for God to tell him what to do next.

Or perhaps our text is more about Paul equipping Priscilla and Aquila to share the gospel. Perhaps our text is a reminder that everyone is called to be a minister, that each of us is called to share the Gospel from wherever we find ourselves – whether we are students or employees, employers or retirees. No one is exempt from sharing the good news of God's love, from revealing the power of the resurrection in the way we live.

Maybe that's the message for Hope Mennonite Church as we enter into these last two months of my interim work. Like Priscilla and Aquila, we are each called to share the story, to proclaim the message of hope and love and forgiveness. We don't know when our next pastor will arrive, but we do know we will continue to be the church until he or she is named.

Meanwhile, the story of resurrection continues to challenge the status quo – not only in Corinth but also in Wichita. (And if it hasn't been shaking things up, maybe we haven't been doing as well at sharing the story of resurrection as Paul does, or as Sister Cabrini did.)

Meanwhile, we have been invited to play a small part in the work of Justice Together. All we have to do is show up. (Seems like a fairly easy task compared to what Paul and Sister Cabrini did – and if feels too small, I'm sure we can find something harder to work toward!)

Meanwhile, I am making plans to return to the familiarity of Methodist traditions and finding my role as a retired pastor who attends worship rather than leads worship. (I am not counting the days; although I am aware that I've been here as long as Paul was in Corinth!)

Meanwhile, God continues to work miracles by bringing us new life.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Randy L Quinn  
Hope Mennonite Church

### Selected Bibliography

Faw, Chalmer E. *Acts (Believers Church Bible Commentary)*. Scottsdale: Herald, 1993.

Willimon, William H. *Acts (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1988.

[www.WorkingPreacher.com](http://www.WorkingPreacher.com)