

The book of Acts, I tell my Bible students, is one story after another about how the Holy Spirit took over from Jesus. Today's episode moves us away from Jerusalem, where the primary disciples lived and where Jesus had spent his last days, all the way to Antioch in Syria. The Antioch church is exactly the wacky kind of congregation that the Holy Spirit loves to form. It has someone named Simeon who is called Niger (meaning black, so maybe from Africa), a guy from the court of Herod-the-beheader-of-John, and Saul, recently a persecutor of Christians. Out of this promising group the Holy Spirit calls Saul/Paul and Barnabas to go out and about.

So they get to Lystra, which is in modern-day Turkey, Paul does a healing, and the townsfolk leap to the logical conclusion that they are being visited by Zeus and Hermes. Paul and Barnabas don't know the local language, so it's not until the priest of Zeus shows up with oxen and garlands for them that they realize all the excitement is *not* about the power of the Holy Spirit or Christ whose death and resurrection changes everything. It's a mistaken identity, one of my favorite forms of comedy. So they rush into the crowd, shouting, "We're not gods! Let us tell you about the real God, whom you've already experienced through rain and fruitful seasons and good food and joyful hearts." But they can still barely keep the crowds from sacrificing to them.

This reminds me of when Bea turned two. Her daycare provider used to order out for pizza on birthdays. Bea was a precocious and verbal little girl, but her life experience was limited. When I asked her what special things had happened that day at Jane's house, she turned glowing eyes to me and said, "The mailman

brought pizza!" Well, we do tend to interpret new experiences in terms of our former experiences; what else do we have? Luke may be slipping in a little dig here, which isn't directly relevant to my sermon but it's interesting so I'm going to tell you. Early critics of Christianity often tried to discredit missionary efforts by characterizing the converts as rustic and uneducated. In the 2nd century, Lucian wrote a story called "The Passing of Peregrinus" in which Christians appear as a naive unsophisticates whom Peregrinus deceives in order to gain undeserved wealth and fame. Easily and quickly beguiled by his personal charms and rhetorical skills, the Christians in the story soon revere Peregrinus as a god, a second "law-giver," a trusted protector, whom they lavishly support with money and gifts. These hapless Christians are so easily bamboozled, Lucian asserts, because the members of this sect are like untaught children, "receiving doctrines traditionally without any definite evidence." Is it mere coincidence that Luke has the Lystrans appear to be just as easily deceived? I don't know.

But anyway, the point is that we interpret our experiences in terms of our previous knowledge or experience. Of course we do; it's all we have. But that presents some problems. Samuel Candler, an Episcopal bishop, says, "The greatest obstacle to our experience of God is our last experience of God. That is, what prohibits us from experiencing God today is yesterday's experience of God." If I've always associated God with organ music and stained glass windows, why would I ever turn aside to see a burning bush? And yet God is constantly doing new things.

Now that the spring semester is over I'm madly preparing my new class on Religion in the US. I had already decided that one of my semester-long questions

would be “What are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and God?” Then I came upon a perfect and very American example of how the story both conceals and illuminates the new thing that God is doing.

In the 1840s, public schools in New York were run by a Quaker-founded society and funded with public money. Fifty years earlier the Bill of Rights had established that the state would not favor one religion over another, but as the Second Great Awakening swept over the land, it became clear that the right and correct religion was evangelical Protestantism. You could be Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, whatever, but there was a certain consensus that made it pretty easy for everyone to feel comfortable with schoolchildren being taught religion and Bible. And in an age of rapid change and uncertainty about the bedrock of the new nation, it was good to know that evangelical Protestantism was providing moral stability to society.

Church people pushed to Christianize their nation, to make it more like the kingdom of God. Individual conscience was individual and private, but socially we established orphanages and poor houses, reformed prisons, urged temperance, pushed for abolition of slavery and for women’s suffrage. And then along came the Irish Catholic immigrants.

By the 1840s, half of all immigrants to the US were Irish, and ¼ of all New Yorkers were Irish. And what do we Protestant evangelicals know about Roman Catholics? Their loyalty is not to the state, but to a foreign potentate, the Pope. They are throwbacks to the church we left 300 years ago in the Protestant Reformation. They are *not* progressive and modern. And the Irish are poor and

ignorant. Just what we don't need in our shiny new heaven on earth.

Irish parents found that their children were being taught that their faith was wrong. The *New England Primer* taught, "Commit no sin in any wise, /but keep his commandments, / Abhor that arrant whore of Rome, /And all her blasphemies/ And drink not of her cursed cup; /Obey not her decrees." When they read the Bible, they read a King James Version without footnotes, because as every Protestant knows, you must read and interpret scripture for yourself. But Roman Catholics had a different version *with* footnotes so that readers could benefit from the commentary of earlier scholars in the tradition. What looked to Protestants like an excellent way to educate the young and build the kingdom of God on earth, looked to Catholics like a way to eradicate a generation. What looked to Catholic immigrants like arrival in a land of opportunity looked to Protestants like an influx of skunks to a picnic. The story everyone told themselves was that this was a free country in which you could relate to God in your own way, but damn it, those other people didn't share the vision.

It ended up, messily, that the bishop of New York, an Irish immigrant himself, led and won a battle to end religious instruction in New York's public schools. People were mad, there were riots, but by golly the Protestant hegemony over religious education ended. And here's my point: Americans have always told ourselves this story: we were enslaved/oppressed, and by the power of God we have come to freedom. The Protestants in New York saw that as their story. But when the Irish Catholics came, also seeing themselves in that story, the Protestants could not. They could only see representatives of their own former oppression: old

Europe, the hegemonic and abusive Church of the 1500s, the medieval papacy. It took time and struggle and probably living in the same city for Protestant Americans to be able to see what was animating the Irish immigrant community was exactly the same story about God liberating an enslaved people.

The Holy Spirit does things that we do not anticipate or even approve of. Sometimes I wonder if the events that are distressing me are just the hurly-burly around something new and renewing that I cannot yet imagine. I think we have to speak up for what is right, and fight the good fight; we can't just be passive. But we should never lose track of the long record of the Holy Spirit for bringing unexpected growth and new life out of dissension and conflict. And we should always be ready to hear good news, even when it comes in a form that we have never seen before. the ministry of the Holy Spirit may be far more powerful than we realize, not so much in assisting in ecstatic miracles, but in interpreting the new. The Holy Spirit, says Jesus, remembers the old and teaches the new ~ two things that we erroneously regard as contradictory.

We thank you, beloved God,
creator of sky, earth and sea and everything in them,
that you move in us and among us when we do not expect it:
stretch out your hand now to heal,
perform among us miraculous signs and wonders:
fill us with your Holy Spirit
that we too may speak boldly for you;
through the name of your holy servant, Jesus. Amen.